

## A Whirlpool of History: *Roaring Currents* between A Determined War Film and A Deifying Biopic

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The summer season of 2014 has been a boon for fans of the cinematic genre of Korean historical drama or period pieces (*sagŭk*). Three blockbuster productions with sizable production budgets, ranging from 12 to 20 billion won, including: *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (Myŏngnyang), a rousing account of the Myŏngnyang sea battle (1597) starring Choi Min-shik [Ch'oe Min-sik] as Admiral Yi Sun-sin facing off an armada of Toyotomi Hideyoshi's Japanese forces; *Kundo: The Age of the Rampant* (Kundo) a spaghetti Western-inflected action film set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which a group of mountain bandits, including a former butcher who uses a pair of meat cleavers like samurai swords, square off against a corrupt *yangban* notable; *The Pirates* (Haejŏk: Padaro kan sanjŏk), ostensibly set in the period of the late Koryŏ-early Chosŏn dynasty transition, concerned with a group of pirates, court officials and other motley crew of characters desperately looking for the royal seal swallowed by a whale. Each production was the subject of much industry speculation in terms of ameliorating (or exacerbating) the anxiety about the markedly poor performance of Korean domestic films in the first half of 2014. When the curtain dropped, however, *Roaring Currents* emerged as the uncontested winner. Not only did the film best *Kundo* and *The Pirates* (with approximately 4.7 million and 6.8 million tickets sold as of August 31, 2014, both films have managed to recoup their production costs and can be safely considered substantial hits) in the box office competition, it also beat

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James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) to become the all-time box office champion in Korea, having sold a whopping 16.8 million tickets (the film's revenue is estimated at an equally mind-boggling 129.5 billion won, about six and a half times more money than its estimated production cost) in less than a month since its theatrical release.<sup>1</sup>

This review is not an attempt to speculate on the reasons for *Roaring Currents*' wayward success. There is no denying that the film is a technically superior production, made with obvious care and professionalism. The film's battle scenes, not numerous but appropriately intense, are impressively presented, by turns suspenseful and spectacular, even though in a few critical scenes- such as a panoramic bird's-eye view of the battle-ships speeding to a confrontation- its CGI (computer graphics imaging) techniques betray their limitations. *Roaring Currents*' writer-director Kim Han-min has no doubt tapped into the reserve of *ressentiment* - especially among the 20s to 40s Korean male population, allegedly the strongest demographic support behind the movie's internet ticket sales- towards current affairs in South Korea and East Asia, including the mishandling of the Sewol Ferry tragedy and the intensified right-wing blustering of Japan's PM Abe Shinzō. In so doing he has managed to deliver a measure of cathartic release for the average viewer in seeing the Korean navy, a numerical underdog but united under the command of Admiral Yi, destroy foreign enemies against seemingly impossible odds. The film is also shrewdly “conservative” in the sense that it hardly challenges the standard view of the particular historical context in which Admiral Yi was active, or of Admiral Yi himself as a historical character, as we shall discuss in somewhat greater detail below.

It is to Kim's credit, though, that *Roaring Currents* is never stodgy and lifeless in the way previous biopics of the Chosŏn dynasty general, especially *The Divine Hero Yi Sun-sin* (Sŏng'ung Yi Sun-sin, 1971) and *A War*

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1 All statistical data regarding the box office performances of the films mentioned in the review are derived from Korean Film Council's KOBIS database page. See <http://www.kobis.or.kr/kobis/business/main/main.do> (Accessed August 30, 2014)

*Diary* (Nanjung ilgi, 1977), both starring Kim Chin-gyu as the heroic admiral, were in my personal memory. I remember, along with my Kyōngdong High School classmates, being mobilized to dutifully watch the latter in a theater; some students would hurl inappropriate jokes at the screen, making fun of the film's lugubrious, wooden acting and by-the-numbers storytelling. One could notice almost laughably fragrant anachronisms such as the maps with modern contour lines used by the Korean navy, at least one hundred years ahead of their European invention, and the invading Japanese forces hoisting Hi-no-maru flags, again 280 years too early. The Japanese villains were depicted in a nondescript and impersonal manner, obviously designed to recall the archetypal North Korean soldiers-incompetent foot soldiers mowed down by Yi's forces, except for a lone, "sneaky" sniper who somehow manages to assassinate the admiral- during the Korean War.

Clearly, *Roaring Currents* is a huge improvement on this type of state-sponsored production we used to see prior to the advent of New Korean Cinema. However, neither is it a revisionist effort that attempts to bring a new understanding to the Imjin and Chōngyu wars (1592-1598) or to the character of Yi Sun-sin. The motion picture reverts back to the familiar, nationalistic narrative that would have won approbation, if not enthusiastic endorsement, of the Park Chung-hee regime, who had been fully behind postwar idolization of Yi Sun-sin as a military hero.

All historical films engage in dramatic license. It is not fair to apply the standards of academic history-writing to commercial motion pictures, which are after all fictional constructions. Given this obvious fact, I still find it disappointing that many academic historians, when evaluating cinema and TV, usually stop at pointing out gaps between the "facts" and "fiction," reducing the function of our profession to that of a fact-checker. In truth, getting historical details "right" is often unrelated to what historians consider "good" or "persuasive" interpretations. Historians, however, often let the questions of interpretations and perspectives slide at the expense of nitpicking the factual information closely related to their own personal expertise or interests. In fact, there is very little discussion

among Korean academic historians of what actually constitutes “historical authenticity” in popular cultural products. Academics, thus, must take a sizable proportion of the blame for the frequent confusion among the public in relation to the proper distinction between a “historical interpretation”- which could be good or bad- and an outright “distortion” or “obfuscation” of history.

It is rather alarming to find many myths, half-truths, unprovable claims and unsubstantiated theories regarding Korean history circulated among the general public as if they are scholarly consensus accepted by most academics. One such argument masquerading as a scholarly consensus is the notion that Prince Sado (1735-1762) was a victim of court conspiracy and never the murderous, insane figure described in *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyoung* (Hanjungnok). Popularized by the journalist-historian Yi Tök-il, this “rehabilitation” of Prince Sado gained such notable supporters as the *Hangyoreh* newspaper, one of the mainstream left-wing-nationalist media institutions, and the Korean-language Wikipedia entry on Prince Sado (as of August 30, 2014), even though scholars such as Chŏng Pyŏng-sŏl repeatedly pointed out the problematic, prejudiced and arbitrary uses of historical and literary sources in Yi’s books.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the standards for “historical authenticity” should be more than just fidelity to the material facticity of the bygone times, such as clothing, hairstyle, food or architecture. They must address the broader question of at what point a particular interpretation becomes so skewed and misguided that it becomes a “myth” or a “half-truth.”

This is far from arguing that combing through *Roaring Currents* to locate “dramatically altered” or “wrongly presented” historical details is a meaningless effort. On the contrary, such a task can be helpful in providing so-called “teachable moments” for citizens and students to have their

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2 Cf. Chŏng Pyŏng-sŏl, “Kil-irŭn yŏksa daejung-hwa: Yi Tök-il ūi ‘Sado seja ūi kobaek’ e taehan pip’an (A Misguided Popularization of History: A Critique of Yi Tök-il’s *Confessions of Prince Sado*)”, *Yoksa pip’yŏng* No. 39 (February 2011): 329-360.

interest in history further stimulated. It has been correctly pointed out, for instance, that Kim and his crew considerably embellished the intensity and violence of the naval battles at Myōngnyang. In reality Japanese and Korean soldiers saw few one-on-one combat engagements between them. In the film, one of the recalcitrant naval commanders Pae Sōl conspires to assassinate Yi Sun-sin, sets fire to the last remaining turtle-ship and is killed by one of Yi's loyal lieutenants while trying to escape in a small boat. In real life, Pae did run away before the critical battle, but was certainly not responsible for burning down the last turtle-ship nor a conspiracy to kill his superior officer.<sup>3</sup> But most of these embellishments, dramatizations and “alterations” fall well within the scope of dramatic license. Less defensible is the film's rather shallow depiction of the Japanese characters, all played by fairly well-known Korean actors speaking awkwardly Korean-accented Japanese. Again, Kim tries to endow the Japanese generals with diverse motivations and objectives and thus portray them as more than ciphers to be knocked down by the “good” Koreans. Unfortunately they remain mostly unconvincing caricatures of the Warring States period Japanese generals, grossly over-dressed, over-decorated, pulling samurai swords out of their scabbards at the slightest offense: functionally their roles are confined to obsessing over how to defeat Yi Sun-sin and eventually getting defeated by him. Imagine a biopic of General Douglas MacArthur set during the Korean War in which the North Korean brass sits around obsessing over how to defeat the UN forces in thickly English-accented Korean: the Japanese generals in *Roaring Currents* are not *that* awkward but sometimes come close.

In Korean history since the Japanese invasions, the heroic status of Yi Sun-sin has always been closely intertwined with the political and ideological controversies of the day. The fact that Yi was, despite his severity in terms of enforcing military discipline, widely admired and supported by his troops and the civilian population is a matter of public record. Yet

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3 Cf. “Separating Historical Film's Facts from Fiction: An Interview with Professor Lim Won-bin,” *Korea Joongang Daily*, 18th, Aug. 2014.

King Sŏnjo, once having intervened and saved the young Yi's life from a potentially politically motivated court martial, personally turned against him at the conclusion of Hideyoshi's first invasion, stripping him of military rank for allegedly disobeying his orders. Even after Yi's undeniable contributions to saving his own skin during the second invasion, Sŏnjo was reluctant to give credit to Yi and continued to champion the chief of staff Wŏn Kyun. According to Chŏng Tu-hŭi's research, Yi Sun-sin's reputation and status as a great military officer was rehabilitated in gradations following Injo's surrender to the Qing empire in 1637, arguably a far more devastating event for the self-perception of Chosŏn Korea than the Japanese invasions. The rehabilitation of Yi reached its zenith during the reign of Chŏngjo, who not only retroactively appointed the general to the post of Chief State Councilor but also personally edited and published the collected writings of Yi Sun-sin. The ideological background behind this effort was Chŏngjo and other Korean elite's "worship of Ming and denunciation of Qing." (*Sungmyŏng pae-chŏng*) In this regard, it was not Yi Sun-sin's military genius or even victories against the Japanese that really mattered: it was the fact that Yi was so highly regarded by Ming generals, having received the *dou du* (commander-in-chief) title from the Chinese court, combined with his credentials of having fought the "barbarians" such as Jurchens and Japanese to protect the Ming and by extension Korea, the sites of true civilization, that clinched his "special" quality for his *yangban* intellectual admirers.<sup>4</sup>

We can readily see that the life and career of Yi Sun-sin rendered itself to the political use of this kind during the late Chosŏn dynasty; it is not surprising, therefore, that modern Korean writers and thinkers such as Sin Ch'aeho and Yi Kwangsu followed suit and championed his unique qualities as a national hero, a stance eventually adopted by Park Chunghee. Moreover, the fact that Yi Sun-sin fought and claimed victories against

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4 Chŏng Tu-hŭi, "Yi Sun-sin e taehan kiŏk ūi yŏksa wa yŏksahwa", (The History and Historialization of the Memories of Yi Sun-sin) *Hanguksa hakpo*, vo. 14(2006): 8-16.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi's forces played into the colonial discourse of the “amalgamation of Japan and Korea (*naisen yūwa*),” through the subtle readjustment of Yi's status as a tragic hero fighting for the stagnant, corrupt regime wholly undeserving of his talents and martial spirits. Even today, one of the most often quoted (and by Koreans, too) epigrams of praise directed at Yi is Japanese naval admiral Tōgō Heihachirō's alleged statement that “I may be compared to Viscount [Horatio] Nelson but not to Yi Sun-sin.” This is the historical context in which some artists and historians have come to revolt against the hero-worship of Yi Sun-sin in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

*Roaring Currents* tries to walk the middle ground in terms of the historical characterization of Yi Sun-sin, carefully evading the areas of his life marked by controversy—for instance, his replacement by Wŏn Kyun—as well as the larger question regarding the origin, nature and meaning of the Imjin and Chōngyu wars. In what was probably a canny calculation that paid off in terms of the box office, Kim and his crew restrict the scope of his film to the episodes of Yi Sun-sin's “victory.” Lacking in his film are any serious exploration of the jumbled, often mutually contradictory nature of the war campaigns, the tug and pull of the international diplomacy surrounding China, Korea and Japan, and the massive social and cultural aftereffects of the wars on the Korean and Japanese populations. Occasionally, the movie, mainly through invocations of subsidiary characters, manages to slip in interesting details that do not get flattened under the relentless rolling-forward of the patriotic narrative. For instance, *Roaring Currents* features a character named Junsa, a Japanese defector working for Yi Sun-sin against the Japanese soldiers, known as a “surrendered Japanese (*hangwae*).” *Sŏnjo sillok* (Chronicles of the Reign of Sŏnjo)

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5 Cf. Kim Chi-ha, “Kuri Yi Sun-sin (Copper Yi Sun-sin),” *Tari*, November 1971. It is also probably not a coincidence that the first serious academic study arguing that Won Kyun was a victim of disinformation campaign was published in 1981, two years after President Park Chung-hee's death by assassination: Yi Chōng-il, “Wŏn Kyun-ron (On Wŏn Kyun)” *Yŏksa hakpo* no. 89(1981).

records that by 1595 there were more than 10,000 Japanese soldiers who had defected to the Korean side. Following initially harsh treatment of the defecting Japanese, Sŏnjo soon saw their usefulness and set up a policy to treat them with generosity, even conferring them official titles, with the view that they could serve as technical resources for the Korean military.<sup>6</sup> *Roaring Currents* features a suspenseful scene that, while dramatically embellished, more or less faithfully recreates the following description from *Nanjung chapnok* [Miscellaneous Records of the War]:

A Japanese defector named Junsa, who turned toward our side at Angol'po, was a crew member in the admiral's ship. He pointed out to Admiral Yi that a man clad in a red silk garment with painted patterns was the Japanese general Mataji (Kurushima Michifusa). Admiral Yi then ordered his men... [to kill and cut] off the Japanese general's head.<sup>7</sup>

The episodes involving Japanese defectors, however, also point to the participants in the war almost completely ignored in Korean historiography: the Koreans who “defected” to or were mobilized by the Japanese for their campaigns, known as “followers of the Japanese” (*sunwae*). Neither “Japanese” nor “Koreans” during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century lived according to the internalized logic of ethnic nationalism: it is doubtful that most “defectors” from one side to another ever thought of their “patriotic” commitment to their “nation-states.” A truly challenging and “progressive” work of art (or entertainment, for that matter) that takes on the Imjin and Chŏngyu wars should be able to address these “historical realities” that fall through the cracks of the conventionally moralistic, court- and *yangban*-centered, hyper-masculine narrative of the wars.

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6 Han Mun-jong, *Chosŏn chŏn-gi hyanghwa-sujik waein yŏngu* (A Study of Defected and Entitled Japanese during the Early Chosŏn Period), (Seoul: Saemi, 2001): 133-159.

7 Han Mun-jŏng, *Ibid.*: 155.

Likewise, Yi Sun-sin himself in *Roaring Currents* remains underdeveloped as a character. Choi Min-shik's charismatic and restrained performance as the aging admiral cannot be faulted in terms of quality of acting. Unfortunately, his Yi Sun-sin lacks the kind of complexity and internal contradictions a great literary or cinematic figure, such as Laurence Olivier's Henry V or Peter O'Toole's T. E. Lawrence, has displayed onscreen. Again, Kim Han-min adds a couple of provocative scenes in which the admiral seems to be losing control, wailing in agony, or seemingly conducting conversations with long-dead spirits, revealing a deeply troubled and stressed soul. But these moments are fleeting and do not add much substance to our understanding of the admiral as a human being. We have a vernacular Korean translation of his *Nanjung ilgi* [Wartime Diary] readily available: could not Kim or another screenwriter extract enough "human details" out of the document to make his hero a little more interesting or challenging? Given the actual paucity of historical scholarship on Yi Sun-sin, however, perhaps it is not altogether fair to chastise director Kim for not trying hard enough.<sup>8</sup> Thematically, he attempts to tie Yi's leadership to contemporary principles of democratic governance via ideas of Confucian (Mencian) populism ("The government exists for the people, not *vice versa*"), but this part of the movie feels tacked on. *Roaring Currents* comes off best when it shuns speechifying and insists on remaining a war film with a limited scope, focusing on one specific, harrowing battle. Yi Sun-sin's effort to turn the universal fear of death into courage in the moment of absolute crisis is far more resonant than his awkwardly proto-democratic speeches and lectures about values of the "people."

I suspect that Kim Han-min is aware that the Myōngnyang battle was really not a story of "Korean victory" over "Japan." It is more accurately a story of "survival against overwhelming odds:" as a war film, it is closer in spirit to Cy Endfield's *Zulu* (1964) rather than to *The Longest Day*

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8 See Kim Chu-sik, "Yi Sun-sin e taehan yōngu hyōnhwang kwa chōnmang (The Current State and Prospect for the Study of Yi Sun-sin)" *Haeyang p'yōngron* (2012).

(1962) or *Stalingrad* (2013). As it stands, *Roaring Currents* is a competently made, crowd-pleasing war film that expertly pumps adrenalin glands of its (male) viewers. What it is not, and must not be (mis)presented as, is a thoughtful biopic of Yi Sun-sin in the manner of, say, Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012), a movie that does full justice to the admiral's complex human character, including his foibles and less-than-perfect qualities, or a historically rich account of the Imjin and Chōngyu wars that transcends the pull of nationalist narratives and gives voice to the “grunts,” civilians and ordinary people of Korea and Japan. These motion pictures are yet to be made by a South Korean filmmaker in the forthcoming future.