

Through the Prism of Masquerade: The Colonial Past in *Assassination*

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Assassination marks a new phase of colonial representation in South Korean cinema. To explicate the film's unique, if not revisionist, view toward the colonial past, this review focuses on an analysis of how the film fleshes out the neglected representational features that have nevertheless constituted the stuff of cinematic history toward the colonial past. In doing so, I move away from the issue of veracity which would inadvertently bog down a serious analysis of popular renditions of history. Instead, I attempt to elucidate the ways in which *Assassination* adroitly changes the coordinates of antinomy and tension in mapping out the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, thereby achieving a more complex and nuanced depiction of the colonial experience. Specifically, I situate the subject of collaboration at the center of the film's analysis as it significantly complicates and relates to other key questions such as perception and appearance, the colonial legacy, and postcolonial politics, as well as symptoms of hysteria and perversion. This review also strives to shed light on the significance of the ethical drive in the film's reckoning of the colonial and postcolonial nexus. I claim that the film breaks away from the deadlock of many conundrums and thereby promises a more radical Korea's sociopolitical history hitherto unrehearsed in South Korea.

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an's cinematic history.

The film's main narrative concerns a covert operation of an assassination unit that aims to purge the elite beneficiaries of colonial rule. The operation's preparation, procedure, execution, and aftermath comprises the film's central narrative as the characters from disparate backgrounds come together to carry out their collective mission. The opposite end of the spectrum is located within the brutal Japanese police force, but also with the pro-Japanese collaborators who show a growing confidence in their position in colonial society. The covert operation shows the complex intersection of personal interests, familial conflict, and shifting political affiliations within the society of colonial-era Korea. Most significantly, the treachery of the "mole" within the nationalist camp creates a deadly threat and nearly derails the entire campaign. Yet the clandestine members insist on carrying out the campaign, achieving success at the end—but only after paying a heavy price for the cause.

The aforementioned adumbration barely covers a narrative that features multiple subplots and twists as well as a diverse cast of main characters and convoluted shifts in loyalty. Director Choi Dong-hoon is known for his complex heist films, earning him the reputation of "master of deception," a label that aptly captures the central thematic tenet of all his films: the complex relation between appearance and essence.¹ *Assassination* shows a variation of the auteur's preoccupation with the theme of masquerade and deception, as Choi uses this thematic frame to explore and expand upon the issue of collaboration under colonial rule.

The theme of treachery manifests itself through the actions of two antagonists: Kang In'guk and Yöm Sökchin. A successful businessman, Kang represents the old traditional figure of the pro-Japanese collaborator whose motivation for treachery lies in the pursuit of power and the accumulation of material wealth. As a shrewd businessman, Kang never hesitates to eliminate anything that gets in the way of securing his upward

1 I am referring to the 2013 Korean film festival at USC, at which the film's director Choi Dong-hoon was heralded as "master of deception."

mobility, including his own family members (first his wife, and then his daughter Mitsuko, as he believes they are linked to the terrorist nationalist camp). The obsequious devotion to the Japanese empire is, for Kang, a rational choice rather than an ideological one in order to benefit himself, his family, and the Korean nation alike.

In contrast, Yöm's act of collaboration has an added psychological and personal dimension. At the beginning, Yöm acts as a competent nationalist agent who devotes himself to the cause. However, Yöm surrenders to the colonizer's brutal pressure after his arrest. He soon works as a secret informant for the Japanese intelligence from within Korea's nationalist headquarters, i.e., the Shanghai Provisional Government. The paramount and vexing task posed by the film is figuring out how to identify and curtail the threat of spy infiltration that constantly threatens both the Japanese and Korean camps. Yöm's secret conversion triggers a series of events that are detrimental to the otherwise meticulously planned covert operation of Korean agents that was ironically put together by Yöm in the first place.

What distinguishes *Assassination* from its predecessors in the spy film genre is its extended treatment of pro-Japanese collaboration in the form of spy infiltration into the nationalist camp. In order to understand the gravity and complexity of this issue, it is necessary to expand the parameter to shed light on a long-held representational convention in South Korean cinema, because it is precisely against this convention through which the film projects its exceptional scenario. South Korean films have typically projected the binary opposition of Korean vs. Japanese to render the colonial reality—that is, the black and white conflict between the colonizer Japan vs. the colonized Korea. However, upon closer examination, the cinematic terms of antagonism inform a more nuanced configuration. On one hand, Japanese colonial domination has always been supposed as total and comprehensive, subjecting Koreans to the ever-effective and expanding force of colonial surveillance and control. This contour led to the peculiar and prolonged aura of colonial Korea on-screen, often charged with the air of inertia, listlessness, and depression. Yet simulta-

neously, Koreans living under such rule have been portrayed with no apparent fascination for the signs of modernity or modernization that the Japanese brought to Korea.

The question is then how do the colonized Koreans carve out a space for alterity, dissidence and opposition toward the colonizer? The answer lies in the trope of masquerade that South Korean films have historically naturalized as a principal ground for ethno-national affinity. Put simply, the colonized Koreans carve out a space of subversive alterity through which they can ward off the colonizer's gaze by feigning performance. Being Korean under colonial rule means living with the perpetual sense of duplicity or split subjectivity, i.e., being able to display the necessary *appearance* of docility, loyalty, and devotion, all designed to fulfill the imperial project. Not being duped to the imperialist ideology, however, Koreans secure a sense of authenticity through—and only through—the act of deception. The catch here is that the Japanese authority persistently *fails* to discern the “duplicitous” character of the Korean collective. The Japanese are almost always duped by the appearance of obedience that the colonized subject seemingly demonstrates of their own volition. Furthermore, Koreans are attributed with the natural capacity to deceive the gaze of the Japanese colonial authority by feigning the act of allegiance.

This consistent feature informs how South Korean films tapped into and subverted the extended promise of the colonial policy of cultural assimilation according to which Koreans were destined to become indistinguishable from Japanese. The root of the contrarian Korean collective hence emerges from, and takes advantage of, the very lacunae of the colonial assimilation policy. However counterintuitive it may sound, South Korean films have already assumed and reframed the conundrum of colonial mimicry. But in order for this subversive scenario to work, Koreans are portrayed with the innate ability to discern the feigning nature of *other* Koreans' acts.² That is, any Korean who observes the supposed “faithful”

2 That said, how Koreans form the collective sense of affinity and belonging relies on the unique perspicacity toward its own people. The recognition of the inner do-

act before the Japanese authority is able to discern and bracket its façade. One always communicates with other Korean people the unspoken political affinity through the shared field of intelligence. The fail-safe nature of intra-ethnic communication, I argue, holds the key to understanding the Korean collective political consciousness on-screen.

This theme of perception, recognition, and subversion operates quite pervasively and systematically in nearly every film set in Korea's colonial past. Almost all of these films feature moments of deception in one form or another: this is a feature that makes these films appear close to the genre of espionage film in which the tropes of masquerade, deception, and duplicity proliferate. But, unlike conventional espionage films where masquerade is limited to the covert operation of the secret agent, these Korean films use the trope of deception more broadly to render the perceptual mode of the Korean collective visible. The fundamental tension between Korean and Japanese can therefore be reconceptualized in terms of a presupposed possession of the faculty for recognition and discernment. As Koreans are always able to discern the nature of other Koreans on the sheer basis of shared ethnicity, they also share the inviolable "inner domain" that is not rooted in the discourse of tradition or spirituality, but in mutual, if not phatic, perspicacity toward undeterred political solidarity.

Within this framework of perception and judgment, the pro-Japanese collaborator signifies a specific type of disarray and threat: the culprit who sells out the inner knowledge of the Korean collective to the Japanese counterpart. The Korean collaborator has the capacity to distinguish what the Japanese fail to discern: the ability to see through the "fallacious" appearance of loyalty by the colonized. In the film, the collabora-

main of truth of "other Korean" is a priori faculty of Koreans in these films. This characteristic of the shared sense of mutual recognition explains, in part, why so many Korean guerrilla agents are able to find a place of refuge or hideout in other Koreans' abodes: Koreans immediately recognize the true identity of other Koreans and put on a masquerade to protect other Koreans who are exposed to the draconic action of the colonial authority.

tor Yōm signals this threat precisely because he disrupts this innate paradigm of inner domain of perceptual acumen that is fundamental to the coordinates of the sporadic, intermittent, but effective, nationalist actions. Furthermore, Yōm has at his disposal the details of the covert assassination scheme that he helped to set up in the first place.

The film is punctuated by sequences in which Yōm authorizes his power to identify and capture Korean operatives in disguise.³ But it is crucial to closely examine the way in which Yōm undergoes the drastic conversion. When his boss Kim Ku orders him to help recruit Korean outlaws for the new assassination campaign, Yōm starts to inform the Japanese intelligence of the planned operation. Kim becomes suspicious of Yōm's secret and intervenes in the plan to secure the squad's early entry into Korea. He then uses this intervention to ferret out Yōm as the mole. Specifically, Kim orders his operatives to follow Yōm and eliminate him once his treachery is detected. This last mission proves a disaster, however, as Yōm quickly retaliates. The film then explores Yōm's troubled subjective state at length. Withdrawing into an opium den, Yōm suffers from paranoia and delusions and subsequently shoots innocent bystanders in the den, mistaking them for Kim. He is then rescued by the Japanese intelligence officer and sent to Korea to track down the assassination squad.

Yōm's explicit symptoms of hysteria, paranoia, and delusion call for

3. It should be noted that becoming close to the inner circle of power causes a loss of discernment for the collaborator. This feature is most apparent in Kang's case. Defined from the beginning as the archetypal collaborator, Kang fails to recognize his wife's terrorist plot and later kills his daughter Mitsuko, whom he mistakes for An Okyun—another daughter who he believes is now the leader of the assassination squad. In contrast, Kang's butler servant has an unflinching insight into the approaching threat of the guerrilla agents. His personal investigation, triggered by Mitsuko's innocuous remark about her long-lost twin sister An, nearly brings about the collapse of the campaign. His discernment is matched by An's possession of clairvoyance, as she effectively quells the scheme of disguise that the butler has set up in order to catch her.

further analysis. Yōm is in abysmal anguish precisely because he feels “betrayed” by his boss, Kim. This reaction shows a peculiar inversion of resentment, for it is the exposed mole who feels betrayed by the organization to which he had been disloyal in the first place. To understand this bizarre scenario of self-victimization, we need to turn to the new imagery of political leadership and commitment that the film articulates at length.

Kim differs in two significant ways from other nationalist leaders showcased by Korean cinema in the past. First, he possesses, yet again, a penetrating insight into the true nature of the counterforce—in this case, Yōm. His unfailing perspicacity illustrates the continuing use of the perceptual dichotomy that governs the anti-colonial logic of nationalism in Korean cinema. But perhaps what is more revealing is—and this is what drives Yōm to his breaking point—his quick judgment and ruthless action to dispel anything that may threaten the nationalist campaign. It is this endless expanse of determination that Yōm fails to recognize. Initially, Kim acts normally toward Yōm even when Kim is aware of Yōm’s dubious past—that is, how Yōm has survived the torture and intimidation of the Japanese police. Both parties are then engaged in the mutual act of masquerade. When challenged, Yōm attempts to prove his “faithfulness” by pulling an (empty) pistol to his head before Kim. However, Kim clearly does not buy his act. Instead, Kim exhibits a façade of trust and concern in order to appease Yōm. Yōm then walks away from the incident, believing that he has successfully deceived his boss only to realize, belatedly, his gross miscalculation. It is this moment of realization that then drives Yōm into a near psychological breakdown. He screams out, “How come did Kim not trust me?”

What lies at the heart of Yōm’s resentment toward the nationalist leader? His excessive reaction suggests that there is a troubling void within the kernel of the nationalist struggle: that there is no consideration for the individual’s past suffering and the personal sacrifice made for the nation. Kim’s unforgiving order to exterminate Yōm does not take into consideration what Yōm had to go through for the nation: gunshot injuries, loss of fingers, prolonged extreme torture, and near-death intimidation. Kim’s

ruthless resolution prevents Yöm from making any kind of appeal for forgiveness or compromise: in order to survive, Yöm had no option but to give in to the pressure of the Japanese police. Instead, the vicissitudes and the personal story of Yöm are reduced to null in front of the merciless political mandate.

What the film configures through this interaction is the somber rendition of the nationalist struggle: the absolute commitment or injunction without any promise of reward or validation.⁴ Kim's adamancy undercuts his anterior nationalist credentials that are central to Yöm's disavowed belief in his political loyalty. Kim completely negates Yöm's past nationalist credentials as well as the circumstantial reason for his weakness; instead, Kim simply proceeds to order the killing without any hesitation. Whereas the archetype of the nationalist leader in earlier films tends to function either as the symbolic figure who grants some form of reward or recognition to the campaign's acting agent, Kim in *Assassination* is hardly engaged in such a mode of value exchange. Instead, he appears as the pure figure of command and authority who only demands the total devotion of the members.

Assassination poses the possibility of a new configuration of the nationalist discourse, one enmeshed in the ethical drive but deprived of clear recompense. The nationalist devotion stands as the mandate under which consideration for personal recognition or reward is never anticipated. The new formulation may appear excessive and lopsided. However, those who follow orders turn this excessive injunction into an inviolable and sublime virtue through equally ferocious determination. All members of the squad carry out the mission without any expectation for personal gain or validation, both of which the collaborators aspire to achieve in contrast. The film thus casts a startling portrayal in the comparison of the nationalist

4 In contrast, the nationalist leader gains symbolic power precisely through organization of the libidinal drive for material accumulation in Manchurian action films of the 1960s. See my "War as Business in South Korea's Manchurian Action Films." *positions: east asia cultures critique* 23, no. 4 (2015): 785-806.

and collaborator. Contrary to popular belief, it is the collaborator and not the nationalist who possesses the complexity of “human” disposition, filled with a keen sense of self-interest, self-preservation, and the assumption of such values as social validation. In contradistinction, the nationalists are deprived of such small-scale “human” traits but dwell in the relentless pursuit of the campaign.⁵

This insistence turns nationalism into an excessive ethical injunction rarely found in Korean cinema. Though this scenario may easily fall into pedantic didacticism, the film articulates and furnishes its inexorable dynamics in terms of character dispositions and assured actions. For instance, An Okyun, the leader of the assassination squad, is a prime example of the unstoppable drive for the political cause. Throughout the film, An maintains composure, showing undeterred concentration on the given mission. Her single-minded devotion and leadership carry forward a mission that suffers several setbacks. She is also situated at the nexus of family reunions and discoveries, but ultimately emerges disentangled. For instance, the encounter with her twin sister Mitsuko informs An about the family background An did not know about: the true identity of their biological mother. However, all these potently melodramatic elements fail to bring her down to a level of sorrow or shock, as she quickly dispels these familial ties to concentrate on the very un-familial mission assigned to her: to eliminate the colonial elite figure of Kang, who is also her biological father.

But it is the meticulous design of the action sequence that fleshes out in visual and affective terms the relentlessness of the ethical drive in the film. Here, I am referring to the privileged moments of forward-thrust actions

5 To be sure, the film features moments when the squad members show a penchant for small pleasure of life. For instance, the leader An hopes to drink some Western coffee for the first time while in Shanghai. Similarly, Soksapo and Hwang Toksam also unveil their trifling desires and penchant for modern dance and drinking. However, the lure of modern culture and affluence hardly triggers any change in their minds. Instead, they treat and bracket them as a joyful distraction.

by the assassination squad that exceed the principle of dramatic plausibility. These members are not deterred by any circumstances, but proceed relentlessly, almost zealously, regardless of any physical pain or threat. As a result, their bodies are often subject to incessant assault and blows, but they nevertheless display an irreducible integrity and earnestness. This includes the tracking shot of An running through the streets of Seoul while shooting a machine gun relentlessly at the Japanese military general's automobile. An's actions, coming after the botched attempts of other members, show her desperate and unrelenting tenacity in defeating the colonial threat. Similarly, the cynical bounty hunter-cum-nationalist agent Hawaii Pistol stages a prolonged and unstoppable act of revenge. He approaches Yöm to attack him with a knife in the final street duel. Hawaii Pistol instantly faces the repeated shots that Yöm fires. He takes every blow, falls down, and manages to repeat the whole process. Hawaii Pistol eventually depletes Yöm with bullets, comes close, and stabs his knife deep into Yöm's chest. It is only after this final act of retribution that Hawaii Pistol then falls on the ground for the last time. The principle of willpower is expressed cogently in Soksapo's statements. When he returns to the nationalist hideout with an injury from an unexpected ambush, a local operative asks Soksapo to remove himself from the campaign. Soksapo stops her from making such an arrangement, and instead retorts, "I am in this to the end. It is not my condition (that makes this operation possible)." Implied in this dialogue is the paramount significance of the determination and grit as the source of the nationalist struggle. Soksapo then joins the campaign and ultimately suffers death, carrying out the mission to his last breath. The instances of death in the film not only portray these characters as mere agents of the campaign, but also render how consciously they uphold the meanings of their actions.

The film's conclusion parallels and elucidates the ethical dimension of the anti-colonial struggle to a spectacular but uncanny realization. The film has a unique bookend structure. It begins with the trial of the pro-Japanese collaborator Yöm after the liberation, followed by the main story in the extended flashback, and then returns to the postcolonial situation

of the present. Though charged with anti-national crimes, Yöm becomes acquitted on major charges as the political situation of Korea slips into confusion and chaos and the colonial elite retain power. His release from the court is overlapped by the brewing protests on streets: the signs that head toward the greater divisiveness and enmity between the left and right camps. The film offers a cogent critical view toward the postcolonial reality of Korea, where the effort for decolonization turns into a botched project. Aporias of the colonial legacy appear unmistakably through the use of the flashback device as it ties up and problematizes both the crime of the past collaboration and the postcolonial failure of legal justice.

If the Korean state signifies the utter failure of decolonization, the film nevertheless reaffirms its indomitable will for retributive justice. Just when Yöm starts to feel safe and free from any persecution and saunters into the market, a dramatic turn occurs: he becomes enticed by the sight of An. Yöm follows An to the back alley and then to an empty back lot. There, he encounters the man who has been waiting for him. At first, he fails to recognize the man due to his disfigured face, but he soon comes to senses. It is the agent who followed Kim's order to attack Yöm but instead suffered the deadly counter-attack from Yöm. Both An and the man close in on Yöm with pistols. An then directs a question at Yöm that is meant to be rhetorical: why has he betrayed his comrades? Terrified, Yöm rationalizes his past actions through historical shortsightedness, answering that he did not know Korea would be liberated from Japan. Undeterred and unable to speak, the man draws his pistol and uses his hands to sign a sentence translated by An in an earnest tone: "My mission from 16 years ago, 'If Yöm is a spy, kill him,' is now fulfilled." Thereafter, the two shoot Yöm mercilessly, bringing the film's narrative to a close.

This retribution is remarkable for two reasons. First, the appearance of these agents, particularly the disfigured man, possesses the aura of the powerful spectral return. South Korean films have historically shown a rigid temporal divide between the colonial and postcolonial time frames with the exception of ghost narratives. Here, the call for historical justice also finds its most vivid and uncanny intensity in the figure of the specter.

The ghost figure that the agent embodies captures the viewers' attention by rendering visible the irrepressible outburst of unresolved resentment. Secondly, An's ventriloquist statement invites reflection on the location and meanings of the nationalist political authority. The supposed recipient of this report is none other than Kim, the nationalist leader, who remains invisible in the sociopolitical frame of postcolonial Korea. In reality, Kim was quickly eclipsed by another leader, Syngman Rhee, who reemployed the colonial elites to fortify his political power. Kim is absent in the scene yet present through the invocation of these agents in action. What is radical about this scene is that the remainders of the past nationalist project carry on their duty even when the authority figure himself has vanished from view. But precisely because of this impossible insistence, the film conjures a new historical imagination consistent with the ethical precept for justice. Even when the dream of decolonization has been crushed in the political reality of postcolonial Korea, the individuals are capable of keeping up the struggle. The film's ethico-historical view is echoed succinctly at another moment in the film, when Hawaii Pistol equivocates to An the efficacy of the nationalist struggle. An retorts with calm determination; "Who knows. But, we need to let people know that we are still fighting." In the end, the film achieves its unusual historical imagination toward the colonial past through its depiction of the nationalist struggle as continuous, rather than resolved, allowing for the emergence of the radical historical subject.