

Intertextual Dynamics in *Ode to My Father*: Competing Narratives of the Nation and the People*

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Recently, films based on a specific historical figure or background are smashing South Korean box office records. For example, over 10 million viewers flocked to watch each of the following films: *The Attorney* (released December 2013, 11 million viewers), *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* (released July 2014, 17 million viewers), and *Ode to My Father* (released December 2014, 13 million viewers as of December 6th 2014). These films are also embroiled in a heated ideological debate between political conservatives and progressives.¹ This essay analyzes the



* All images in this article are from the official site of the movie ‘Kukjesijang’ (Ode to My Father).

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1 For instance, *The Attorney*, a film about former President Noh Muhyŏn’s awakening as a human rights attorney in the 1980s, received severe criticism from conservative groups for promoting leftist ideas. In contrast, progressive groups criticized *The Admiral*, a film about naval military genius Yi Sunsin’s historical defeat of the Japanese invasion at Myŏngnyang. Controversy over this film centered around criticism that this film continues former President Park Chung

most recent of these three films, *Ode to My Father*, which was directed by South Korean blockbuster film maker Je-kyoon Yoon. Even before its release, the film was swept into the ongoing historical debates over the evaluation of contemporary Korean history.² It is an epic human drama that follows the life of Töksu, a fictional character, through turbulent events in Korea's recent past (including the Korean War) and through temporary labor migration to West Germany and Vietnam.³ During the chaos of the Korean War, while Töksu and the rest of his family are able to flee south, his father and one of his younger sisters are separated and unable to join them. Töksu and his divided family head to Kukche Sijang (International Marketplace, located in the coastal city of Pusan), which is where he and his father promised to meet if they were separated. For the rest of his life, he takes care of his remaining family members while continuing to wait to be reunited with his father and sister.

Ideological debates within and about the film reflect contested narratives of the nation and “the people” in contemporary society. By employing the concept of intertextuality, this essay explores challenges posed to essentialist narratives of the Korean nation in the discourse on *Ode to My Father*. A film theorist, Christian Metz argued that film is not simply a self-contained artistic production. Rather, meanings of a film are produced within a dialogue with other texts.⁴ The concept of

Hee's political project of inspiring a sense of patriotic spirit in South Korean citizens through the idolization of Yi Sunsin.

- 2 In anchor Sohn Suk-hee's interview with the director in the JTBC News Room, Yoon mentioned that he was inspired to make this film as a gesture of gratitude to his deceased father, who lived life to the fullest for his family and children. His father and the main character share the same name, Töksu. The interview was held on January 6, 2015.
- 3 Je-kyoon Yoon (b. 1949) first directed comedies, such as *My Boss, My Hero* (2001) and *Sex Is Zero* (2002) before switching gears to directing large-scale spectacles such as the tsunami blockbuster *Haeundae* (2009).
- 4 Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1974).

intertextuality helps us to understand how the narration of the nation and people in the filmic text is continuously (re)shaped in the discursive sphere. I focus on three key events in the film in order to explore how multi-faceted narratives destabilize the normative narratives of the nation and its recent past, thereby reassuring the unstable and transformative identity of the Korean nation and people.

The Formation of Essentialist Notions of the Nation in Filmic Text

The political reality of division deepened the identity of the South Korean nation as an anti-communist state. Anti-communism has been a hegemonic political ideology and shaped the essentialist narrative of the Korean nation. South Korean anti-communist education depicted the Korean War as a defense of the democratic free world against communism, and South Korea as a free and democratic nation, which embraced a large population of refugees, who migrated to the South to flee from communism. Therefore, this anti-communist nationalist discourse equates acts of anti-communism as humanitarian acts such as sheltering refugees from communist oppression. In this film, the first decisive moment of Töksu's life is the day he becomes a war refugee.⁵ This scene takes place in the chaos of the December 1950 Hüngnam evacuation. In addition to portraying the protagonist's harrowing escape, this scene also depicts the bravery of real-life unsung hero, Hyun Bong Hak, and his vital role in the safe passage of over 14,000 refugees to Kōje

5 After General MacArthur's successful military operation at the landing of Inch'ŏn, the United Nations forces advanced to the Tuman River. However, General MacArthur's intention in extending the Korean War into China ultimately resulted in Chinese military intervention. The overrunning of the Chinese army in the North forced all UN forces to evacuate North Korea and to withdraw to the 38th parallel (which is also called the Retreat of January 4th). At Hüngnam, 193 ships carried about 100,000 refugees and safely landed in Pusan and Cheju and Kōje Islands.

Island.⁶

The rise of nationalist discourse on the figures involved in this evacuation demonstrates how the normative notion of the nation is produced by the “pedagogical” (education about national heroes and history) and “performative” (state holidays, memorial) functions.⁷ For example, soon after the release of the film, an episode of the talk show “Hwanggŭm P’ŏnch’i” (The Golden Punch), which airs on the conservative broadcast station TV Chosŏn, focused on shedding more light on the significance of Hyun convincing Commander Edward Almond to allow refugees to board a cargo ship to escape the Chinese volunteer army. The show’s hosts emphasized how Hyun and Commander Almond displayed heroic acts of humanitarianism towards refugees searching for a free state. The hosts highlighted the role of Hyun as a “Korean Schindler,” referring to Oscar Schindler, who is celebrated for saving many Jews from execution during World War II.⁸ Reports also praised the role of Colonel Edward Forney in assisting Hyun in successfully persuading Commander Almond. Public interest in Colonel Forney extended to an outpouring of news reports on the children and grandchildren of these men.⁹ This interest culminated in a press conference held by Yonsei Severance Hospital for Hyun and Forney’s descendants to share memories of these now-celebrated figures with an eager public.¹⁰ By educating the nation about unsung war heroes and

6 Before the release of *Ode to My Father*, a broadcasting channel run by the Ministry of National Defense had made a short documentary on the Hŭngnam evacuation in 2013.

7 Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 139-170.

8 Hwanggŭm p’ŏnch’i (The Golden Pnch), *TV Chosŏn* (December 25th 2014).

9 For instance, see Sŏk Hyewŏn, “Hŭngnam ch’ŏlsu ajik kkŭtmaji annatta” (the Hungnam evacuation is not over yet), <http://news.kbs.co.kr/news/NewsView.do?SEARCH_NEWS_CODE=3005500&ref=A> (January 20th 2014)

10 Since Hyun graduated from the Yonsei medical school, the Yonsei medical school community has celebrated Hyun’s accomplishment in the Korean War.

commemorating them, the nationalist discourse helps to re-imagine South Korea as a free nation with an impeccable anti-communist political record.

Competing Narratives of the Nation (kukka, 國家) and Its People (kugmin, 國民) in Filmic Text

As discussed above, the discursive sphere created through the intertextual relations between the film and viewers consolidates the essentialist narration of the nation. The remainder of this essay will examine how intertextual dynamics produced in the discourse of the film disrupt essentialist vision of nation. Many film theorists have shown how filmic devices such as dialogue, mise-en-scène, techniques and actors help the audience to shape their own understanding of the film; the viewers' own experiences and knowledge produces diverse narratives of the nation, which also deconstruct hegemonic concepts of the nation. Returning to the above example of the Hŭngnam evacuation, an alternative reading of the scenes can deconstruct the dominant representation of the Korean and U.S. military. These scenes are shot from the point of view of the refugees on board the cargo ship staring at U.S. forces razing their hometown. While the destruction of Hŭngnam was a strategic move on the part of the joined forces to prevent enemy troops from utilizing key resources including people, the scene also reminds viewers how these refugees had to flee their hometowns to escape the horrors of war rather than to commit a political act of anti-

communism. Thus, an intertextual reading of the film demonstrates a potential fissure between the normative narration of the refugees and the U.S and South Korea, and the individual's image of the U.S. and South Korea.



Another example of dismantling the essentialist notion of the nation can be found from the film's depiction of Töksu's participation in two moments in South Korea's economic history. As a migrant miner in West Germany, Töksu



overcomes a near fatal mine accident. As a war-time technician, viewers follow Töksu's narrow escapes from the battlefield.¹¹ The leader of the Frontier Party, Kim Moo-song, after watching the film, mentioned that Töksu's generation selflessly made sacrifices on behalf of the family and nation.¹² By contrast, a group of progressive media critics expressed concern that the film is being used by the political right-wing as rhetoric. The film's depictions of Töksu's leaving for West Germany and Vietnam possibly equates with the normative narration of the South Korean people of Töksu's generation as "industrial soldiers" (*sanöpyökkun*) who championed the Miracle of the Han River with a strong sense of nationalism.

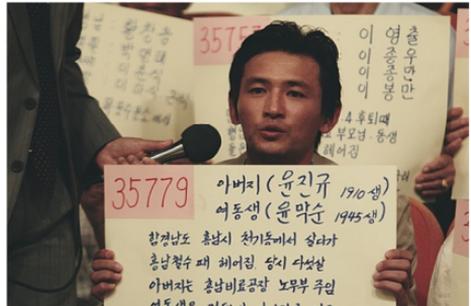
In contrast, a shot at the name of the company *Taehan*, written on the boxes of imported goods and Töksu's uniform, also offers a different narration of "industrial soldiers." In fact, although the real names of places, stores, and historical figures are used in the film, the film uses a fictional name for the company that employed Töksu. Yet, some viewers can easily guess the company's real name since a few companies (such as Hanjin Construction, Hyundai, Tonga Construction, and Hyosöng)

11 From 1963 to 1977, many Korean workers, such as miners, nurses, shipbuilding technician, and chick sexers, immigrated to West Germany. Also, 62,800 technicians were sent to Vietnam as service laborers and construction workers. Their sending money composed 19.7% (195 million dollar) and 16.7% (170 million dollar) of South Korea's invisible trade balance.

12 "Aböjji üi hönsin yönghwa kukche sijang e chöngch'ikwön to kasüm mungkkül" (Father's devotion: political circle is touched by the film, kukche sijang), n.d., <<http://media.daum.net/politics/others/newsview?newsid=20141231210908380>> (December 31st 2014).

flourished from labor services, construction, and import contracts during the Vietnam War. And these companies became top conglomerates (*chaeböl*) after the war. Although people went to Vietnam in search for better opportunities, the lives of most of the men who went to Vietnam as soldiers or laborers did not significantly improve. In 1971, a group of former Hanjin technicians who worked in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, protested against unfair labor practices during that time and demanded their share of unpaid wages. The protest culminated in setting the Korean Airlines building (owned by Hanjin) in Seoul on fire, for which they were sentenced to one to five years in prison.¹³ The name of the company “Taehan” (albeit is fictional) triggers the viewers to recognize that the exploitation of Korean workers is the flipside of the economic history of contemporary Korea. Thus, the filmic text challenges the normative narration of the patriotism of “industrial workers,” and exposes the more exploitative nature of the Miracle of the Han River.”

Lastly, the film’s depiction of the 1983 live television broadcast, “Looking for Separated Families,”¹⁴ reminds the audience of the many marginalized members of society not recognized by essentialist narratives of the nation. These marginalized groups, including *isan kajok* (離散家族, families separated by the division), *silhyangmin* (失鄉民, people who lost their hometown) and *wöllamnin* (越南民, people who came to the South from the North) embody tragedies of the



13 Yun Chung no, “Pettūnam chōnjaeng sigi ‘wöllam chaebol’ ūi hyōngsōng kwa pawöl kislja ūi chōhang” (The formation of the congregate companies from the Vietnam War and the resistance of workers who were sent to Vietnam), *Sahoe wa Yōksa* (Society and History) Vol. 27 (2008): 93-125.

14 Applicants for reunion reached 100,952; 53,536 cases resulted in 10,189 reunions. It aired live for 138 days from June 30th 1983 to November 14th 1983.

Korean War that have been long forgotten in South Korean society. Not only has more than 60 years passed since the Korean War, but the nationalist discourse incorporated these marginalized groups into a larger single category of the people (國民, *kungmin*).

Being welcomed into the fold of the homogeneous nation effectively erases their identity and removes the potential for advancing the specific interests of these groups. For example, since the identity of *wöllamnin* is tied to their origins in North Korea, they were forced to remove traces of “northern origins” as citizens of the South Korean state. As the *wöllamnin* were integrated into the South Korean state, they also became objects of surveillance. The discourse of *isan kajok*, *silhyangmin*, and *wöllmanin* is located on the periphery of the nation. Although scenes of Töksu’s search for his father and sister composed a significant portion of the film, the news media hardly covered this emotionally and politically fraught issue. However, while remembrances of these groups dismantle the notion of the people as a homogenous socio-cultural group, restoring voices to these groups demonstrates their power in constantly (re)shaping Korean identities.

Conclusion

The ideological debates surrounding *Ode to My Father* demonstrate how the nationalist discourse engulfs personal histories into the linear-narrative of the nation and the people. In contrast, I have attempted to show that a diversity of narratives have shaped a multi-faceted national identity. I do so by analyzing the intertextual dynamics of the film. Like many of his generation, the main character’s life encompasses curial landmarks in Korean and global history. Yet, the interpretation of Töksu’s life as a mirror of his generation reinforces the practice of subsuming the history of the individual to the grand narrative of the nation. Instead, searching for various narratives that challenge the unity of a single nation can be one means to restoring an individual’s history.