

# Uncanny Hybridity and Nostalgia Politics in *The Yellow Sea*

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*This article analyzes the ways that Korean Chinese migrants are exploited aesthetically in their ancestral homeland by focusing on their mass-media refiguration. These return migrants, or the Chosŏnjok, have been received by their South Korean co-ethnics into what may be called a “hierarchical nationhood.” The strategies of temporal displacement, this article contends, are employed in South Korean cinema and television dramas in order to contain the uncanny cultural difference embodied by these ethnic returnees. As a result, a certain sense of belatedness is inscribed on the bodies of these migrants. If this temporal refiguration wards off the psychological discomfort of dealing with difference in the midst of sameness, it may be said at the same time to fetishize its object within an archaic constellation that South Koreans find endearing, yet disturbingly absent, from their highly consumerist contemporary society. In attempting to delineate the “nostalgia politics,” the article aims to shed light on the function of certain mass media representations, including Hongjin Na’s movie *The Yellow Sea*, in the context of the socioeconomic realities of South Korea.*

**Keywords:** *Chosŏnjok*, co-ethnic migrant, cultural difference, film, Korean Chinese, hybridity, nostalgia politics, South Korea, *The Yellow Sea*

## INTRODUCTION

TODAY, THERE ARE PRESUMED to be over one billion migrants. Despite the universalizing claim that “we are all migrants” (Feldman 2015),<sup>1</sup> the status of the migrant is a perilously uncertain one. The migrant often appears not just as a mobile subject *a patria* but as a source of threat to national purity and security. Illegal migrants or “*sans-papiers*” find themselves in an even more horrendous situation. The so-called “undocumented” migrants’ subjection to the exclusionary and violent nation-state biopolitics is well captured in Georgio Agamben’s (1998) notion of the “bare life.” No matter where it occurs, migration tends to be perceived in terms of an “invasion” of cheap labor from the periphery. In such a scenario, migration is seen as an occurrence that is likely to jeopardize at the least the domestic labor market and perhaps even the overall public health of the host society. What is more, the figure of the migrant worker may serve as a receptacle for the aggressive or phobic collective imaginings and practices to which the nation-state often resorts in order to maintain its unity and sanity, as Freud once suggested.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Nail (2015, 1) also predicts, “The twenty-first century will be the century of the migrant.”

This article addresses the situation of one ethnic group, the so-called “*Chosŏnjok*” workers in South Korea. *Chosŏnjok*, or *Cháoxiǎnzú* 朝鲜族 is a term used to refer to the Korean Chinese, one of China’s fifty-six ethnic groups. A central reason for choosing this particular group for analysis is the exemplariness it takes on as an ethnic minority within its current home country. Another reason is the singularity with which it can be said to illustrate a minority status, even in terms of its ancestral land. Until 1988, for example, the year in which Seoul hosted the Olympics, the South Korean encounter with the Korean Chinese was virtually nonexistent. Even in 1991, there was no official provision made for the entry of Korean Chinese persons into South Korea. And even as late as 1992, the year in which South Korea normalized its diplomatic relations with China, the number of *Chosŏnjok* visitors was negligible. As of April 2017, however, the Korean Immigration Service (2017, 3) recorded that the number of registered *Chosŏnjok* had topped 652,738 persons. This figure represents one-third of the total number of foreign residents in Korea or, to put it differently, it represents one-third of the entire ethnic Korean community in China.

Despite Benedict Anderson’s (1991, 7) view of the nation as a community based on “a deep, horizontal comradeship,” the *Chosŏnjok*, as return migrants, have been received by their South Korean co-ethnics into what may be called a “hierarchical nationhood” or secondary citizenry (Seol and Skrentny 2009, 149–52). To many South Korean company owners, they are just a cheap migrant labor force that conveniently possesses Korean language skills. In consequence, they have been readily employed in the so-called 3D (dirty, dangerous, and demanding) jobs, which are these days shunned by their co-ethnics. To the South Korean government, they are a large group of quasi-foreigners in need of surveillance, the consequence of their alleged association with a variety of criminal activities, including illegal immigration. The purpose of this article, however, is not primarily to investigate the dual politico-economic disadvantage in which this ethnic group is enmeshed, on both sides of the Yellow Sea, the small body of water that runs between China and the Korean peninsula.<sup>3</sup> Instead, focusing on the realm of mass-media representation, I argue that there is more to the signifying dynamics built in the narrativization of the return migrant than the Freudian affective paradigm of phobia and hate can explain.

To be more specific, I analyze the ways these return migrants are exploited and consumed aesthetically in their host society by focusing on their cinematic and discursive refiguration. As Homi Bhabha (1994, 75) once observed, following Edward Said, it is the individual who is threatened by racial or ethnic differences. The strategies of temporal displacement, I contend, are employed in South Korean cinema and television dramas in order to contain the uncanny cultural difference embodied by the Korean Chinese. In other words, these representational devices *differentially* re-ethnicize these familiar, yet foreign, co-ethnics by transposing them within a shared history. As a result, an uneven

<sup>2</sup>To quote Freud (1961, 114), “It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness.”

<sup>3</sup>Much sociological and ethnic research has already been conducted on the Korean Chinese (see Freeman 2011; Han 2013; Skrentny and Lee 2015; see also Chulhyo Kim 2015; Hye-Kyung Lee 2015).

temporality, a certain sense of belatedness, is inscribed on both the bodies and the hometown cityscapes of these migrants.

If this temporal refiguration wards off the epistemological or psychological discomfort of dealing with difference in the midst of sameness, it may be said at the same time to lock up or fetishize its object within an archaic constellation that South Koreans find endearing, yet disturbingly absent from their highly consumerist contemporary society. Nostalgically reimagined, the bodies of these hyphenated beings stand as a poignant social critique of South Korean capitalist society; they may even be said to embody or bring forth a form of vicarious fulfillment. In attempting to delineate the “nostalgia politics” on whose behalf the archaic bodies of these ethnic Koreans are required to perform, I aim to shed light on the function of certain major mass cultural genres amidst the demoralizing socioeconomic realities of South Korea in the post-IMF era.

### THE *CHOSŎNJOK* AS A SIGN OF AMBIVALENCE

The *Chosŏnjok* have become a sign of identity-ambiguity, both inside and outside China. Despite their Chinese nationality, the *Chosŏnjok* possess the status of an autonomous prefecture and reportedly endeavor to conserve their collective Korean cultural and ethnic identity. Due to this peculiarity of social identity, the question of which nation the Korean Chinese really belong to has emerged as an issue among the *Chosŏnjok* themselves, witnessed in the recent controversy among three leading *Chosŏnjok* scholars.<sup>4</sup> According to the first view, the *Chosŏnjok* are Chinese citizens in every sense, including that of cultural citizenship. In particular, the ethnic Koreans who live in close contact with the Han Chinese community in China proclaim complete identification with the Chinese, except for some small differences in appearance such as that caused by their dress code (Hyesŏn Lee 2003). The second view holds that the *Chosŏnjok* need not take an uncompromising “either/or” attitude; instead, they should consider themselves as holders of dual citizenship—a blend of Korean cultural and Chinese civic citizenship.

The liminality of this cultural identity is apparent to many South Koreans no less than to the *Chosŏnjok* themselves. While the Korean language these ethnic Koreans speak confirms their shared cultural membership in the eyes of South Koreans, their simultaneous fluency in Chinese acts as a potential source of alienation. Even their use of Korean, typically a metonymy of ethnic sameness, draws ambivalent responses from some in South Korea. Their use of archaic diction and a noticeable accent often make them the butt of good-hearted laughter; at the same time, they remind many South Koreans of their terrifying, nuclear-testing, northern “brothers” who share much the same diction and accent, due to the geographic continuity between Chinese Yanbian

<sup>4</sup>The debate over the identity of the Korean Chinese involved Yupok Hwang, Professor at Minzu University of China, Peking; Sŏngil Cho, Premier of Yanbian Chosŏnjok munhwa palchŏn ch’ok-chin wiwŏnhoe (Committee for Promoting Yanbian Chosŏnjok Culture); and Houng Kim, Professor at Yanbian University. According to Kim, the Korean Chinese are “Korean daughters married off to China” (Chonghwan Lee 2012, para. 5–7). This view is also voiced by P’anyong Chŏng, Professor at Yanbian University (Tongbuga Kongdongch’e Yŏn’guhoe 2010, 187).

延邊 and North Korea. Most notable among the *Chosŏnjok*'s markers of potential alien status is their assimilation into Chinese culture, particularly their consumption of Chinese cuisine, which has become an inalienable component of their daily life. These markers of cultural difference create emotional distance between many South Koreans and their Chinese compatriots.

Within the Korean movie industry, the Korean Chinese, marked in an ambivalent way with signs of both familiarity and strangeness, have recently been in increasing demand. Of course, their sudden popularity does not mean that these overseas “brethren” are always portrayed in a flattering light. Take the familiar, yet uncanny, figures found in Hunchōng Pak's *Shinsegye* (New world, 2013), for example. In this Korean remake of the Hong Kong noir *Mou gaan dou* (Infernal affairs, 2002), four Korean Chinese, hired by some overseas Chinese gangsters in South Korea, cross the border in order to commit multiple murders. These hired guns, referred to as “Yanbian beggars” in the movie, strike the audience with a kind of oddity. Consciously dressed-up, they nonetheless manifest a conspicuously shabby and markedly out-of-date set of appearances. Their familiar, yet eccentric, visages give the impression that these ethnic Koreans are from a different time, one the South Korean nation left behind decades ago. Although they try to dissimulate, the temporal discrepancy that oozes from them belies their attempt to blend in. If their bewildered, out-of-place behavior often seems comic, their lawlessness and barbarousness strike the audience as horrific.

In contrast, in Hongjin Na's *Hwanghae* (The Yellow Sea, 2010), the *Chosŏnjok* not only function as a signifier of cultural ambiguity but also are put to the service of a “nostalgia politics.” In this process, the uncanny hybridity of these ethnic Koreans and their culture is resignified in order to simulate certain past periods of Korean national history. If the signifiers of cultural ambiguity and temporal discrepancy in *New world* provide for comic relief, they are employed for the more serious task of social critique in *The Yellow Sea*. In other words, if the shabby *Chosŏnjok* killers in the former play funny sidekicks with their thick northern accents, disoriented awkwardness, and general simple-mindedness, those in the latter make South Koreans painfully confront a not-so-pleasant self-portrait.

The use of an ethnic minority for the critique of the hegemonic group or the society at large is not uncommon in other regions of Asia, although the specific political and economic context may vary from country to country. The struggles of South Asians against racial discrimination, for instance, receive the limelight in one of the Hong Kong crime movie series, *Tactical Unit: Partners* (2009). The movie registers the local residents' increasing concern about the rise of the dark-skinned South Asian gangs. At the same time, it makes strong statements about the harsh racism of Hong Kong society against its subaltern class, such as Indians, Filipinos, and Nepalese in this case, thus earning the title of “social conscience cinema” (Mudge 2009). Another example is *Jagat*, the 2015 Tamil crime movie that advances a strong indictment of the established classes in Malaysia from the perspective of an ethnic group “left out of the nation's urbanization and development plans” (Ect and Azman 2015). Focusing on the rise of gangs, impoverishment, and moral breakdown, this movie portrays the struggles of the ethnic Indians who were forced to leave the rubber estates and survive on the fringes of the city.

## TEMPORAL RESIGNIFICATION OF THE CO-ETHNIC MIGRANTS

In *The Yellow Sea*, the Korean Chinese characters embody an odd hybridity of the uncanny-within-the-familiar. The sense of “uncanny” is evoked when these characters are associated either with North Korea or China, the only socialist nation that has consistently supported North Korea economically and militarily. The movie starts with the protagonist Kunam Kim narrating an account of the outbreak of rabies in his hometown in Yanbian. The heavy old Hamgyōng-do (one of the northern provinces of North Korea bordering Yanbian) accent of the protagonist may sound familiar and possibly even endearing to elderly South Koreans of a northern origin. At the same time, due to the associations of the accent with North Korea, the accent may also seem slightly disconcerting. The disconcerting “difference” within identity also emerges near the beginning when Kunam and Chōnghak Myōn, a dog seller and *Chosōnjok* mafia boss in Yanji 延吉, play mahjong in a dirty-looking gambling house. These two ethnic Koreans’ mastery of the staple form of Chinese gambling, as seen in their professional handling of the tiles, indicates in the eyes of the audience the advanced stage of their “going native,” that is, their acquisition of the cultural citizenship of the “Other.”

The foreignness that permeates the otherwise familiar co-ethnics is also foregrounded when Kunam visits his father-in-law to discuss his wife’s disappearance in South Korea. As presented in figure 1, the *Chosōnjok* father-in-law’s house has a typical Chinese interior. One conspicuous example of this may be seen in the narrow, platform-like floor, which, unlike the lower, Korean, heated floor, is raised high above the ground. A second is the golden calligraphy on a long and narrow red paper pasted on the right-side wall. Perhaps equally as alienating is the fact of Kunam’s smoking with his father-in-law over the broken marriage, which is symbolized by the smashed glass frame of his wedding ceremony. While it is not uncommon among the Chinese



**Figure 1.** The house of Kunam’s father-in-law in *The Yellow Sea*. Image used with permission.

for a son to smoke in the presence of his father or father-in-law, it is considered to be a gross violation of etiquette among Koreans.

This is not to say that the exposure of the foreign or Chinese nature of the *Chosŏnjok*, which is likely to act as a potential source of discomfort or alienation among the South Korean audience, does not go unchecked in the movie. Instead, it is subjected to a reconfiguring or resignifying process. The Korean entertainment industry has actually capitalized on the cultural differences embodied in this ethnic minority, as long as these are safely managed. This management takes the form of repositioning the potentially alien nature within familiar contexts and thus minimizing its menacing aspects. Caricature is an easy variation of this strategy that renders the alien harmless or ridiculous. For instance, sometime after the movie's release, an eponymous episode was created for *Gag Concert*, a South Korean television comedy show. This episode has become extremely popular due to the actors' mimicry of the *Chosŏnjok*'s quaint accents and awkward behavior.

A comparable work of containment may be found in the movie *The Yellow Sea*. The movie interpellates these uncannily same, yet different, ethnic Koreans within different temporalities associated, explicitly or implicitly, with certain stages of Korean or Chosŏn national history. One conspicuous temporality employed by the movie is the sixties and early seventies—the early modern period when South Korea started to rebuild itself from the ruins of the civil war, overturning in the process the outdated legacies from both the Chosŏn dynasty and Japanese imperialism. By leaving out the contemporary, stylish, high rise structures of Yanji from the screen, the director was able to render the cityscape nondescript and, at the same time, mark it with the general signs of the “periphery” during the early stages of modernization. The effect is that the adult audience is made to feel that they are making a trip back to an earlier time period of Korean national history, especially when faced with the carefully selected, drab, and untidy urban images: rundown apartments, graffiti-filled walls, and dirty hallways; apartment yards piled with giant bags of trash that appear to have been left there a long time ago; laundry hanging from rusty balcony railings; poorly lit streets; old, unkempt cars; and unpaved roads pockmarked with giant puddles (see [figure 2](#)). Even when the camera turns to the main streets of Yanji, the scenery reflects a “periphery” yet to be fully baptized by capitalism.

In order to make this time travel to the sixties possible, the director performs a sleight of hand: creating a protagonist based on Yanji's past, not its present, in addition to excluding most of Yanji's modern cityscape from the movie frame. To put this differently, one is no longer able to find a person like Kunam, the *Chosŏnjok* taxi driver, easily in the Yanji of today. It used to be otherwise. According to one Internet Jilin newspaper and certain South Korean news agencies, Yanji has developed rapidly since the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and South Korea.<sup>5</sup> The subsequent

<sup>5</sup>*Chosŏnjok* taxi drivers are not the only “endangered species” in Yanji. The small shops—hair salons, barber shops, and grocery stores—that used to line the streets of Yanji and were owned and operated by *Chosŏnjok* have now been taken over by the Han Chinese. The rural areas of Yanbian from out of which *Chosŏnjok* flowed in large numbers, abandoning the land, have also been taken over by the Han Chinese (see [Chang 2008](#); [Dongpo 2011](#), para. 13; [Chŏngryong Kim 2010](#)).





**Figure 2.** Cityscapes of Yanji in *The Yellow Sea*. Images used with permission.

economic boom so invigorated the taxi business in Yanji that the number of taxis per capita became by the mid-nineties the highest among all the cities in China. At that time, an absolute majority of the taxi drivers were *Chosŏnjok*. But this is no longer true. According to one Han Chinese taxi driver, today most Yanji taxi drivers consist of that ethnic group that is ineligible to make the trip to South Korea: the Han Chinese (Chonghwan Lee 2012, para. 16). In this regard, the character of Kunam represents an anachronism of the Yanji of the nineties or even earlier, when the *Chosŏnjok* still constituted a majority of the Yanjii population.

### THE POLITICS OF NOSTALGIA

Another somewhat less conspicuous form of time travel in *The Yellow Sea* takes place when Kunam visits the Yanbian countryside to see his mother. The house of Kunam's mother represents a typical *Chosŏnjok* residence, with its relatively modern look, consisting of a slate roof and brick walls, significant improvements upon the centuries-old thatched roof and mud walls typical of the Chosŏn dynasty. And yet despite the exterior signs of modernity, the interior of the house subtly references a more remote, albeit indefinite, part of Korean history. It does not take a great deal of effort to note the absence of any visible room-to-room distinction inside the house, for example, the distinction between bedroom and living room or between living room and kitchen. In the scene in which Kunam's mother feeds her granddaughter, watched over by her reclining son, the audience will notice a large, round, iron-cast lid partially captured by the lower left corner of the movie frame (see figure 3). The container or pot itself cannot be seen, the presence of which is indicated only by the puff of steam that rises from it. Yet most of the Korean audience will be able to identify the lid as part of an object commonly found in traditional Korean farm houses: a cauldron.

What is unusual about this scene is that while the lid is on the same level as the heated floor, or *ondol*, the large pot remains invisible due to its placement inside the hearth built below the floor level. If the monolithic, undivided floor of Kunam's mother's house, the so-called *t'onggudŭl*, exemplifies the traditional Korean heating floor style, the lid metonymically refers to an archaic provincial Korean history. Although not visible to the audience, the kitchen area, which includes the hearth, is on the ground level, a little lower than the floor. This area can be covered up by wooden panels, thus becoming extra floor space (see figure 4). The interior space of the house is then composed of only one large floor with the kitchen area convertible either to a living room or a bedroom.

This hybrid space is called "*chŏngjugan*" 鼎廚間 (see Chŏngjugan, n.d.; Lee Hyŏntong 2005). It is unique to the old Hamgyŏng-do farmhouse, a style that was later transplanted into Manchuria and the areas beyond during the massive Korean dispersion into China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although this old architectural style will not be the cause of general reminiscences, it nonetheless still possesses what Fredric Jameson (1988, 19) would call "a faintly archaic feel" or what Roy Richard Grinker (1998, 61, 59) would term an "authentic past" "nearly forgotten." According to Jameson, films like *Star Wars* reinvent past cultural experiences in the form of pastiche, thus allowing the adult audience to gratify a nostalgic desire to return to an older period. This kind of film





**Figure 3.** The house of Kunam's mother in *The Yellow Sea*. Image used with permission.

is thus metonymically a historical or nostalgia film: unlike *American Graffiti*, it does not reinvent a picture of the past in its lived totality; rather, by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period ..., it seeks to reawaken a sense of the past associated with those objects. (Jameson 1988, 19)

The architectural style of Kunam's mother's house serves to conjure up the same vague sense of an older period. Its effect is to make the audience believe they are stepping back



**Figure 4.** A kitchen area partially covered by boards. Photo courtesy of Sokcho City Museum, South Korea.

uncertainly into the Korean or Korean diasporic past. Unlike the American audience of *Star Wars*, however, the South Korean audience does not need a personal experience of the past. This is because they now have proxies who will do it for their sake: the Korean Chinese.

The evocation of the sense of a bygone era also operates through inconspicuous items, such as glass photo frames. Originally produced for both remembrance and decoration, these frames are found hanging on the wall in the background slightly above the television set within Kunam's mother's room (see figure 3) as well as within the father-in-law's Han-style room (see figure 1). The frames contain either single or multiple black-and-white family pictures that slightly overlap. These items now ironically become part of a fading set of memories. This token of endearing archaism and obsolescence found in these countryside homes resonates with a wistful, vague Korean past, even if the custom of keeping photos in such frames is far from being a uniquely Korean one.

The strategy of temporal displacement seems intended to re-ethnicize these "foreign" Koreans by repositioning them within a shared history in an effort to eliminate their discomfiting alien quality. However, the strategy does not make these Korean Chinese indistinguishable from ordinary South Koreans. Instead, to borrow Bhabha's (1994, 89) term, they have become "almost the same but not quite."

The representational practice of metamorphosing the *Chosŏnjok* into an early modern Korean doppelganger is not unique to *The Yellow Sea*. According to a recent study of a Korean newspaper's coverage of the traditional homeland of the *Chosŏnjok*:

Yanbian is defined as a premodern agricultural community that has just entered the initial stage of capitalization. Such a referencing leaves out the decades-long history of Yanbian as a province of socialist China. Instead, displaced to a particular past period of South Korea, that of the sixties and seventies, Yanbian is represented as a typical Korean agricultural community. (Yang 2010, 214; my translation)

In *The Yellow Sea*, however, the appropriation of Yanbian is not aimed at repositioning it at a single particular stage of the history of the South Korean nation. Instead, the movie employs different temporalities to deal with different geographic locales. To facilitate the remapping of the Yanji cityscape, the time chosen is that of the Korean sixties and early seventies. In contrast, the countryside of Yanbian mobilizes a more indefinite, remote period of the Korean nation in order to create its nostalgic ambience, seeming at times to reach back to the early stages of Korean settlement in Manchuria.

The practice of rendering the homes of the *Chosŏnjok* by such Korean temporal simulacra may not be dictated by, but is certainly susceptible to, the hierarchical logic of developmentalism. According to Arif Dirlik (2000, 151–52), the hierarchical conceptualization of the center and the periphery underlying the concepts of developmentalism and modernization posits that all societies move in a single temporality, of which the center is the most advanced instance. In *The Yellow Sea*, South Korea is thus placed at the top of the ladder of development in its relationship with the more regressive Yanbian. However, ultimately the movie breaks with the logic of developmentalism, since it does not suggest the Korean model for the Korean Chinese community either in China or South Korea. On the contrary, it wishes to preserve the latter in its peripheral state even as it yearns

for incorporation within the framework of global capitalism—or perhaps better it tries to fetishize Yanbian within an early modern or premodern archaic structure. This nostalgic undertaking is in part motivated by the painful realization of what the South Korean people had to sacrifice at the altar of modernity and consumerist capitalism. Among the tolls they had to pay are the traditional values superseded by the central value of capitalist society: money.

The inscription on the co-ethnics of such ambivalent values as “backward but pure” and “unsophisticated yet humane” is, however, not something new with South Koreans. It has been practiced with regard to “the other sibling,” the North Koreans, as well. The figuration of the North Korean as a brutal yet humane killer is testified to by such South Korean movies as *Shiri* (1998), *Kongdong kyōngbi kuyōk JSA* (Joint security area, 2000), and *Dongchangsaeng* (Commitment, 2013), a practice that was not possible during the anti-communist authoritarian rule spanning from the sixties to the eighties. The psychological dynamics of conceiving the co-ethnics as regressive yet preserving “good old values” was, according to Grinker, also witnessed in the public sphere, for example, in a 1993 South Korean government-sponsored exhibition in Seoul about North Korea. The exhibition that displayed daily items of the North Korean household was appropriated not only as a way of denigrating North Korea as a backward state but also as a means of self-reflection on the part of South Koreans, or “a way of attacking historical changes in the south such as the growth of excessive consumerism” (Grinker 1998, 61).

#### DESIRING THE DESIRE OF THE OTHER

Paradoxically enough, this sorely felt loss of traditional values is initially attributed to the nostalgically reimagined alien brothers, not to the South Koreans. Among the old traditional values to which the movie pays a belated respect is faithfulness. It is Kunam’s suspicion about Hwacha, his wife’s suspected adultery, that causes the husband to take out a contract on a Korean professor named Sūnghyōn Kim, which initiates a whole series of horrifying catastrophes for himself and others. Six months previously, Hwacha left South Korea in order to work, leaving her husband in great debt as a result of trying to procure his wife’s visa. Harassed by Chinese loan-sharks to pay off his debt, Kunam visits a *Chosōnjok* lady broker to see if any money has been wired by his wife, who is now working in Seoul. What he receives from her is doubly frustrating news: not only does he discover that there is no money but also he is informed to forget about her because she is apparently living with another man. The target of this accusation of adultery is quickly expanded to include quite a number of *Chosōnjok* wives who have been separated from their families by their work obligations in South Korea: “Don’t come back here anymore. Consider your wife dead. Quite a few *Chosōnjok* wives are leading loose lives there too.” This bad news causes Kunam to accept an offer from a hit man named Mr. Myōn, figuring that he can kill two birds with one stone: paying off the debt using the contract money and finding his missing wife.

The scarlet letter fixed upon the entire female *Chosōnjok* is witnessed again when Kunam, having smuggled himself into South Korea, inquires about his wife in Ansan, a principal *Chosōnjok* place of residence. Upon hearing Kunam’s story, the owner of the restaurant in which Hwacha used to work advises him to confront the sad reality:

“How many do you think are married couples among the diners here, eh?” What the camera then catches as it pans across the room is the apparently suspicious sight of numerous men and women laughing and drinking together. The possibility that a significant number of the merry-making patrons and patronesses in this *Chosŏnjok* restaurant could also be Koreans (skewered mutton, known to be the staple cuisine of the *Chosŏnjok*, has become quite popular among Koreans), does not receive attention. Nonetheless, the friendly restaurant entrepreneur, probably Korean, if his accent is any indication, continues the unasked-for counsel: “Forget it, or ignore it. Don’t make any trouble. It means immediate deportation for you folks. Just work patiently and leave here with some money.” Despite its good intention, the advice tends to confirm the derogatory view held by the Yanji woman broker of the *Chosŏnjok* wives working in South Korea.

In Garibongdong, a densely populated *Chosŏnjok* district in Seoul, Kunam continues to search for his wife. Here, he learns that his wife is receiving help from a South Korean raw fish supplier, probably in return for sexual favors. As soon as he finds out who the man is, he starts to beat him up for the act of cuckoldry. Following one lead after another, Kunam finally arrives at his wife’s one-room house but finds it not only empty but in shambles, with bloody signs of a physical fight and a hurried escape. Later, Kunam torments himself with thoughts about the violence his wife must have suffered at the hands of her vindictive Korean lover. However, soon he has to worry about his own life. Although he does not get to kill his target, the South Korean professor Kim, he finds himself on the run as a murder suspect.

Viewed in this light, *The Yellow Sea* participates in stereotyping the *Chosŏnjok*. The fetishistic images imposed on the latter are those of illegality, immorality, and a get-rich-quick mentality. The South Korean news media has played an important role in fetishizing the *Chosŏnjok* in terms of its moral depravity, whether in Yanbian or in the quarters of Seoul favored by the *Chosŏnjok*. The examples of this stereotyping include newspaper reports about elementary schools in Yanbian being converted to dance halls, an entertainment venue associated with adultery for South Koreans, and Korean-visa-related bribery and debt bondage. They also include lurid stories about the *Chosŏnjok* in South Korea, including frequent reference to adultery, “*Chosŏnjok* women in the sex trade,” “their craziness about money,” and so on. These reports are made not only by South Korean but also by Korean Chinese news agencies (Chin 2003; Sŏ 1995). Apparently, Kunam, who wastes all of his daily wages in night-long gambling sessions despite his being harassed by creditors, who sends his wife overseas in the hope of making some easy money, fits the get-rich-quick type. So too does Mr. Myŏn, the *Chosŏnjok* mafia boss, who is portrayed as someone who is willing to do anything for money.

This representation of the *Chosŏnjok* in *The Yellow Sea* has incurred the charge of racism from several *Chosŏnjok* critics. According to one *Chosŏnjok* news agency, the movie

relates the *Chosŏnjok* to such issues as crime, adultery, poverty and what not. The *Chosŏnjok* in the movie are depicted as violent people, willing to commit crime for money, and as cheap labor, filling the bottom level of Korean society. Especially portraying them as willing to do anything for money generates a false equation between *Chosŏnjok* and crime in the minds of South Koreans. (Miran Kim 2011; my translation)

The director's attempt to explain that at heart the movie represents his affection for the *Chosŏnjok* did not cause the controversy to subside. According to *Baekdunet*, another *Chosŏnjok* online news agency, "the Korean Chinese, the party directly concerned, find it hard to agree with the director's statement. The portrayal of the *Chosŏnjok* as poor, violent and tragic, and also as potential criminals threatening South Korean society, makes a negative impact on the South Korean perception of the Korean Chinese" (*Baekdunet* 2011, para. 2; my translation).

Nonetheless, this line of criticism, which highlights the cinematic stereotyping practices, commits the same sin of simplification. This is because such criticism overlooks the convoluted psychological dynamics between self and other that operate within the movie. What is more, it tends to leave out of account the movie's ending. Our portrayal of the Other is always imprinted or implicated with our own self-image, whether this is the result of our habitual defensive imposition of sameness upon the threatening Other, as Bhabha (1994, 88) claims, or the result of our narcissistic need for the Other as "a sort of surrogate and even underground self," as Edward Said (1979, 3) argues. For whichever reason, narratives about the Other cannot help but speak of ourselves. To quote the director Na, "I wanted to talk about [the Korean Chinese and their] lives." Na is also quoted as suggesting, "I have the intention of portraying the life we are living today" (Na 2010, para. 11, 14). Seen in this light, even the accusatory journalistic piece by Chŏngkyŏng Sŏ, entitled "Ton mat e yet mat irŏganŭn Yŏn'gil Chosŏnjok" (Yanji Chosŏnjok sacrifice good old values for money), can be read as a South Korean story, one that registers the wistfulness for bygone days, for the old values and truer feelings that have been lost, values and feelings that appear to have been magically preserved within the Korean Chinese community.

The ending of the movie tends to confirm this line of interpretation. The audience is taken by surprise when it is finally revealed that it is some Koreans, rather than some members of the *Chosŏnjok* community, who have been guilty of sexual debauchery and soulless money-making. In the end, Kunam and his wife are revealed as the only couple who have remained faithful to each other. Kunam's devotion to Hwacha is eloquently illustrated at the end by his preservation of a box that allegedly contains her ashes, even while he suffers death. Throughout the movie, the likelihood that Hwacha has committed adultery while working in South Korea is entertained by both the protagonist and the audience. And this appears almost as a confirmed fact when the television news broadcasts the brutal murder of an unidentified *Chosŏnjok* woman by her lover. In the event, however, the murderer turns out to be the raw fish supplier that Kunam once beat up in Garibongdong. Meanwhile, Hwacha catches a train back home to her waiting family, thus emerging as a paragon of faithfulness and moral integrity.

Moral integrity is a virtue that would seem to be conspicuously absent in almost all the Korean characters. For instance, T'aewŏn Kim, the company president, keeps a mistress and has a close friend, Professor Kim, murdered by hired thugs after he discovers the latter has been sleeping with her. The loyalty is betrayed between Korean employer and employee: it is his most trusted man, his bodyguard and chauffeur, who eventually cuts Professor Kim's throat. Although Mr. Myŏn, the *Chosŏnjok* mafia boss, earlier gives Kunam the mission of killing Professor Kim, the clients behind this "business deal" are revealed to be the professor's wife and her bank clerk lover.

Equally, the vices of inefficiency, illegality, and moral depravity are attributed to the South Korean characters. For example, more than a dozen armed policemen fail in their



attempts to catch the unarmed Kunam; a South Korean police officer fumbles with his handcuffs and shoots a junior officer by mistake; Professor Kim runs a series of illegal businesses, including four massage parlors and three “room salons” (hostess bars that provide their customers with prostitutes); and President Kim runs a mafia operation behind the legal façade of a bus company. In short, the materialism and debauchery that are initially attributed to Kunam and his wife are actually attributes of the Korean characters.

In the introductory monologue where he talks of the rabies that once infected a dog he had as a child being back in town, Kunam is speaking metaphorically of the deadly epidemic of consumer capitalism in contemporary Korea. As the story unfolds, talk of an infected mad dog may at first suggest to the audience Kunam, this desperate man who has to fight or bite in order to pay off his debt. Yet, the truth is that to see real insanity and real beastliness, the audience must wait until Kunam comes to Korea. Here, the disease of soulless materialism has infected almost everyone. Although a brush with the evils of Korean materialism and depravity costs him his life, Kunam is able to keep his humanity intact until death through his attempts to get his wife back and by his efforts to take justice into his own hands, even if misguidedly, for the sake of Professor Kim’s widowed wife. And despite her deep involvement with the seductive but ultimately exploitative society, Hwacha is also able to keep her sanity and her chastity intact.

#### A CULT OF ARCHAIC ETHNIC BODIES

Unlike their South Korean brothers, Kunam and his wife are able to remain unaffected by the apparently widespread debauchery in their new homeland. Their ability to reassert their humanity, the movie suggests, is something that can be fostered only in a peripheral area not yet fully incorporated into global consumer capitalism. In a similar way to the effect produced by Kunam’s humble appearance, the modest black clothes in which Hwacha travels home again, as if memorializing her husband’s death, symbolize her continuing cultural and spiritual membership in the underdeveloped periphery. Viewed in this light, the nostalgic rendering of the *Chosŏnjok* and Yanbian is geared toward the project of reimagining these “less-developed” brothers as moral resources for a materialistic, covetous South Korean nation. As Nayoung Kwon (2014, 118) points out, nostalgia can rarely be considered separately from “present anxieties.”

The retro-styling practices that invent both Yanji and the Yanbian countryside as subsumable under an earlier imaginary Korean nation have been operative in the Korean entertainment industry for some time. As early as 2006, this cinematic strategy called forth critiques of what was seen as conscious anachronism: “We, Yanbian folks, are not hillbillies of the sixties” (Ch’oe 2006). The Yanji of today, which the film director Zhang Lu calls “a city without memories,” is developing so fast that visitors who return after even a couple of years find it hard to recognize the city.<sup>6</sup>

The critical perspective obtained by viewing a materialistic society through the eyes of the “untainted” Yanbian girls is not new, although perhaps not entirely ordinary yet, certainly within Korean media representations. Their central-stage appearance in

<sup>6</sup>Zhang Lu, personal interview with the author, May 20, 2014.

South Korea dates back to T'aesök O's play *Yöu wa sarang ü* (Love with fox, 1996). In this work, the ugly materialism of South Korea is indicted through the perspectives of six Yanbian girls, thus setting the example of appropriating the quaint, yet romanticized, ethnic bodies for the sake of Korean self-reflection. More recently, Yanbian girls have been cast as protagonists in a variety of entertainment genres, including movies (*Failan* [2001] and *Taensö üi sunjöng* [Innocent steps, 2005]); television drama (*Yörahop sunjöng* [Hearts of nineteen, May 2006–January 2007]); and even a play (*Söndei Söul* [Sunday Seoul, 2004]). As the Korean titles indicate, the *Chosönjok* female body within South Korean popular culture is inscribed with purity, romance, and innocence, lacking in urban pretentiousness and sophistication. Kunam's faithful wife, Hwacha, is the latest addition to this media tradition.

In *The Yellow Sea*, the body of the *Chosönjok* male is also appropriated to a related set of seemingly outdated values, including masculine daringness, barbarousness, and physical prowess. The hyper-masculinity is especially projected upon the body of Mr. Myön, the earthy *Chosönjok* mafia boss. When he is seen perching on a chair in an outdoor dog market in Yanji, his charismatic masculine appearance, dressed in shabby khaki, is reminiscent of the warlords (*pukyanggunböl* 北洋軍閥) who ruled China in the early twentieth century or the Korean diasporic nationalists who defeated the Japanese imperialist army in Manchuria in the 1920s (see figure 5).<sup>7</sup>

In the hotel scene in Yanji (see figure 6), this icon of physical prowess—single-handedly and armed only with a small hand axe—manages to kill each of the Korean assassins sent by President Kim apart from one, whom he decides to use as a message-bearer. When he emerges from another scene of carnage, armed with a giant pork bone (see figure 7), which he has been using to knock off a series of Korean gangsters, he seems to have stepped out of ancient times. Exuding a savage, primal force, he acts out the ultimate Nemesis. He is not just immoral but amoral in the sense that human values mean nothing to him. To quote Yun Sök Kim, the actor who played Mr. Myön:

I kept talking with the director about why he created Mr. Myön. If Kunam is a universal character with finer emotions, drawing out sympathy from the audience, the director wanted to portray Mr. Myön as more stylish. He is the kind of person who acts and lives according to the laws of his own making, unlike those who live according to the external restraints, such as laws, morality, and ethics, as well as hypocrisy. He is a man with magnanimity befitting a continental being. (Hyeün Pak 2010; my translation)

Mr. Myön's being above fine human sentiments or law or even ethics is horrifyingly etched upon the mind of the audience when the former casually orders his men to dump the heads of the murdered South Korean assassins somewhere and feed the headless bodies to the dogs.

Mr. Myön's charisma and physical prowess are at once terrifying and fascinating. When he flies over to South Korea to cut a business deal, President Kim, the man he is negotiating with, becomes too terrified even to look him in the face. Barbarous and

<sup>7</sup>See Tongbuga Kongdongch'e Yön'guhoe (2010, 18–21) for a description of the typical Korean nationalist who fought successfully against the Japanese army in Manchuria during the 1920s.



**Figure 5.** Mr. Myön, dog seller and mafia boss, in *The Yellow Sea*. Image used with permission.



**Figure 6.** Myön with a hand axe at the hotel in *The Yellow Sea*. Image used with permission.



**Figure 7.** Myōn, with giant pork bone in *The Yellow Sea*. Image used with permission.

violent as he may be, Mr. Myōn does not come across as morally repugnant but rather as someone of heroic stature. The movie reinforces Myōn's compelling, charismatic leadership by using President Kim, the South Korean mafia boss, as a foil: a cowardly back-stabber and constant nagger. In other words, the law-defiant magnanimity of the *Chosŏnjok* mafia boss is tendentiously compared with President Kim's pettiness, duplicity, and effeminacy. The latter slyly covers up his running a mafia by exuding a church-goer's devotion to a series of more legitimate businesses. At the same time, Kim continually verbally abuses his right-hand man for his failures to catch and kill Kunam, the only witness to Professor Kim's murder. President Kim later receives an axe blow across the mouth from Myōn, a symbolic punishment for the "effeminacy" of being loose with his tongue. As he swings his ax, Myōn makes it clear what has brought about this devastating attack: "If you open your damn mouth again, I will chop your head in half."

Interestingly, President Kim is the only person among those involved in the murders who is not economically motivated. Even Professor Kim's innocent-looking wife, it is later revealed, has her eyes set on the money that her husband's death will bring forth. When President Kim discovers his mistress's secret relationship with Professor Kim, he reacts excessively, angrily staining his hands with blood over a mistress, one of the many "things" money can easily buy him. In this sense, jealousy does not seem to be an appropriate motivation for a person like him. But his extreme fury makes sense when it is understood with regard to the injury his manhood has suffered. The humiliation must have been unbearable when President Kim, the head of a terrifying organized gang, realized that he had been cuckolded. What appears to make it worse is that the culprit turns out to be not only a friend of his but someone possessing significantly more machismo. Compared with this former national Judo champion, President Kim is merely ordinary in stature, lacking the charismatic, daring qualities of a true mafia boss. In this regard, being cuckolded is like being forced to confess his lack of masculine competence, in



spite of his charismatic pretensions. In a bed scene with his mistress, President Kim shows a penchant for rough sex, as if he is compelled to prove his manhood. In this sense the restoration of his wronged manhood appears to be the driving force behind President Kim's vicious act of vengeance.

## CONCLUSION

The iconizing of the *Chosŏnjok* male in *The Yellow Sea* would appear to be related to South Korean society's need to reaffirm its masculinity. This reclaiming of a strong manhood not only engages with the contemporary Korean gender politics but reverberates more widely within the broader historical framework of postcolonial history. In the first half of the twentieth century, South Korea underwent a long series of historically traumatizing events, including Japanese colonization from 1910 to 1945, US military rule from 1945 to 1948, and finally a devastating civil war from 1950 to 1953. After South Korean independence, the nation did not seem to fare much better, due to a set of politico-economic debacles that lasted through the 1950s. During this period, "emasculatation was a normal rather than aberrant condition" (Kyung Hyun Kim 2004, 15). In this regard, the emergence in South Korea of what Seungsook Moon (2005) calls "militarized modernity," as witnessed in the military regimes of 1961–79 and 1981–88, can be interpreted as an attempt at remasculinizing the emaciated nation. Park Chung Hee, who seized power in 1961, advertised himself as "the father of the nation"; this advocacy coincided with the patriarchy's desire to refashion or refigure itself as an avatar of authority and competence. During this period, popular culture, including cinema, also renegotiated with the traumatic history in ways that reaffirmed masculinity and relegitimized older gender relations.

Since the 1997 International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout, male anxiety over the issue of the emaciation of patriarchal authority has been increasing in South Korea. The massive layoffs required by the IMF in order to restructure the debilitated economy left a great number of patriarchs unemployed, forcing their unskilled women to enter the low-wage job market to make up for the loss of income.

One of the consequences on the traditional Korean family structure is registered in the jokes about certain Korean husbands that gained widespread popularity among Korean women in the aftermath of the IMF bailout. According to one of these jokes, a husband who eats no meals at home is called by his wife Master No-Meals-at-Home (*yŏngshingnim* in Korean); a husband who eats only one meal a day prepared by the wife is called Mister One-Meal-at-Home (*ilshikssi*); one who eats two meals a day is called Two-Meals-at-Home Guy (*isingnam*); one who, obviously out of work, stays home all day and eats three meals is called by his tired and angry wife Three-Meals-at-Home Bastard (*samshiksaekki*, a rude homonymic pun on *samshisekki*, meaning three meals a day). These jokes indicate the new status of many Korean husbands that emerged in the late nineties, following the international bailout. Indirectly, such jokes also reflect patriarchal anxiety about seismic changes taking place within the traditional family structure. In the Korean film industry, this anxiety is strongly registered in the figure of the phallic females in such movies as *Chop'ok manura* (My wife is gangster 1 [2001], 2 [2003], and 3 [2006]), *Yŏpkijŏgin gŭnyŏ* (My sassy girl, 2001), and *Kamun ūi wigi* (Marrying the mafia 2, 2005).



In this context, *The Yellow Sea* would seem to fulfill at an imaginary level the patriarchal Korean fantasy to reassert genuine manhood. This fantasy is projected onto the body of Mr. Myōn, an icon of primordial masculinity who wreaks havoc on anyone who gets in his way. Seeing this primitive, violent fury, members of the male audience may secretly enjoy the vicarious thrill of becoming potently masculine again. However, this male wish-fulfillment is not the only agenda that the movie pursues. Along with this clandestine undertaking, or rather enveloping it, there is a social critique in *The Yellow Sea* that targets consumerism and the shameless pursuit of carnal desires. Rabies has infected South Korean society. To quote again the actor who played Myōn: “Over the small issue of amorous passion going askew, all moralities and ethics fall, and the ‘rabies’ becomes rampant. Yet, is this movie telling a story about the *Chosōnjok*? No, it’s ours” (Hyeūn Pak 2010; my translation). In criticizing “rabies,” the movie appropriates the *Chosōnjok*, interpellating the familiar, yet archaic, ethnic Koreans within a set of older images ripped out of the Korean national past. The anachronistic strategy helps to inscribe a set of bygone values on the bodies of these hyphenated ethnic Koreans.

But in so doing, the movie begs a question that it is not able to answer: For whose sake are these ethnic Koreans reimagined as “untainted and sound” beings preceding the onset of capitalism? To put it in Gayatri Spivak’s terms, who speaks for these “foreign” Koreans? Given this question, the movie is susceptible to the charge of “Othering,” that is, focusing on and amplifying certain aspects of the lives of other people, whether those people live in Yanbian or in South Korea, and relegating them to a past temporality. One may refute this criticism by pointing out that the cinematic representation of Kunam and his wife is reflective in some sense of the hostile realities many *Chosōnjok* have to face. In this sense, the movie is simply being truthful. Indeed, some of the *Chosōnjok* workers in South Korea have succumbed to the seductions and hardships of the host society while others have emerged morally unscathed. However, even truthful statements can falsify when, by telling the truth, one excludes other aspects of a complicated situation. After all, truth is not the same thing as reality. To put it in Rushdie’s (1992, 375) terms, when “a highly selective truth” masquerades as reality, it can be as injurious to the object of representation as a lie.

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