

Contemporary Re-Interpretations of the Colonial Past Through the Biopics of Two Koreans: Park Kyŏng-Wŏn and Kim Sin-Rak

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Abstract

In the past few years, the South Korean film industry has released a growing number of Korean movies set in the colonial period. This essay focuses on how these films deal with the painful memory of occupation. More specifically, the analysis will be centered on two biopics with narratives that differ from what could be argued to be the mainstream portrayals of the colonial period, which tend to depict the struggle of Korean freedom-fighters under Japanese rule. Moreover, this essay reflects on the meaning of reinterpreting the past through cinema.

Keywords: Korean cinema, biopic, identity, colonial Korea, politics of memory, Zainichi

Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of Korean movies set in different historical periods have been released within the frame of the so-called *Hallyu* 한류, or Korean wave, phenomenon. These movies set in the past belong to a wide range of genres, though they are classified as *sagŭk* 사극, or historical drama, in Korea. For example, on the one hand, it is possible to find epic action movies such as

Myōngnyang 명량 (*The Admiral Roaring Currents*, 2014), that recounts Yi Sunsin's naval victories against the Japanese during the Imjin War (1592–1598) and makes use of impressive special effects. On the other hand, there have been humorous approaches to important military conflicts of the past, such as in *Hwangsanböl* 황산벌 (*Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield*, 2003) and its sequel *P'yōngyangsōng* 평양성 (*Battlefield Heroes*, 2011) dealing with the Battle of Hwangsanböl between the Kingdoms of Silla and Paekche and the war between the Kingdoms of Silla and Koguryō respectively.

Among these historical films it is also common to find representations or references to the most traumatic historical experiences that have beset the Korean nation in the recent past, such as Japanese colonial rule. As noted by Frances Gateward, recent historical cinema has usually concentrated on three distinct periods: the colonial period (1910–1945), the period from the outbreak of the Korean War until the ceasefire signed between the UN, North Korea, and the PRC (1950–1953), and the struggles of the Korean population under dictatorial regimes until the democratization of the country.¹

This paper analyzes the narratives of two historical films, *Ch'ōngyōn* 청연 (*Blue Swallow*, 2005) and *Yōktosan* 역도산 (*Rikidōzan a hero extraordinaire*, 2004). Both movies are based on historical characters and have been selected because they share specific characteristics in their representation of the colonial period. Moreover, their narratives differ from the approach on the period taken by most South Korean cinematic productions set during the Japanese occupation. More specifically, this paper will examine how these two movies try to contest the predominant representation of the colonial period, as seen in most other productions, within the space of reinterpretation and remembering. In that sense, the goal of this study is not merely to point out a series of differences and commonalities, but rather to reflect on the relationship between these two movies and the concept of memory and the meaning of these narratives within the context of contemporary Korean cinema.

There is no doubt that the colonial period remains one of the most painful episodes within the collective memory of the national history. It is possible to differentiate two main reasons for that: the first one is related to the direct threat to Korean identity that Japanese rule constituted and the second one is related to the concept of memory. The threat to Korean identity became more obvious in the last phase of the occupation, a period from the late 1930s to the defeat of the Japanese in 1945. During those years, the Japanese tried to accelerate the assimilation process of Koreans as subjects of the Empire, promulgating new regulations directed at the eradication of Korean culture and identity.² In particular, the measures regarding the use of the Japanese language, the forced adoption of

Japanese names as a replacement for Korean names, and the mandatory participation of students and government employees in Shinto ceremonies (a foreign religion to Koreans), are clear representatives of Japanese efforts to eradicate Korean identity.

This sort of painful historical experience had an impact on how Korean identity is understood today, and in fact some authors regard historical foreign aggressions as a component of the so-called *han* 한 (恨),³ a term intrinsically linked to Korean identity and to the development of Korean nationalism. *Han* refers to a collective feeling of “unresolved resentment,” “bitter feeling,” or “hatred” unique to Koreans and thus difficult to translate into other languages. Its counterpart is *chōng* 정 (情) which is defined by dictionaries as “affection” or “tender feelings,” but once again *chōng* transcends translations and refers to an emotion that binds people who suffer from the same *han*.⁴ The concept of *han* has been widely circulated and debated, and though several scholars dismiss it as an outdated construct with colonial origins, it continues to be portrayed as a root aspect of Korean culture by academics, artists, writers, and critics.⁵

In relation to the concept of memory it is important to note that only a few decades have passed since the end of the colonial period. This relative temporal proximity is directly related to its impact in the memory of Koreans. Firstly, it is important to distinguish between the different types of memory. As defined by Polit, it is possible to argue the existence of three different types of memory: individual memory, communication memory, and cultural memory. Individual memory refers to memory based on our own personal experience or what we lived personally. Communication memory is the memory that connects, as a rule, three generations, and it is the memory of verbally transmitted memories. As there are still survivors that lived under colonial rule, they and their relatives constitute the living individual and communication memories of a traumatic period that left many open wounds, which still hinder the normalization of relations between Korea and Japan. Finally, cultural memory (often referred to as “collective memory,” a term coined by the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs) is the shared pool of memories of a social group of variable size. It serves specific needs of social groups and it should not be mistaken with “historical truth,” though it could not exist without history.⁶ From an emotional point of view, cultural memory differs from “historical truth” insofar as unambiguous conclusions and heroes are sought. Deeds are good or bad and the heroes are saint or scoundrels.⁷

In fact, among the Korean movies set in the colonial era there is a trend to approach the subject from a nationalist perspective, offering a dualist narrative of Japanese oppressors versus Korean freedom fighters or perpetrators versus

victims that appeals to cultural memory. Recent examples of this tendency can be found in movies such as *Modön poi* 모던보이 (*Modern Boy*, 2008), *Amsal* 암살 (*Assassination*, 2015), *Tökhye Ongju* 덕혜옹주 (*The Last Princess*, 2016), *Milchöng* 밀정 (*The Age of Shadows*, 2016) and *Kunhamdo* 군함도 (*The Battleship Island*, 2017). In movies like these the audience will generally find Koreans who struggle to regain the independence of their country against evil Japanese army officers. Among these, *The Last Princess* is remarkable because of its portrayal of princess Tökhye as an eloquent freedom fighter symbolizing the culmination of an embracing process of the royal history of Korea by popular media that contrasts with the negative attitude towards the Korean royal family in the early postwar discourse.⁸ Even though the dynasty was largely criticized for its corruption and inability to protect the nation's independence, the reconciliation of popular media with this dark past is consistent with the restoration of royal dignity and the use of its cultural legacy by the tourism industry in South Korea.

Sometimes film directors add slight shades to this form of the predominant narrative, for example in *Assassination* it is possible to find an interesting Japanese secondary character who is aiding Koreans in their fight for independence. In the biopic *Pak Yöl* 박열 (*Anarchist in the colony*, 2017) based on the life of independence activist Pak Yöl, it is also possible to find a Japanese character (Fumiko Kaneko) who sympathizes with oppressed Koreans, but its narrative falls into the same nationalist dynamic. In relation to how Japanese are portrayed in Korean movies about the colonial period, we should note *Chokpo* 족보 (*The Genealogy*, 1973) by the internationally acclaimed South Korean film director Im Kwönt'aek. The main character of this movie is a Japanese man with a sensibility and love for Korean art who is ordered to notify a Korean family with a deep history that they are required to change their names into Japanese names according to the new colonial government policy. Despite being a public servant who works for the colonial government he is presented as a human who feels troubled about fulfilling his mission, which makes the character unusual, because in other movies the Japanese are mostly depicted as evil and part of the colonial machinery. This different attitude can already be perceived from the first scenes of the movie when he receives his orders and tries to question his superior, stating that the change of name should be voluntary and not imposed, but his speech is quickly interrupted by the officer.⁹

However, this paper will focus on two specific contemporary portrayals of Koreans who lived during the colonial period. As already mentioned above, in movies set during this period, most Koreans are represented as either freedom fighters or traitors who collaborated with the Japanese, allowing no chance for a middle ground in this polarization. Despite this, it is possible to find less common

narratives that portray the colonial period through a different approach, such as *Ch'onggyŏn* 청연 (*Blue Swallow*, 2005) and *Yŏktosan* 역도산 (*Rikidōzan a hero extraordinaire*, 2004). These two biopics shift away from more typical film narratives of the Korean struggle for independence and present the audience with the stories of two individuals pursuing their professional careers and goals within the hostile frame of being colonized subjects.

The biopic as a vehicle of memory in Korea

The *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* defines the biopic as a film that tells the story of a real person, often a monarch, political leader, or artist.¹⁰ This means that biopics are movies that reinterpret the individual memory of a prominent character of the past. This fact often imbues them with a sense of legitimacy that producers sometimes present in the form of a disclaimer stating that their product is “based on a real story.” That shows that there is an intention towards historical accuracy from the producer’s side, and in fact when a biopic’s portrayal loses that intention it is categorized as “biofantasy.” For example, the portrayal of Yi Sunsin in *Myŏngnyang* (*The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, 2014) would arguably fall in this last category for its exaggerated fighting scenes. As pointed out by Kim, the intensity and violence of the naval battles at Myŏngnyang were considerably embellished and the Japanese enemies remain mostly unconvincing caricatures with over-dressed and over-decorated generals who draw their swords at the slightest offense.¹¹ To some extent, it could be argued in defense that such deviations from “historical fact” are part of the dramatic license of movie makers. However, the intense weight of the nationalistic narrative in this movie does not offer a new evaluation of the admiral’s figure to the audience. Kim further examines the historical construction of the figure of Yi Sunsin himself, exposing the superficial representation of the admiral and referring the reader indirectly to a fundamental question: What was the real admiral’s story? As much as biopics try to approach “historical truth,” they cannot escape the fact of being new versions of a lost memory, or in other words, mere reinterpretations made by their producers.

Biopics rarely use individual memory as a source and rely on written materials as most of them are produced after the death of the historical figure. In the introduction to his book, Custen asserts that biopics create a view of history based on the cosmology of the film industry.¹² Even though biopics intend to narrate the story of a historical character, the role of producers is determinant in the ways the historical figure’s life will be presented to the audience. Given the room for exploration provided by the genre it comes as no surprise that the relationship between biopics and national identity has been the subject of numerous studies.

In Hollywood, biopics enjoyed their peak of popularity from the 1930s to the 1950s, subsequently fading away to a minor form from the 1960s. During those decades, major American studios produced around three hundred biopics.¹³ During the 1970s, while not entirely vanishing, the biopic nevertheless saw its significance on the big screen wane. Over the past few decades, it has reemerged with prominent auteurs such as Martin Scorsese, even though it has not regained the popularity it enjoyed as a genre prior to World War II.¹⁴

The Korean film industry was no exception to this trend as it started to produce biopics based on national heroes after liberation in 1945. During the 1940s, a series of biopics portraying anticolonial resistance politics against colonial oppression were filmed, but biographical films set in the precolonial and colonial eras would reach their pinnacle of success and popularity during the late 1950s.¹⁵ Many of those films present examples of dramatized heroic tales of anticolonial nationalists. There were biopics on historical figures such as Min Yŏnghwan (1861–1905), Ryu Kwansun (1902–20), Yun Ponggil (1908–32), and An Chunggŭn (1879–1910). Among them, the historical figures of Ryu Kwansun, a female student activist of the March 1st Movement of 1919, and An Chunggŭn, a young nationalist who assassinated Japanese statesman Ito Hirobumi in 1909 as a protest against the Japan–Korea Protectorate Treaty of 1905, are well known to any Korean and integrated as national heroes into the history of Korea. As Jinsoo An points out:

The repeated dramatization of select political figures hence served not only the biopics' didactic and memorial functions but also the continuity and predominance of the nationalist historical discourse in the making of Korea's national cinema in the 1940s and '50s.¹⁶

Thus, these examples do not intend to explain the historical development of biopic as a genre in South Korea, but rather exemplify in which ways biopics often complemented the national historical discourse with the intention of fostering a selective memory in their audience. Whether this intention responds to a political agenda or just to the cosmovision of movie makers depends on the product. It is also important to emphasize that biopics do not consist only of portrayals of national heroes, but also include other kinds of remarkable characters, such as musicians, writers, and others.

In what is probably his most famous work, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson wrote the following:

As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of 'forgetting' the experience of this continuity—product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century—engenders the need for a narrative of identity' [...] Yet between narratives of person and nation there is a central difference of emplotment.

In the secular story of the ‘person’ there is a beginning and an end. She emerges from parental genes and social circumstances onto a brief historical stage, there to play a role until her death ... Nations, however, have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural. Because there is no Originator, the nation’s biography can not be written evangelically, ‘down time,’ through a long pro-creative chain of begettings. The only alternative is to fashion it ‘up time’—towards Peking Man, Java Man, King Arthur, wherever the lamp of archaeology casts its fitful gleam.¹⁷

Biopics, as artificial renderings of lost individual memories share a common characteristic with national history. Both are narrated through a selective process in which specific events or episodes are emphasized at the expense of others. In the case of nations, their histories seek to build the nation’s narrative and foster a sense of national identity, among others. As a spectacle for the masses, the impact of cinematic representations in the audiences and its relations with nationalism have been the subject of academic scholarship. For example, *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* edited by Wimal Dissanayake discusses how Japanese imperialism made use of cinema in Korea and other colonized territories for propaganda purposes. On a broader perspective, *Cinema and Nation* (2000) edited by Mackenzie and Hjort approaches the ways in which film production and reception are shaped by ideas of national belonging and the influence of globalization on the concept of national cinema. The next section analyzes the ways in which the two selected biopics construct their narratives and the unique place these two films hold within the array of Korean movies set during the colonial period.

Blue Swallow and the controversy of collaborationism

The heroine of *Chōnggyōn* (*Blue Swallow*, Chong-ch’an Yun, 2005) is a strong female character with a life goal who suffers the double challenge of being a woman and a colonized subject. However, this fact does not necessarily transform her into an independence fighter, as is common in other movies. On the contrary, the irreconcilability between her personal aspirations and a part of her identity that cannot be changed leads to a more complex relation and reflection on the meaning of being Korean. The movie presents to the audience the fictionalized story of Pak Kyōng-wōn (1901–1933) who together with Kwōn Kiok (1901–1988) and Yi Chōng-hūi (1910–?) was one of the first female Korean aviators.¹⁸

The film was released a year before Martin Scorsese released *The Aviator*, a biopic that portrays the life of Howard Hughes (1905–1976) and set in a similar temporal framework. Pak lived during a time in which the concept of modern woman *sinyōsōng* 신여성 was in vogue, as particular sectors of the Korean

intellectuals recognized the importance of providing women with a modern education, although there was a strong reaction against it by conservatives prompting a social debate about gender roles. During the Chosŏn dynasty, under a rigid neo-Confucian state, women had been confined to the domestic sphere without participating in public affairs. However, from the beginning of the twentieth century, as more women accessed education and came in contact with international feminism, women became more active within civil society, such as publishing women's magazines that present women's views on gender. The brief articles that appeared at that time in the press evince the pride of young Korean women for Pak achieving such a challenging goal. Within this context a woman like Pak could represent a symbol of women's liberation, but the fact that she flew for the Japanese always obscured her personal achievements as an aviator.

The movie opens with a scene of a young Pak Kyŏng-wŏn smiling at the arrival of Japanese soldiers in 1910. From this point, the audience is aware of her lifelong dream of flying like a bird. In fact, she even appears running in the fields after a plane that is flying low due to a technical problem. The scene portrays her as coming from a humble farming background and having a dispute with her father because of her desire to attend school against his will. Even though Pak Kyŏng-wŏn indeed came from a farming background, her parents were actually relatively wealthy and concerned about her education. However, the audience is warned about potential dramatic license by the director, since the movie includes the following disclaimer: "it is also to be noticed that the characters and incidents in this film are partly modified and dramatized as occasion demands."¹⁹

The next scene shows Pak enrolling in the *Tachikawa Flight School* while she is working as a taxi driver in Japan to pay the tuition fees. Before that, it is known that she attended *Sinmyong Higher Common School* and then she studied silk and hemp-reeling techniques at Yokohama's *Kasahara Industrial Arts School*. When she returned to Korea in 1920, she already dreamed of becoming a pilot, and she was working as a nurse with hopes of saving enough money to accomplish this dream.²⁰ After that, she got a chance to enroll in the *Kabata Driving School* in Tokyo as a step in preparing herself for flying lessons, and she used her license to work as a taxi driver, as shown in the movie. Finally, she enrolled in the *Tachikawa Flight School* in 1925, being one of six female students out of a group of 33. In 1928, she earned her level two aviator license, which was a significant accomplishment for the time, especially considering her status as a Korean woman during the colonial period. She took part in many aviation competitions, winning all the female events. After graduation, Pak flew several promotional flights with the final goal of a flight to Europe or America. One of her lifelong dreams was to fly to Korea, a wish that may have been inspired by An Ch'ang-nam's triumphant



Pak Kyōng-wŏn on her plane.

Source: <https://ppss.kr/archives/55571>

homecoming flight to Korea in 1922. An was the first Korean male aviator and was cheered by the crowd at his arrival at Yōūido (Yeouido) airport. The newspaper *Tonga Ilbo* 동아일보 had raised funds to purchase a plane so that he could fly to Korea.²¹ On 7 August 1933, Pak Kyōng-wŏn died attempting to accomplish her dream during her first trip to Korea, crashing her plane into Mt. Kurotake in Japan only fifty minutes after taking off due to bad climatic conditions. This last flight and other exhibitions performed by Pak are impressively portrayed in the movie, making use of special effects. The movie's title refers to her beloved Salmson 2A2 biplane,²² the latest model at the time and the aircraft used for her last trip.

Even before its release, the movie drew criticism, because it was discovered by netizens that Pak Kyōng-wŏn was not the first Korean female aviator. Kwŏn Kiok apparently became a pilot before her, serving in the Chinese army against Japan. This fact forced the director to change the promotional campaign of the movie.²³ However, this alone would not have exerted a negative impact on the public reception of the movie sufficient to justify its failure in the box office. One of the main problems may have been the perception of the main character as a collaborator and traitor by part of the Korean audience. She did not just fly for the Japanese, but allegedly carried on a scandalous affair with Koizumi Matajirō, the minister of posts and telecommunications and grandfather of Koizumi Junichiro, a former prime minister of Japan.²⁴ At the time, rumors appeared in

the Japanese press, and before the movie's release different articles based on them and criticizing the movie were published under titles such as "Who would glorify the cheer-girl of Japanese imperialism?"²⁵ At the time, Koizumi Matajirō was a powerful and wealthy man who supervised the civil aviation business. His favor made it possible for Pak to acquire her aircraft,²⁶ but the nature of the relation between them remains obscure.

The film ignored these existing items of gossip and presented us with a fictionalized version of Pak having a love story with Han Ji-Hyōk, a Korean who serves in the Japanese army. When the character is first presented, he speaks to Pak in Japanese, and she seems to have a negative perception of him until she discovers that he is Korean as well, a characteristic that makes romance possible between the two and seems an attempt by the director to hint to the audience that Pak despises the Japanese colonizers. The addition of this Korean lover also plays an essential role to strengthen Pak's connection with Korea, as most of the movie's dialogue is in Japanese. However, the rumors about the historical Pak's affair with Koizumi raised controversies and some netizens even called for a boycott and suggested that such a movie should not be released in Korea considering her involvement in pro-Japanese activities and propaganda flights.²⁷ The situation prompted the director and actors to try to defend the character and Jong-chan Yun alleged: "I just wanted to show a tragedy of a woman who had to choose her dream over her country."²⁸ According to his own words, the director wanted to focus on her story rather than depicting the nation's struggle for freedom, such as frequently seen in other movies.

However, the historiography of collaboration, as defined by Koen de Ceuster, has a significant impact in the reception of this kind of re-interpretation or representation of the colonial past. After the liberation of Korea in 1945, the demands of justice against the collaborators were far from satisfied,²⁹ ensuring that the issue would remain unsolved in the popular Korean historical consciousness. For example, of 682 cases of collaboration opened during Rhee's presidency, 559 were passed to prosecutors and only 38 were taken to court. Finally, 12 collaborators were imprisoned, 5 suspended and one sentenced to death, although this last sentence was never carried out.³⁰ In addition to this, as described by Carter Eckert:

Nationalist paradigms have so dominated intellectual life in Korea that they have obfuscated, subsumed, or obliterated virtually all other possible modes of historical interpretation. Whatever the topic—social groups and classes, political or cultural movements, governments or other institutions, individual figures, novels, poems, films, scholarship, even ideas themselves—all have been screened through a myopic nationalist lens that is as judgmental as it is pervasive.³¹

What Eckert points out brings us back to the concepts of national identity and *han*. As stated before, the concept of *han* is controversial in its definition, but if we accept foreign aggression of Korea as one of the sociopolitical sources of *han* that sparks this deep-rooted “sadness,” “bitterness,” or “longing” as described by different scholars, it is possible to shed light on why cultural products dealing with Korea’s traumatic past are unavoidably scrutinized through a nationalist point of view and can be perceived as an offense to a shared memory when they deviate from the mainstream discourse.

This is one of the main reasons the biopic of Pak Kyōng-wŏn could not escape the sterile debate on collaborationism. The deviations from what constitutes “historical truth” are not uncommon and often forgiven by the audience when they emphasize a national hero, as happened with Yi Sunsin in *Roaring Currents*. However, Pak’s background as a collaborator arguably led to the scrutiny of netizens due to the open wound it constitutes. Analyzing the character from a nationalist prism, it is easy to label the actual Pak as a collaborator if compared to other aviators, such as An Ch’ang-nam and Kwŏn Kiok, who took an active role in the fight for independence. But the question often leads to a dead end as the collaboration concept itself is subjective and dynamic. For example, it is known that Pak did not want to change her name to a Japanese name as other pro-Japanese Koreans did. Apparently, she was proud of being Korean, and it is also well known that she dreamed about a homecoming flight. However, living within the colonial context, she found herself involved in consolation propaganda flights, agreeing on them rather than giving up her dream of becoming a pilot. For that reason, regardless of where Pak’s sympathies may have lain, her ties with collaboration and the rumors about her personal life made her an impossible heroine for part of the audience.

There is a very significant scene in the movie when she visits her boyfriend in prison before he is sentenced to death by the Japanese:

Han Ji-Hyōk: How about the flight preparations?

Pak Kyōng-wŏn: They’ll let me fly only if I follow the Foreign Minister.

Han Ji-Hyōk: Follow what?

Pak Kyōng-wŏn: A consolatory flight for Japan’s army in Manchuria with the Japanese flag. I don’t know ...

Han Ji-Hyōk: Worried about people calling you a traitor? But Korea hasn’t done anything for you. Go ... there is no other way

Pak Kyōng-wŏn: I’m so angry ...³²

This scene represents the troubled feelings Pak would have felt at the thought of being close to achieving one of her life goals and only being able to do it under propagandistic conditions and using the Japanese flag. An essential point is raised here. As an individual, why should Pak become a fighter for the independence of

Korea? What did the nation do for her? This scene can be interpreted as the desire of the director to stress the human dimension of the character. Should she renounce her lifelong dream because of nationalism? Would that be selfish if she did not?

The scene represents the peak of a narration that has been unfolding throughout the movie. The audience has been presented with different scenes that depict the hardships and abuses suffered by a Korean woman within the Japanese colonial system. From the scenes in which Pak is discriminated against because of her ethnicity and a Japanese female pilot is chosen to represent her school in tournaments, despite Pak's superior skills, to the scenes in which she and her boyfriend are tortured because of their suspected ties with a Korean journalist who attacks Japanese officers before committing suicide. Those scenes suggest that the director is not trying to represent a colorful "kitsch" colonial period that does not fairly address the difficulties and suffering undergone by Koreans. Indeed, surviving within the colonial context often implied following colonial rule. Refusing to take part could lead to an arrest and the hygienic conditions in prisons were bad enough for prisoners to contract mortal diseases. As Sanha points out in his review of the movie, people should not forget that even though freedom fighters' examples are valuable for the national history there were still many Koreans who had to carry on with their lives in the hostile colonial context. Thus, dismissing Pak's achievements as a female aviator and tagging her as a "cheer-girl of imperialism" might be a "cruel dogmatism for future generations,"³³ which also reflects the importance of popular culture portrayals that escape the predominant black and white narratives.

However, the audience can feel betrayal as the potential feelings of Pak are appropriated by the producers to send a political message. From the perspective of memory the biopic contains a reconstruction of Pak's life, but a reconstruction from the director's memory. This does not just refer to the fictionalized elements of the narrative, but also to how the narration is presented itself and the strategies it follows. For example, the troubled feelings of Pak with her national identity are largely based on assumptions by the producers rather than facts or real memories. For example, there are scenes in which Pak's dream of flying to Korea is represented. After winning an important tournament for her school, Pak states in a press conference her desire of "flying home." This kind of scene, together with scenes that portray the discrimination she suffered, prepare the audience for the climax scene in which the debt owed to the nation is questioned. As much as Pak might not feel in debt to her country, in the movie she still hates being used by the Japanese for a consolation flight because, from their side, having an ethnic Korean pilot do the trip was a perfect move to show that she became a successful woman within the colonial system without acknowledging her suffering.

That said, *Blue Swallow* was perhaps a representation of the colonial past that not many people among the audience were able to enjoy, and still it was necessary. Unlike Kwŏn Kiok who is said to have dreamed about “bombing the palace of the Japanese emperor,”³⁴ Pak Kyŏng-wŏn might not be the hero that Korean nationalism requires, but she can be a character who can help to reconcile Koreans with their troubled past from a more human perspective.

Rikidōzan: From Japanese hero, to ethnic Korean, and finally transnational figure

Let us now turn to analyze the biopic of a Korean ethnic wrestler who developed his career in Japan as, among other elements, its main character questions nationalism in a very similar way to the heroine of *Blue Swallow*. *Yŏkdosan* 역도산, directed by Song Hae-sŏng (*Rikidōzan, A hero extraordinary*, 2004) presents the life of a wrestler known by his artistic name, Rikidōzan (1924–1963). He was born to an impoverished family in modern-day South Hamgyŏng Province under the name of Kim Sin Rak.³⁵ The movie is a South Korean-Japanese co-production starring Korean and Japanese actors. The leading role was interpreted by Sŏl Kyŏnggu, who gained 20 kilograms for the role and had to put an extra effort in attending language tutoring since 97% of the movie lines were in Japanese.³⁶ This decision makes sense as producers may have tried to prioritize the Japanese audience, taking into consideration that Rikidōzan became quite a popular figure in postwar Japan. However, this is a double-edged strategy, since it also posed the risk of causing a rejection of the film by South Koreans due to the language of the movie dialogue.

Since the film is told in the form of a flashback, a typical narrative device in biopics, it comes as no surprise that the film opens with a scene of the incident that put an end to Rikidōzan’s life. Rikidōzan was stabbed by a yakuza member after a dispute. Complications with his wound caused his death a few days later in 1963, though the official cause reported was an overdose of medicine. The film then flashes back to his youth. Rikidōzan started his fighting career at a young age practicing traditional Korean wrestling *ssirŭm* 씨름, and due to his success, a sumo promoter offered him a debut. Even though his parents were against it and tried to marry him off to force him to stay, Rikidōzan was ambitious and ran away from home to Japan.³⁷ At that time, he adopted the name of Mitsuhiro Momota, taking the family name of the Japanese farmer who gave him shelter in Nagasaki. However, after ten years of pursuing a sumo career he decided to leave sumo, partly because of the discrimination he faced for being of Korean origin:

He endured the brutal dawn to dusk regime of a sumo trainee, which included the practice-ring beatings with a bamboo cane to correct bad form and the unpleasant requirement of ministering to the needs of the senior wrestlers in the group bath and toilet. He also bore the occasional whispered taunts of “garlic breath” a patronizing reference to the Korean preference for hot, spicy food, from supervisors who knew of his background.³⁸

This aspect of his youthful years is well depicted in the movie through the first scenes that show him being beaten by his sumo colleagues. It is significant, because it shows the audience the struggle of a Korean to succeed in a sport which was not just dominated by Japanese, but also regarded as the national sport and a symbol of the Japanese nation itself. As a Korean, he lost hope of rising to the grade of Yokozuna, the top rank among sumo players. After abandoning his sumo career, at some point he had a fight with an American who would become his friend and introduce him to pro wrestling, a discipline in which he became a pioneer in Japan. He spent some time in the United States training himself as pro-wrestler before returning to Japan.

It is important to emphasize the historical context of the time. Only a few years before Rikidōzan started pro-wrestling, Japan had suffered the humiliation of defeat and American occupation at the end of the Second World War. At the same time, the 1950s were a decade in which televisions started to appear in Japanese homes. In this context, Rikidōzan became a Japanese hero and, ironically, a symbol of Japanese masculinity and national pride.³⁹ His role in the ring was of a redemptive nature, because many times he would fight and win against oversized western wrestlers who represented the United States and were depicted as treacherous. Moreover Rikidōzan’s signature moves were his famous karate chops. Pro-wrestling matches are more a sort of spectacle than real combat and



Rikidōzan using his signature movement.

Source: <http://blog.daum.net/css53/1504>

Rikidōzan mastered the art of playing with the dramatic momentum. He would pretend to be losing against an opponent, only to finally reverse the situation using his karate chops.

Interestingly, while a considerable portion of his audience in Japan was unaware of Rikidōzan's Korean origin, in the Korean peninsula he was perceived as a genuinely Korean hero. Rikidōzan was sent on a tour in 1963 to Seoul in an effort to improve relations between the two countries and he was received as a Korean.⁴⁰ He also had ties with North Korea, where he had a daughter, and he would be featured in some of their comics as a national hero who moved to Japan, because he was the victim of an alleged blackmail by Japanese policemen.⁴¹ In 1995, as part of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Japan's defeat in World War II, North Korea published Rikidōzan's biography entitled *I am Korean*, which was translated into English and sold in Pyongyang International Airport's departure lounge along with a bottle of liquor for foreign consumption called the "Rikidōzan Drink."⁴² Due to his North Korean origin, his figure was used for propagandistic purposes, and the obsession regarding his personage led North Korean leader Kim Il-sung to build a tomb for him even though he was buried in Japan. However, this notion of Rikidōzan as a Korean ethnic hero is challenged in North Korean writer Kwang Kwi-mi's short story "A tale of music." In the story, the main character, a trumpeter, feels disappointed after meeting the fighter and tells his brother "I thought he was Korean. But he was just another Japanese."⁴³ Despite fighting in Japan, Rikidōzan did not talk openly about his Korean roots, yet he was still regarded as a hero in both Koreas and was well received on the peninsula. At the time, he became a historical figure whose memory has been instrumentalized and contested by three countries. Due to his rise in popularity, Rikidōzan had to hide his Korean origin to avoid losing his followers and income. His connection with his Korean roots is depicted in the movie through his conversations with Myōngil, a fellow Korean friend who owns a barbecue restaurant in Japan. His friend tells him that he has signed the repatriation papers to North Korea and suggests Rikidōzan confess his ethnic background. As pointed out by Hwang, here the movie refers to the historical moment in which more than 700,000 Zainichi Koreans⁴⁴ emigrated to North Korea from Japan between 1959 and 1961.⁴⁵ The conflict between his identity and his career reaches its peak in a significant scene of the movie when he answers to Myōngil:

What did Korea do for me? Surely if I had stayed at home, I would have died as cannon fodder. My only choice would have been whether the bullet that would blow up my head was American, Russian, or something like that. Perhaps, I wouldn't even have that choice. Japan, Korea? What difference does it make? I am Rikidōzan and I belong to the world.⁴⁶

The similarity to the scene mentioned above in *Blue Swallow* is striking. Once again, here it is possible to find a question that has been denied in the mainstream narratives of movies dealing with the colonial past: “What did the nation do for me?” It is a thorny question for a movie as Korean modern nationalism emerged mainly in opposition to Japanese rule and its strong development is related to a traumatic period during which the Japanese tried to erase the Korean identity through assimilation policies. The parallel between the two main characters’ dilemmas is clear, but there are significant differences as well. For example, as Rikidōzan lived into the 1960s, movie producers make a reference to the Korean War (1950–1953). As Yunmi Hwang suggests, the fact that Rikidōzan is resistant to the idea of revealing his ethnic origin and even wants to erase his association with his homeland is related to how South Korean producers carefully treated his relationship with the North, since a different scene could have been seen as an implicit endorsement of the North Korean state.⁴⁷ Conveniently for the movie narrative and as pointed out by Andreas Niehaus, “Rikidōzan has gone from being quintessentially Japanese, to a North Korean resident of Japan, a North Korean, a South Korean and now he finally makes his way back to Japan, this time as a man of the world, a model for a new Japan.”⁴⁸ This notion of Rikidōzan transcending nationality and becoming a citizen of the world seeks to avoid the potential conflict about his true origins. When the movie was released in Japan, Sony Pictures had a (no longer available) website that provided information about Rikidōzan’s life, where he was presented as a model for contemporary Japanese: “He transcended nationality and became a citizen of the world. His life gives hope and courage to us, who live as Japanese.”⁴⁹ The Japanese version also included a disclaimer stating that it was not historically accurate.

Emphasizing Rikidōzan as an international figure was a strategy of instrumentalizing his memory to appeal to both audiences in Korea and Japan, even though the movie did not perform well in the box offices. At the same time, perhaps unintentionally, as it happened with *Blue Swallow*, this specific powerful scene offers the audience a more human approach to the colonial past where the suffering of the nation remains on a secondary level and the viewers are shown the struggles of two Koreans to succeed in their careers in a discriminating and often hostile environment. It raises the question whether characters such as Pak Kyōng-wōn or Kim Sin-rak (Rikidōzan) did or did not have the right of pursuing their careers instead of going into exile and becoming independence fighters. It also reminds us that most Koreans at that time had to carry on with their lives under an oppressive and discriminating system imposed by the colonizers. Thus, the usual narrative of freedom fighters versus Japanese is not present, but the suffering experienced by both characters as victims of an unfair system is

represented in both movies. There is little doubt that both Pak and Kim lived uncommon and exceptional lives during a traumatic historical moment. Both movies portray them as ambitious characters who put great effort in pursuing their careers despite the political context. In that sense, while Pak Kyōng-wŏn cannot escape the ghost of collaboration, Kim Sin-rak's portrayal did not raise the same controversies, perhaps due to the fact that both his fame and career developed during the postwar period. However, as already mentioned, the movie was a failure from the economic point of view. In her research, Hwang quotes different Japanese reviews published at the time of its release that provide valuable hints about why the movie had such a poor reception in Japan. Among others, Rikidōzan's portrayal was perceived as "serious and tragic" and a Japanese website stated that the film "shatters the glorious image of a hero of our time" and instead presents a man "filled with a deep sadness for not having a home or a place to return."⁵⁰

Conclusions

In the era of mass media and globalization the potential of cinema to influence popular understandings of the past is significant. Moreover, as argued by Alison Lansberg, cinema as one of the new technologies of mass consumption that can create a shared "prosthetic memory."⁵¹ The two biopics—*Blue Swallow* and *Rikidōzan*—cannot be interpreted as mere recollections of the lives of two remarkable figures, but rather as products that use specific strategies to send a message to their audience.

Once individual and communication memories fade away, our societies are left with collective memory. This is a dynamic kind of memory constantly being reshaped. In that sense, the two biopics differ from other movies set in the same historical period in their challenge to the predominant nationalist narrative. By stepping away from nationalistic portrayals of the period, they approach the audience with a more personal and human dimension of what occupation meant for Korean individuals rather than entering the field of independence struggle. Their value resides primarily in that they do not try to define historical figures in binary terms within a nationalist history of heroes and traitors.

However, regarding the concept of memory, it is essential to emphasize that these movies do not reproduce "historical truth." Even though they can be categorized as biopics and not biofantasies for their fairly accurate representation of historical facts, on the field of emotions they become entirely products of their directors, their particular cosmovision, and the message they intend to send the audience.

As is often the case in such experiments that take a step away from the mainstream discourse, both movies had a very limited impact on audiences, since they performed poorly in the box office, despite their considerable budgets. In the case of *Blue Swallow*, according to the Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB) it was displayed on 164 screens with a profit of \$2,711,016 and was watched by 496,061 viewers.⁵² However, according to the IMDB, its estimated budget was 8,000,000,000₩, which far exceeded its profits. On the other hand, *Rikidōzan* was shown on 223 screens with a profit of \$5,656,543 and a total of 1,018,382 admissions, which again, is far from its eight-million-dollar estimated budget. These numbers may have prevented other directors from pursuing similar endeavors in recent years. While there were several factors in these performances that escape the scope of this analysis, it is possible to conclude that their representations of the historical characters did not satisfy the audiences. In the case of *Blue Swallow*, it may be related to how its main characters became involved in the collaboration controversies even before the movie was released. As for *Rikidōzan*, the irony of a Japanese postwar hero who turned out to be ethnic Korean could attract neither the attention of the nostalgic followers of his wrestling shows nor the younger generations.

If we take into consideration the South Korean audience, it is also important to note that both movies present an extensive use of Japanese language in their dialogues, which could have alienated potential viewers and led to a loss of interest. In the case of *Rikidōzan*, it seems that the double strategy of trying to attract his fans in Japan by producing the movie almost entirely in Japanese and, at the same time, trying to attract a South Korean audience by introducing elements about his Korean origins—both these strategies ultimately failed.

Despite their box office failures, these two movies are remarkable for contesting the space of colonial reinterpretation held by the predominant nationalist discourse that represents the period as a dichotomy of good versus evil or Koreans versus Japanese. They offer the audience a glimpse of two Koreans struggling for their individual freedom, Pak looking for it in the skies and Kim fighting for it in the ring. They dealt with their Korean identity in different ways, Pak accepting it and Kim hiding his roots from his public. In that sense they remind the viewer of the Zainichi portrayed by Kim Saryang in his novella “Into the Light.”

Both representations put forward interesting questions related to nationalism: Are they to blame as traitors, because they are following their dreams or careers instead of fighting for the nation’s freedom? In the interest of putting forward this question, movie makers instrumentalize the memory of both historical figures imbuing them with their views. As a positive outcome, in my view, both movies

are providing to the audience important questions to reflect on that can potentially break the dichotomy of good versus evil that prevails in the perception of this period. However, it is also important to note that any reconstruction of the lives of the historical figures will be destined to become just one reconstruction among the infinite possibilities of remembering them. From my perspective, this was a risky move within a mainstream trend that demands national heroes in movies set during colonial times. Even if the audience could have understood the personal reasons of both characters, their troubled relationships with their national identity prevent them from becoming the kind of heroes who would have drawn a greater degree of sympathy. Perhaps this is yet another reason for their failure in the box office, together with the fact that South Korean society is still in the process of settling the traumas of the colonial past and coming to terms with its heritage.

Notes

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2. Mark Caprio. *Japanese Assimilation Policies in Colonial Korea: 1910–1945* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009), p. 142.
3. Isolde Standish. “United in Han: Korean Cinema and the ‘New Wave’” *Korean Journal* 32.4 (1992), p. 111.
4. Isolde Standish. “United in Han: Korean Cinema and the ‘New Wave,’” p. 110.
5. To see more on the concept and specific examples see: Sandra So, Kim Hee Chi. “Korean Han and the Postcolonial Afterlives of ‘The Beauty of Sorrow’” *Korean Studies* 41 (2017), pp. 253–279.
6. Krzysztof Polit. “Historical Truth Contrasted with Individual Memory and Communication Memory” in: *Out of the Prison of Memory. Nations and Future*, edited by Vladimer Luarsabishvili (Tbilisi: New Vision University Press, 2020), p. 16.
7. Krzysztof Polit. “Historical Truth Contrasted with Individual Memory and Communication Memory,” p. 16.
8. Christine Kim. “The Choson Monarchy in Republican Korea, 1945–1965” in *Northeast Asia’s Difficult Past*, edited by Mikyoung Kim and Barry Schwartz (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 18.
9. See Im Kwŏnt’aek: *Jokbo* (*The Genealogy*, 1973). Minute 2:44.
10. Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell. *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 177.
11. Kim Kyu Hyun. “A Whirlpool of History. Roaring Currents between a Determined War Film and a Deifying Biopic,” *International Journal of Korean History* 19.2 (2014), p. 275.
12. George Custen. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood constructed Public History*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 4.
13. George Custen. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood constructed Public History*, p. 2.
14. William Epstein and Barton Palmer (eds). *Invented Lives, Imagined Communities. The Biopic and American National Identity* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2016), p. 130.
15. Jinsoo An. *Parameters of Disavowal: Colonial Representation in South Korean Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018), p. 23.

16. Jinsoo An. Parameters of Disavowal: Colonial Representation in South Korean Cinema, pp. 23–24.
17. Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, Verso, 2006), p. 205.
18. Jennifer Jung-Kim. *Gender and Modernity in Colonial Korea*, Unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of California, 2005, p. 198.
19. Included in the movie credits.
20. Theodore Jun Yoo. *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor and Wealth. 1910–1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 2008), p. 194.
21. About this see: Yi Sünghwan, ed. “Cheguk chüi üi ch’iöridö”, Pak Kyöng-wön üi salm.” In: *ppss. 09.09.2015*: <https://ppss.kr/archives/55571>. Last accessed October 2020.
22. Bae-Yong Lee. *Women in Korean History* (Seoul: Ewha University Press. 2008), p. 232.
23. Taejong Kim. “Blue Swallow Faces Turbulences,” *The Korea Times*, 22 December, 2005, Available online in Hancinema.net: <http://www.hancinema.net/blue-swallow-faces-turbulence-4746.html>. Last accessed June, 2021.
24. Theodore Jun Yoo. *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea. Education, Labor and Health. 1910–1945*, p. 193.
25. Chöng Hyeju. “Cheguk chuüi üi ch’iögöl, nuga mihwa hanün-ka?” *Ohmynews*. http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002299511. Last accessed September 2020.
26. Chöng Hyeju. “Cheguk chuüi üi ch’iögöl, nuga mihwa hanün-ka?”
27. For more information on the comments made by netizens at that time, see: Kim, Miyöng “Ch’in-lp’a mihwa yönghwa ‘Ch’öngyön’ poji malcha!” *Hankyoreh*. 2005. <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/movie/89438.html>. Last accessed June 2021.
28. Taejong Kim. “Blue Swallow Faces Turbulences.”
29. Roman De Ceuster. “The Nation Exorcised: The Historiography of Collaboration in South Korea,” *Korean Studies* 25.2 (2001), pp. 212–214.
30. María del Pilar Álvarez. *Who has betrayed the Nation? A Cinematographic Perspective of the Collaboration* (University of Buenos Aires: CONICET, 2010), p. 8.
31. Carter Eckert. “Epilogue. Exorcising Hegel’s Ghosts: Toward a Postnationalist Historiography of Korea,” in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Asia Center. 1999), p. 366.
32. See: Yun, Chong-ch’an: *Ch’öngyön (Blue Swallow)*. Korea Pictures, 2005. Minute: 92:30.
33. Yi, Sünghwan, ed. “Cheguk chüi üi ch’iöridö”, Pak Kyöng-wön üi salm”, in: *ppss. 09.09.2015*: <https://ppss.kr/archives/55571>. Last accessed October 2020.
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37. Sujin Chu. “Famed Wrestler hides his Korean Identity,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, December, 12 2005. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2503920>. Last accessed October 2020.
38. Robert Whiting. *Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 103.
39. John Lie. *Multi-Ethnic Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 62.
40. Robert Whiting. *Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan*, p. 106.
41. Kwon Heok-Tae. “The Memory and Interpretation of August 15, 1945: Korean’s Perception of Japan as Reflected in Comic Books,” *The Review of Korean Studies*, 8.1 (2005), p. 98.

42. Robert Whiting. *Tokyo Underworld: The Fast Times and Hard Life of an American Gangster in Japan*, p. 108.
43. Kwi-mi Kang. "A Tale of Music" in *Literature from the Axis of Evil. Writing from Iraq, North Korea, and other Enemy Nations* (New York, NY, The New Press, 2006), p. 116.
44. The Japanese word "zainichi" refers to a foreign citizen "staying in Japan". However, the term Zainichi Koreans is used to define those permanent ethnic Korean residents of Japan who trace their roots to Korea under Japanese rule differentiating them from more recent waves of Korean migration to Japan.
45. Yunmi Hwang. "Trans-Action. Epic Tensions and Ethics of Memory in East Asian Co-Productions," in: *Transnational Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinemas: The Reel Asian Exchange*, edited by Philippa Gates and Lisa Funnell (London. Routledge, 2012), p. 123.
46. See: Hae-sŏng Song. *Yŏkdosan (Rikidōzan: A Hero Extraordinaire)*. CJ Entertainment, Sidus, 2004. Minute 83:50.
47. Yunmi Hwang. "Trans-Action. Epic Tensions and Ethics of Memory in East Asian Co-Productions," p. 123.
48. Andreas Niehaus and Christian Tagsold. *Sport, Memory and Nationhood in Japan: Remembering the Glory Days* (London: Routledge Press, 2013), p. 136.
49. Andreas Niehaus and Christian Tagsold. *Sport, Memory and Nationhood in Japan: Remembering the Glory Days*, p. 136.
50. Yunmi Hwang. "Trans-Action. Epic Tensions and Ethics of Memory in East Asian Co-Productions," p. 125.
51. See: Alison Lansberg. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass culture* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004).
52. These are statistics for South Korea provided by Korean Film Biz Zone "KOFIC" <http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/eng/films/index/filmsView.jsp?movieCd=20050342> (Blue Swallow) and <http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr/eng/films/index/filmsView.jsp?movieCd=20040682> (Rikidozan). Their estimated budgets have been quoted from Internet Movie Data Base: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0409811/?ref=fn_al_tt_1 (Blue Swallow) and Mark James Russell. *Pop Goes Korea: Behind the Revolution in Movies, Music and Internet Culture* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2008).

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