Introduction: Gender, Genre, and Nation

NANCY ABELMANN AND KATHLEEN MCHUGH

A husband and wife are in transit. He has recently quit his job as a policeman, and, with his sizeable severance pay, the two are traveling to the southeastern coast of South Korea to start a business of their own. In her arms, the wife clutches the pocketbook that holds all of their money, their future. At a bus station, the wife chats with a stranger and only moments later realizes she has lost track of the pocketbook. Husband and wife search for it frantically, to no avail. Finally, they continue to the coast and take up peddling shellfish on the beach to feed their family. They barely get by. The husband takes a mistress and abandons the family. The wife is left dissolute and alone.

A South Korean veteran has sustained disabling injuries during the war, which prevent him from earning a livelihood. Although his fiancée still loves him and wishes to marry him, he sends her away, as he considers that he is no longer an appropriate match for her. The fiancée’s family is in dire straits—her mother has gone mad; her brother cannot find work; her sister-in-law is ready to give birth. Desperate and having no other prospects, she takes to the streets to earn money as a prostitute for American GIs. Her first night out, she runs, half teasing, half terrified, from a U.S. soldier trying to pick her up. As she dashes across the street, she bumps into someone and knocks him down. It is the war veteran, her ex-fiancé, who has been struggling down the street on his crutches. As they look into each other’s eyes, the American GI runs up to her. Devastated, the war veteran realizes what his fiancée has become.

A fatal moment organizes each of these scenarios. In the former, an instant of distraction instigates a life-altering reversal of fortune, sudden and irrevocable. In the latter, an unbelievable coincidence compounds
the misery provoked by desperate social circumstances and a woman's equally desperate choice. In all of their particulars, these two scenarios evidence certain qualities of melodrama: dramatic and sudden reversals, remarkable coincidence, pathos, and sensation. In each, precipitous falls—economic, social, and literal—take place within complex causal networks involving gender relations, cultural and economic structures, and the state. In each, this network is both dramatized and veiled by the focus on a calamitous event.

These two narratives are set in postwar South Korea, and though similar in dramatic structure and affective force, they derive from disparate sources and historical moments. The first anecdote is drawn from a 1990s ethnographic account in which an affluent South Korean woman described the fate that befell her sister in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950-53). The second is taken from a classic of South Korean Golden Age melodrama, Yu Hyun-Mok's (Yu Hyŏn-mok) 1961 *The Stray Bullet* (Obal't'an), celebrated for its stark realism and artistic achievement. While the first recounts a private familial catastrophe from a female point of view, the second focuses on a masculine crisis that allegorizes the fate of the nation through the figure of a U.S. interloper and his sexual congress with a fallen, "public" woman. In each of these moments, the first an account of lived experience, the second a realistic cinematic fiction, melodramatic narration conveys the force of a specific historical trauma. The essays in this volume focus on South Korean Golden Age melodrama, a vibrant film movement spanning the years from 1955 to 1972, that arose in the traumatic historical circumstances brought about by the Korean War. We approach this film movement with an eye to the convergences suggested by these two gender-inflected anecdotes—between lived experience and cinematic fiction, between melodrama and history.

**A Golden Interlude**

In the immediate aftermath of the Korean War, the release of two enormously popular South Korean films, *Story of Chunhyang* (*Ch'unhyangjŏn*, 1955) and *Madame Freedom* (*Ch’ayu puin*, 1956), signaled the beginning of what would come to be known as the Golden Age of South Korean cinema. By the end of the 1960s, the increasingly autocratic U.S.-supported dictatorship of Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏng-hŭi) effected the demise of this efflorescence of cinematic creativity. During the brief period from 1955 to 1972, a number of South Korean directors produced a body of work as historically, aesthetically, and politically significant as that of other well-known national film movements such as Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, and New German Cinema. Yet unlike these other film movements, South Korean Golden Age film has been largely unknown in the West and is only now becoming available, most forcefully because of the rapid and remarkable emergence of South Korean cinema on a global stage into the twenty-first century. The first impulse motivating this collection of essays, therefore, is to introduce readers to this remarkable body of Golden Age films as the antecedent of the current renaissance. Although critical work on contemporary South Korean cinema and directors is beginning to appear, currently no book-length study of South Korea’s Golden Age films exists.

Other considerations shape this collection as well. While a great deal of the work on melodrama in Hollywood has focused on representations of women within the “woman’s film” or family melodrama, Western critical understandings of gender and genre cannot be lifted wholesale and imposed on other cinemas. Writing on Chinese political melodrama, Nick Browne advises that we must...

Browne finds the workings of Chinese political melodrama to suggest important new directions for the study of melodrama both in Asia and in the West. In this book we explore South Korean melodrama's use of gender for its variable articulations of political and cultural forces within a particular national imaginary in a distinct historical moment. In the South Korean films of this period, the crises of the nation manifest themselves in persistent gender and genre trouble. The essays in this volume, individually and taken together, seek to generate a portrait of Golden Age melodrama by combining textual analysis, reception, and historical/cultural context in order to render its historical, aesthetic, and political complexity.

Certain questions immediately arise. Is South Korean Golden Age melodrama truly distinct from Western cinema and its melodramatic tra-
dition and if so, how? Or, was the postwar saturation of U.S. culture in South Korea so pervasive as to render any such assertion suspect? The answer to both questions may be yes. South Korean melodrama certainly does betray some of the generic features of melodrama noted above and exemplified by Hollywood’s classical cinema. Peter Brooks, in his famous study of the melodramatic imagination, described a “modern aesthetic” characterized by “the effort to make the ‘real’ and the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘private life’ interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture.” If this impulse characterizes melodrama in the West, then South Korean melodrama is somewhat distinct in the alignment or proximity between traumatic lived historical circumstance and melodramatic narrative. While both types of melodrama may well have transformed political, economic, and cultural conflicts into personal narrative, Hollywood’s economic focus on regional, national, and international markets resulted in the systematic suppression of historical, political, and local detail in its classical cinema. American studios wanted their product to play well in “all locales” and therefore studiously avoided any potentially provocative historical specificity in their selection of villainous characters or conflict. The result was a cinema that seemed to take place in familiar but unspecified places with plots that were mythic rather than politically or socially realistic or specific—a cinema that played well in South Korea, as it did across the globe.

South Korean Golden Age melodrama suffered from no such complications or aspirations, and its consequent historical and social specificity provides a starting point for considering the distinctive features of this genre within its national context. Further, in postwar South Korea, the film industry had no need to dramatize private life so as to render it interesting and thereby to allegorize and “resolve” social contradictions. Rather, the South Korean variant of melodrama, with its plot reversals, cataclysmic coincidences, and seismic narrative compressions, seemed uniquely suited to rendering the nation’s dramatic history and compressed modernity in the second half of the twentieth century. That life in mid-twentieth-century Korea has been dramatic is lost on few observers of South Korean postwar history. Thus, instead of maintaining generic boundaries between the realistic and the melodramatic, between lived experience and fictional narrative, South Korean cinema construes melodrama as the most efficacious mode of realism. Before detailing the individual essays, we would like to give a broad sense of what was the “lived experience” in twentieth-century South Korea.

A Bitter Legacy

Japanese colonialism (1910–45) subjected Koreans to violence, humiliation, and mass displacements. By 1945, some 20 percent of the population was either abroad or in a Korean province different from that of their birth. In the postcolonial era, the numbers of Koreans who would come to know the world beyond their villages grew even more dramatically: first with the 1948 partition of the country (into North and South); next with the profound dislocations (that is, exile) caused by the Korean War; and finally with rapid and irreversible urban proletarianization of vast numbers of South Korean women and men into the 1970s and beyond.

South Korean history and its radical changes in the twentieth century have again and again inspired one resounding word—compressed. The transformation of Korea from a traditional, primarily agrarian culture at century’s beginning, to the modernized, divided, urban state at century’s end took place at a dizzying pace. South Korea’s experience of dislocation and compression had a particular character—of human misery and devastation. Bruce Cumings describes South Korea of the 1950s as “a terribly depressing place, where extreme privation and degradation touched everyone: Cadres of orphans ran through the streets... beggars with every affliction or war injury... half-ton trucks full of pathetic women careened onto [U.S.] military bases.” In addition to the physical and economic devastation, South Korea also experienced the political humiliation of being passed from one colonial power (Japan) to another (the United States). If immediate postwar Seoul was a city of the walking wounded, so was it also an odd pastiche of a real and symbolic economy of American goods, language, money, and influence, all of which saturated the South Korean landscape, complicating any straightforward sense of national identity.

The multiple ambiguities of postwar South Korea can perhaps best be captured by focusing on one of many key moments whose initial complexity has only been enhanced by subsequent historical developments—a moment at the temporal heart of Golden Age cinema. April 19, 1960, or 4·1·9 as it has come to be known, stands both for the outbreak of student protests against the Syngman Rhee (Yi Sung-man) regime (1948–60) as well as for the heavy-handed suppression of those struggles, which left over one hundred dead and nearly 1,000 wounded. Many developments, both positive and negative, led to this uprising. By the late 1950s, the Rhee regime had grown increasingly autocratic, a fact that had become more and more apparent, especially in the light of a stagnating
economy. Meanwhile, high school and college attendance had quadrupled between 1948 and 1960, making for an intelligentsia fueled by democratic ideals as well as economic desires. Finally, there was conflict over revisions to tighten the already draconian national security law (that is, the legal arm of anticommunism); and considerable opposition to the prospect of a normalization treaty with Japan.

The April 19, 1960, student uprisings were victorious in the most obvious sense: they toppled the regime. By the end of that April, Rhee took exile in Hawai‘i, his refuge an overt indication of who and what (American aid and its graft economy) had been running the country under his aegis. The uprising bore fruit in the brief democratic regime of Chang Myŏn (1960–61), only then to be eviscerated by the military coup of Park Chung Hee on May 16, 1961. Park’s regime combined staggering economic growth of world-historical dimensions (South Korea’s “economic miracle”) with a stunningly autocratic regime whose far-reaching ideological control resulted in unrivaled labor suppression and horrific working conditions.

April 19, 1960, thus emerges as a historical marker that signals both victory and defeat. The date commemorates a successful, if very costly grassroots struggle for political and economic justice, for “Korea’s Place in the Sun.” Yet, the uprising exacted significant casualties, and the hard-won democratic regime was tragically short-lived. Both the uprising and the Chang Myŏn presidency stand as a precarious interlude between the Rhee and Park presidencies. The popular struggle and democratic achievement of this historical moment do however index a legacy of dissent persisting through and in the aftermath of the colonial period, running through the Park, Chun Doo Hwan (Chŏn Tu-hwan, 1980–87) and subsequent regimes, and into the present.

The films discussed in this volume coalesce around 1960, either grappling with the complexity of this moment, or, in a few instances, evoking this historical time. The compressed, ambiguous, and fundamentally transnational social and political dramas of South Korea’s recent history have inspired many of the contributors to contemplate the widespread appeal of particular film modes and aesthetics, especially that of melodrama. Rather than documenting the events of this historical moment, the melodramatic mode adopted in these films apprehends something of their lived impact in the pace, disorienting reversals, and affects excess of their narration. In this way, South Korean cinema infused the conventions of realism, melodrama, and generic classification itself with an ironic overlay based on the audiences’ recent experiences.

Taken together, The Stray Bullet, celebrated as one of the crowning achievements of the Golden Age, and Madame Freedom (1956), a box-office hit, demonstrate this generic complexity and polysemy. The Stray Bullet, a film that figures prominently in three chapters here (Eunsun Cho, Hye Seung Chung, and Keehyeung Lee), presents perhaps the bleakest, most realistic social portrait of immediate post–Korean War South Korea. The film was based on a 1958 story of the same title that was unsparing in its criticism of the Rhee regime. Subsequently filmed in the democratic Chang Myŏn era, this bleak cinematic portrayal was the result of fleeting artistic freedom. No sooner was the film released, shortly after President Park’s military coup, than it was banned. Much as the democratic moment of its production, this film would come to stand for the hopes and struggles of the South Korean people on the eve of the coup. Tellingly, cinematic quality would deteriorate into the late 1960s and was finally eclipsed as the Park regime took its most autocratic shape with the 1972 Tysin (or restoration).

In its day, it was not The Stray Bullet that captured the popular imagination, but rather box office hits such as Madame Freedom. Where the Seoul of The Stray Bullet portrays abject suffering, the Seoul found in Madame Freedom is that of boutiques, cafés, restaurants, parks, and nightclub/dance halls. If the 4-1-9 student protests were harbingers of fin-de-siècle democracy, no less does Madame Freedom speak to South Korea’s transnational youth culture in the dawn of the twenty-first century. But neither Madame Freedom nor The Stray Bullet can be easily categorized or contrasted. As Cho and Chung discuss in this volume, The Stray Bullet betrays its “realism”; likewise, Madame Freedom encodes, as Kathleen McHugh argues, the crises of its day. Where The Stray Bullet places the idea of “Liberation” (haebang) (the film’s protagonists live in “Liberation Village”) in ironic and indelible quotation marks, so does Madame Freedom do so for “freedom” (chayu). These ironies alter the conventional Manichean binaries of melodrama, and direct the narrative resolutions of this cinema toward more complex social commentary.

The Golden Age, Then and Now

While there is no doubt that South Korean cinematic melodrama derives in part from the example of Hollywood and other national cinemas, the writers in this book attempt to explore how “national specificity” comes to be marked in Golden Age cinema. Thus the individual films discussed don’t easily reside within a stable or traditional notion of genre and its
function. Rather, in these essays, genre, particularly melodrama, is doing
many things, and national specificity emerges precisely in and as its theo­
retical and historical difficulty. Writing in 1984, Alan Williams called for
gene studies to “get out of the United States,” his comment signaling
many things, and national specificity emerges precisely in and as its theo­

In Golden Age cinema the resulting complexities are “acted out”
both through generic hybridity and referential specificity. Melodramatic
narratives are rendered in starkly realist styles (The Stray Bullet: Until the
End of My Life [I sangmyeong tabadorok]); horror conventions are em­
ployed by domestic women’s film (The Housemaid [Hanji]); and the style
of a woman’s dress registers, with catastrophic simplicity, the inability of
the nation to lay down its boundaries, to assume its identity free of
transnational influence (Madame Freedom; The Stray Bullet). Kathleen
McHugh’s “South Korean Film Melodrama: State, Nation, Woman, and
the Transnational Familiar” explores the latter problematic, aligning a dis­
cussion of the historical construction of “national cinemas” with the spe­
cific instance of the Golden Age. Noting the fundamentally self-conscious
quality of this cinema as it attempted to imagine South Korea as both
“emergent and divided,” McHugh examines how filmic representations of
femininity incorporate and dramatize this imagination. Reading the night­
club scene in Madame Freedom, McHugh notes that the homosocial and
vaguely homoerotic dynamics shaping the relationships among the women
in this film erupt in the gaze of Madame Freedom at a female dancer. The
visual framing of, and more especially the musical accompaniment to this
gaze, register the influence of Hollywood, but also, and more strikingly, of
the contemporaneous cabaretera or dance hall film in Mexican cinema.
Thus the problem posed by Madame Freedom’s femininity is inextricably
connected to what McHugh terms a “transnational familiar” that the film
cannot do away with or resolve.

But contrast, Nancy Abelmann begins from the lived experience of
two South Korean women who came of age during the Korean War in
her “Melodramatic Texts and Contexts: Women’s Lives, Movies, and
Men.” Using their life narratives, she analyzes the capacity of Golden Age
melodrama to engage the moral imagination of a generation of South

modernity. In an essay that combines ethnographic reception and genre
analysis, she argues that for these women, and this era of films, melo­
drama can be appreciated precisely for its capacity to articulate this imagi­
ation. Refusing to distinguish the melodramatic from the real, she sug­
gests instead that this capacity is enlivened because viewers are inspired to
take up the question of the distinction between the two for themselves.
To demonstrate her point, Abelmann reads the Golden Age melodrama
Neighbor Pak (Pak sobang) in conjunction with the personal narratives of the
two women.

Taking the notion of imagination in a very different direction, Jin­
soo An, in his “Screening the Redemption: Christianity in Korean Melo­
drama,” suggests that for Golden Age cinema, melodrama is a “mode of
imagination” consonant with South Korean “popular reasoning.” An
offer that, within South Korean culture, the Christian promise of salvation
is another resonant and related mode of imagining. Christian redemption,
he argues, seems “forced” on the surface of key Golden Age films; it jars,
appearing as it does just in the moment of the “total disintegration” of
these films’ “moral economy.” He suggests that we might think about
South Korea’s rapid postwar Christianization along similar lines. Much as
he challenges ideas about melodrama, An also describes the “strongly
sociological character” of Christian salvation in South Korea for the ways
in which it articulates with extant social values as well as political ideolo­
gies. Typically, these motifs of Christian redemption are mobilized in
ambivalent narrations of imperiled and sometimes fallen femininity.

Crossing genders, Eunsun Cho, in “The Stray Bullet and the Crisis
of Korean Masculinity,” draws our attention to a critically neglected
aspect of this canonical Golden Age film—Hollywood’s influence on it,
notable in the action and film noir elements nested within its otherwise
neo-realist mode. Cho describes these generic borrowings and allusions
as “cinematic instants” that disrupt the documentary realism of the rest
of the film and trouble its easy classification or reading. She offers a
provocative analysis of these “instants” of action genres set against the
otherwise bleak realism of the film. One such action sequence features a
wounded war veteran who abandons the pretense of a “clean life,”
dreaming to “make it big” with a bank heist. Cho argues that this macho
Hollywood moment offers a meta-commentary on South Korean film
itself: the bank robbery fails, the action plot dissolves, and the film returns
to the gritty world of immediate postwar South Korea. Within this com­
plex narrative, Cho notes that the scopic structure of the film also persis­
ently and symptomatically disallows the masculine gaze. Thus the master’s (Hollywood’s) filmic mode, visual regime, and generic conventions fail to resolve the crisis of postwar masculinity.

Hye Seung Chung’s “Toward a Strategic Korean Cinephilia: A Transnational Détournement of Hollywood Melodrama” stages a complex, cross-cultural encounter between the traditions of Hollywood and South Korean melodrama. Noting Hollywood’s impact on Golden Age film, she argues that rather than condemning this influence and South Korean audiences’ general fascination with Hollywood melodrama as “a symptom of U.S. cultural imperialism,” these cross-cultural relationships should be historicized within the postwar context. In her subsequent analysis, Chung notes both the broad contours as well as the textual particulars of South Korean cinephilia. Calculating the relative popularity of an array of Hollywood films from their box-office draw in South Korea, she observes that certain plots (“tragic romances”) and stars captivated audiences there. Further, the Hollywood films popular in South Korea differ significantly from those canonized by U.S. film scholars and popular film classics lists alike. Blending reception data with cross-cultural textual analysis, Chung presents a compelling case study of transnational cinematic desire and appropriation.

Beginning with a contrast between Korean war films made in South Korea and those made in the United States, David Scott Diffrient makes a significant scholarly contribution to what has been a neglected genre in Golden Age cinema, the war film. Taking one important example, Sin Sang-ok’s Red Muffler (Ppalgan mahura), he analyzes the text of this film, its director/auteur, and its star, the latter two both very important figures in Golden Age cinema. He finds the film exemplary of the Korean War genre’s tendency toward generic blurring and complexity in the meeting it stages between the maternal melodrama and the war film. As Sin Sang-ok, the film’s director, and Ch’oe Un-hûi, its female star, were both renowned for their work in the former genre, their very participation in Red Muffler complicated its generic signification. By simultaneously featuring both the war hero pilot and the melodramatic heroine (the widow-turned-prostitute of the pilot’s former colleague) in both of its subplots, Red Muffler allows for what Diffrient terms a complex “dialogue between the sexes.” Further, though the film diverges from the Hollywood war film in directly exposing women to the realities of war, it cites Hollywood and other Western images and icons, thus demonstrating “the remarkable visual literacy” of South Koreans, a legacy of their colonial past and postwar status.

The last three essays in this book relate the melodramas of the Golden Age to contemporary independent and mainstream cinema and television in South Korea. Soyoung Kim’s “Questions of Woman’s Film: The Maid, Madame Freedom, and Women” offers a gendered understanding of “women’s film” for South Korean film generally and the Golden Age in particular. She argues that the Golden Age “woman’s film” is in fact a 1990s invention. Understanding that those Golden Age films that catered to overwhelmingly female audiences appealed to a particular clientele—a “ajumma (married women) in rubber shoes with handkerchiefs”—Kim argues that Golden Age cinema blended an appeal to a generic “woman,” derived from its use of Hollywood conventions, to more local narrative codings that divided women by kinship roles, class status, and sexuality (for example, chaste widows, promiscuous maids, and such). Tracing this complicated textual address and reception through the example of several films, she finishes her analysis by contrasting contemporary feminist films about the “comfort women” (sex workers mobilized by the Japanese colonial state),27 with Golden Age melodramas’ representations of “Western princesses” (yanggongju, sex workers servicing American GIs),28 underscoring the institutional, infrastructural, and ideological structures that link these two histories.29

Turning to contemporary popular cinema, Kyung Hyun Kim focuses on the emergence of a new generation of South Korean filmmakers with the dawn of the twenty-first century, a generation both able and inclined to cite from Golden Age melodrama. He traces how the domestic space in Happy End (Haep’i endu, 1999) updates and renovates the representation of that space in The Housemaid (1960). In so doing, he finds the gendered signature of two crisis moments in postcolonial South Korean history: the 4-1-9 Student Revolution (1960) and the IMF Debt Crisis (1997–2001). The claustrophobia of the mise-en-scène and the violence that troubles the domestic in each film, blending conventions of melodrama and horror, reference the respective financial crises of each historical moment, in each case pinning blame on women who work outside the home. If, according to Cho’s analysis of Hollywood citation in The Stray Bullet, South Koreans must no longer screen recovery with the masters’ tools, the historical moment defining Happy End presents an ironic juncture: the new dawn of South Korean film takes place just as global neoliberal political, economic, and symbolic economies have colonized South Korea. The timing of South Korea’s IMF Debt Crisis (and the largest World Bank bailout in history—a national humiliation to South Koreans) seems uncanny: just as South Korea elected its first truly dissi-
dent president in 1997, it had to tend to the socially conservative dictates of the World Bank bailout, many of which seemed to turn the clock backwards in terms of gender equity and social distribution. Kim finds the telling of this national crisis in the uses made by a contemporary film of the tropes of Golden Age melodrama.

Finally, Keehyeung Lee brings the question of genre in the 1990s to television, reading the prime-time serial *Morae sigye* (*Hour Glass*) against the grain of the melodramatic television drama. He argues that this series is generically hybrid, citing as it does the Hong Kong action film, the Hollywood gangster/buddy film, and what he dubs “social melodrama.” His analysis indicates the ways that this TV series both unsettles and reinstates elements of classical Golden Age melodrama. Lee asserts that it is precisely the serial’s allegiance to melodramatic convention that accounts for its enormous popularity—a remarkable popularity given its bleak focus on the bloody suppression of the 1980 Kwangju Uprising on the eve of the military takeover of Chun Doo Hwan. For its historical focus, *Hour Glass* is indisputably progressive. Lee, however, resists easy celebration; considering the series in the context of South Korea’s rapidly expanding media market with its “halo of live coverage,” he asserts that the series’s “social melodrama” is compromised. With an argument about media and temporality that echoes points made by An and Diffrient, Lee concludes that through its manipulation of melodramatic conventions, television is profoundly presentist even as it seems to recuperate the past.

**Conclusion**

Although the Golden Age of South Korean cinema has no definitive ending, film censorship under Park, the influx of television, and increased market liberalization impoverished the industry. Film freedom, quality, and audience deteriorated in the 1970s, the nadir of South Korean film history. Indeed, as Kyung Hyun Kim observes, “None of the celebrated Golden Age filmmakers had survived the absurdity of the ‘70s.” Most dramatically, Sin Sang-ok, director of several of the films discussed in this volume (*Hell Flower* [Chikhwari], *The Houseguest and My Mother, Red Muffler*, and *Until the End of My Life*), “mysteriously disappeared” to be found later in North Korea where he directed many films; in 1988 he returned to South Korea. True to this story of South Korea’s preeminent director, it is no exaggeration to say that Golden Age cinema is itself a product of the so-called division system; the Golden Age was nothing if not deeply political.

At the moment in which we write this introduction, South Korea has only quite recently (2001) declared the IMF Debt Crisis “over.” Meanwhile many in South Korea remain unconvinced. For starters, South Korea remains a cold war flash point and neoliberal reforms have compromised much popular progressive vision. With the hindsight of the new century, the mid-1990s emerge as a small but remarkable cultural/political moment, the subsequent potential of the Kim Dae Jung regime (Kim Tae-jung, 1997–2002) curbed by the IMF. It was in the mid-1990s that a new age of film dawned. And as Kyung Hyun Kim argues, it is only later in the decade that an even younger generation of directors, basking in newfound political freedoms and cultural confidence, discovered anew the Golden Age cinema.

That these directors, however, came of artistic age in the midst of yet another national crisis is revealing. Gender, genre, and nation, reminiscent of the Golden Age cinema, are troubled. We predict that South Koreans will continue to rediscover Golden Age cinema and that a vibrant cinematic conversation with these films will enliven contemporary filmmaking. With this volume we too seek a conversation on a national film movement whose expression and context are as timely as they were in their own Golden Age.

**Notes**


3. South Korean Golden Age films have been the subject of several high-profile film festivals, most notably *Post-Colonial Classics of Korean Cinema* held in Irvine, California in 1998.
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18. Ibid., 343; Lie, *Han Unbound*, 36.


20. Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*.


22. Young-il Lee, *The History of Korean Cinema: Main Currents of Korean Cin-
This essay considers one Golden Age melodrama and the personal narratives of two fifty-something women who came of age in South Korea in the late 1950s. I interviewed the two women—whom I call The Education Mother and The Moviegoer—at length over several years for a larger oral narrative-based project on women and social mobility in contemporary South Korea.

By Way of a Story

The narrative that follows, which also begins the Introduction to this volume, is The Education Mother’s account of the fate of her only sister. I call her The Education Mother because of her tireless efforts on behalf of her children’s education. Enveloped in a rich web of interpretive asides and afterthoughts, the story offered much more than a string of events. The Education Mother joins many women of her generation in South Korea in the conviction that their lives are as “dramatic” as those featured in television and film.

At the time the story was told, The Education Mother’s younger sister was peddling shellfish on the beaches of South Korea’s southeastern coast. Abandoned by her husband early in her marriage, and then part of a marginal economy, this sister inhabited an entirely different world from that of The Education Mother in Seoul, who defined her own “middle-class” identity in terms of the “leeway to live entirely off the interest of stock and real-estate investments” and the “time and money to join a health club and travel with international tours.”

At the heart of this story is a melodramatic moment in which her sister’s fate turned suddenly—the sort of moment that could easily be accompanied by high-pitched string instrumentation or thunder and lightning in a melodramatic film or soap opera. It happened one day when...
At the time evoked in the story, the sister and her husband were in transit. Her husband had recently quit his job as a policeman, and with his sizable severance pay in hand, they were off to the coast to open a business. Throughout the journey, The Education Mother’s sister clutched the pocketbook that held these bills—the promise of their new lives. Chatting with the stranger at the bus station, she somehow lost track of the pocketbook; the bus station thus became the couple’s way station to poverty. They continued to the coast and began peddling wares on the fringes of the formal economy. Shortly thereafter the husband took a mistress and eventually abandoned his wife entirely.

The Education Mother mused that by today’s standards—and her current middle-class status—the money she would have needed to stem her sister’s fate is but a trifling amount. But in those days, The Education Mother’s family was enveloped in their own struggles to survive in immediate post-Korean War Seoul.

What I found most intriguing about this story was The Education Mother’s reflections on her sister’s misfortune—that is, the way in which she told the story. No sooner had she led me to the story’s climax than she had attributed her sister's woes to her boyish personality (sŏnggyŏk), namely her sister’s impertinence and impropriety. Snatching her sister’s tragedy from the impersonal winds of fate, she delivered it to the workings of personal proclivity. For a moment I was baffled—for all her sister had done was to misplace her purse, or less still to have had it stolen; it struck me as unjust or even unkind to pin the blame for a turn of circumstance on personality. And yet I knew that this was a sister who The Education Mother loved dearly and by whose misfortune she was deeply saddened. But my understanding of these seemingly personal attributions changed as the story of the downward mobility of The Education Mother’s sister veered in a different direction.

As The Education Mother continued, she portrayed her sister's personality as not only the source of a particular—and in this case devastating—social outcome but also the product of a particular family history and social environment. The Education Mother detailed her sister’s relationship with their overly ambitious mother, a woman who had been permanently separated from her husband during the division of the country into what became North and South Korea (1945-48). She explained that her sister’s “mistaken” marriage to a policeman (in her words, “such a low-class profession”) was the result of their mother’s “ignorant ambition” that had fixed itself on the policeman’s gentrified (yangban) origins.

“Yangban only in name,” The Education Mother continued, as his family coffers were empty and his father had long ago taken up residence with another woman.

While The Education Mother knew how to tolerate her mother’s domineering ways—to say “yes” while all along quietly forging her own path—her younger sister grew up at once fighting against, and ironically complying with, her mother’s “twisted and ignorant” ambition.

When I reviewed my notes from this rather extraordinary story, I could see that “personality” was not simply a catalog of personal traits or inclinations but rather a discursive site where the workings of a particular family history and even of national histories were at play. When The Education Mother turned from the lost or stolen purse to her sister’s personality, it was not to wrest this sad story from the larger course of South Korean social transformations but rather to place it squarely within them—from the national division, to the structure of patriarchy, to the reconfiguration of status hierarchies.

This story captures the melodramatic dimensions of the profound personal dislocations that have accompanied South Korea’s rapid postwar social transformation, which incidentally have made for many stories like this one, stories in which small turns of fate spiral into great tragedies or enormous social divides. In her ruminations over her sister’s fate, The Education Mother was struggling with nothing less than social justice at its barest bones: whether people get what they deserve. In much the same way that this pocketbook story enlivens a veritable debate on social justice, so does melodrama theory offer an understanding of melodrama as a site of personal and popular discussion.

**Signifying Melodrama**

“Melodrama” here refers to a complex of theatrical, literary, and cinematic conventions characterized by excess— of affect (the overdrawn, overmarked) and of plot (strange, almost unbelievable twists, coincidences, connections, and chance meetings). Thomas Elsaesser writes that the general use of “melodramatic” describes the “exaggerated rise-and-fall pattern in human actions and emotional responses, a from-the-sublime-to-the-ridiculous movement, a foreshortening of lived time in favor of intensity—all of which produces a graph of much greater fluctuation, a quicker swing from one extreme to the other than is considered natural, realistic or in conformity with literary standards of verisimilitude.” Excess also characterizes melodrama’s overdrawn characters—moral hero/ines and evil villain/esses. “A particular form of dramatic mise en scène,”
including decor, color, and music, has also been critical to the enactment of excess.

I argue here that a melodramatic sensibility has been pervasive in contemporary South Korea, as it has been in many moments and locales of rapid social transformation. Indeed, many theorists of melodrama assert that the genre rose with the social and class transformations that accompanied the rise of capitalism. Peter Brooks writes about melodrama as both a "mode of expression and representation" and a "means for interpreting and making sense of experience." My use of "melodramatic sensibility" follows his convention, referring not only to the properties of a particular field of texts (including personal narratives) but also to their dialogic context (that is, to the talk that so often surrounds them). Melodramatic texts and narrative conventions are effective in South Korea because they dramatize issues central to rapidly changing societies, and because they draw their audiences into dialogue. We can learn something about the nature of this dialogue by reviewing the contours of some of the scholarly debate on melodrama.

Over the last twenty years, melodramatic novels, films, and television soap operas that were once considered of little cultural or scholarly value have been resuscitated in academic writing. These works are now legitimate texts for inquiry, which reflects the increasing interest in popular culture generally and transformations in theoretical and historical perception. Interestingly, scholars have taken up the touchstones of melodrama's long-standing devaluation to proclaim its very value. This said, neither is contemporary melodrama theory singular nor are the features of the "genre" completely agreed upon.

Scholars of melodrama debate the appropriateness and use of the term for the non-West or for non-Western genres. If some argue that it is imperialistic to transport Western theory to the non-West, others have asked whether it is imperialistic to suggest that melodrama has arrived in the non-West whole-cloth from the West. And again, some argue that it is problematic to abandon Western genre and theory in the examination of non-Western texts. Some scholars focus on non-Western melodramas' distinct features, or argue that the characterization falters because of the historically limited ways in which it has been formulated in the West. These critiques of the cross-cultural use of melodrama suggest necessary cautions: that we cannot assume analogous histories of similar narrative or dramatic forms; that we must consider the limits of theory devoted to the particularities of Western genres; and that we must be wary of universal or pan-cultural arguments. Nonetheless, "melodrama" can signal shared properties that are worth thinking about cross-culturally, and, for cross-cultural study, it is important to consider literary and genre developments in their particular historical crucibles. In the case of South Korean melodrama, or melo- nal (melodramatic) things, we find a local vocabulary and popular sensibility—the delineation of which The Education Mother and her cohort would recognize—that conjures images of excess, tears, and drama in keeping with widespread Western characterization. While Korea has certainly been influenced by the considerable contact with Western melodramatic genres over the twentieth century, also pertinent are premodern literary and dramatic traditions that are easily characterized as melodramatic (for example, p’ansori).

At the heart of debates concerning melodrama is the question of realism. Indeed, melodramatic excess can seem unrealistic with every flourish, and it is precisely this lack of realism that has led many to trivialize melodrama. From another vantage point, however, it can be argued that this excess dramatizes the real: namely, that while realistic genres are naturalized or ideologically unmarked, the drama of excess highlights the unreal and by extension the constructedness of the real. In this sense, the affective efficacy of melodramatic unreality derives precisely from its transgressions of reality.

Diverging from the argument that melodrama works by transgressing reality is the position that melodrama can be effective in reflecting "reality"—the melodrama of "real" life, such as that we just met with The Education Mother. Ariel Dorfman makes this argument for Latin American magical realism, suggesting that the North American academy has misunderstood the reality of its representations. The matter of "reality," of course, turns again on the sense of the real and the imaginary (or possible), the here-and-now versus the desired. In this sense, the debates on melodrama negotiate between competing aesthetics in the apperception and narration of the social world: the realm of the possible versus the accommodation to the real.

Integral to contemporary discussion on melodrama is the matter we met in the case of The Education Mother on her sister: namely the relation between the domestic and the social or political. Some scholars argue that melodrama works precisely to collapse the social and political into the domestic: as Elsaesser observes, "the characters are . . . each others' sole referent, there is no outside world to be acted upon." Christine Gledhill asserts, however, that it is wrong to limit the "real" to the "set of socio-economic relations outside the domestic and personal sphere," thereby ignoring the domestic with its "sexual relations . . . fantasy and
Gledhill thus refuses to relegate the domestic to a “surrogate level,” and instead calls attention to the “real social conflicts” of the domestic. Similarly, Peter Brooks argues that melodrama “evokes confrontations and choices that are of heightened importance because in them we put our lives—however trivial and constricted—on the line.” These perspectives thus challenge us to question those dichotomies (for example, public/political/domestic, and personal/social) that obscure the sociopolitical workings of the home and of private lives. The seemingly personal nature of the pocketbook story was in fact entirely social and political.

The debates over melodrama also consider whether characters in melodrama are centers of (“realistic”) psychological interiority, or alternatively, social composites or social projections. This discussion is critical because so much of melodrama is structured around good and evil characters. On the one hand, when characters are fashioned with “individual” psychologies, their social fates seem somehow deserved and their good or evil is celebrated or condemned respectively. When, on the other hand, characters are constructed as social composites or projections, their good or evil operate differently. In this latter vein, Elsaesser argues that for Hollywood melodrama, evil “is firmly placed on a social and existential level, away from the arbitrary and finally obscure logic of private motives and individualized psychology.” Brooks notes similarly that melodramatic characters have “no psychology” or “interior depth,” and Gledhill cautions that personalization is not necessarily “a mechanical reflection of the ideology of individualism.” Some commentators on Asian melodramatic genres in particular have noted that characters’ troubles are framed outside of the self, in “social codes” or beyond human agency entirely. Certainly, in the pocketbook story, the character of the sister is narrated beyond the confines of individual psychology or personality.

Finally, at issue in discussions of melodrama is the extent to which it renders a moral order legible, one of Peter Brooks’s central assertions about the genre. Melodrama’s metadrama of the affective makes for what Brooks calls the “moral occult”—“the domain of spiritual forces and imperatives that is not clearly visible within reality, but which [is] believe[d] to be operative there, and which demands to be uncovered, registered, articulated.” In another idiom, writers on North American soap operas have asked whether melodrama is “open” or “closed.” Some have argued that the serialized and open-ended nature of that genre makes for texts that invite audience involvement and reflect the pace and style of women’s lives. It has been observed, however, that non-Western soap operas are typically not as open—that although serialized, they tend to complete the narrative, to close off the moral questions and plots. I suggest, however, that melodrama can also be considered “open” when it stimulates and shapes the terms of cultural dialogue.

At issue then is whether to understand melodrama’s engagement with moral concerns as fostering a closed Manichean universe or rather as dramatizing, rather than closing, moral debate. It seems that in his later writing, Brooks veers toward a more “open” approach to melodrama’s moral universe, offering, for example, that the “moral occult” lays bare “large choices of ways of being.” As recounted above, The Education Mother’s open engagement with her sister’s melodramatic story reveals the sort of discussion (that is, about social justice) that the melodramatic mode can inspire.

In popular discussions of melodramatic texts—discussions that are particularly vibrant among South Korean women—we find echoes of these contests over the contours and meanings of melodrama. To some extent, melodrama successfully engages its consumers precisely because it sets people talking. These issues are of course all the more salient in places and times when the real often seems unreal; when the domestic is easily comprehended as social; when persons are easily taken as social composites; and when the moral universe is unsettled. It is in this sense that I assert that such debate sustains the attention accorded melodrama, or melo-mul, and narratives like that of The Education Mother with which I began.

**Back to, and Beyond, the Story**

The pocketbook in The Education Mother’s story works as a melodramatic sign of excess. The Education Mother knew that a listener would be somewhat incredulous at the puissance of the pocketbook; it seems almost unreal that the turn of events in the aftermath of the stolen pocketbook would not have reversed themselves to this day. The reality of the story derives not so much from the plausibility of a woman carrying or losing her entire life’s savings, but rather from other social, emotional, and political contingencies that either enabled this melodramatic moment or that transpired because of it. First is the misplaced ambition of her mother, who through her social widowhood, suffered the scars of national division that not only burdened her with responsibilities she was “totally unprepared for,” but “distorted” her personality as well. (In the course of my interviews I found frequent, if subtle, commentary on the effects of socially enforced celibacy on young widows.)
Second, critical to this story are the fluid and changing contours of class and of the times. The Education Mother's mother—like so many people of her generation—miscalculated by privileging her future son-in-law's yangban legacy over his meager prospects and low social standing as a policeman. In my conversations with fifty-something South Korean women, I often heard their praise or disdain for their parents' ability or inability to effectively "read" the changing times. In this vein, The Education Mother faults her mother for being out of sync with the new rules of the game, for her anachronistic decision that set her sister's course. Indeed, Koreans have been straddling multiple status systems for generations; the melodrama of the story of The Education Mother's sister is intimately tied to the personal strategies that people have mobilized amidst the sea changes of social transformation. Although with hindsight it is perhaps easy for The Education Mother to dismiss her mother's igno­rant marital choice for her sister, it has in fact not been so easy for people at one or another juncture to know what to do, strategically or ethically. The enormous changes in stratification systems have been neither uniform nor total: premodern status distinctions did not, for example, suddenly or completely lose their social significance or political sway. Rather, the ways in which people calibrate human worth and achievement have been continuously contested.

A third reality entailed in the melodramatic moment featured in the pocketbook story is patriarchy. Patriarchy fashioned the ignorance of The Education Mother's mother (being unschooled), and it was also at work in a yangban's son becoming a policeman, for he was also the son of an abandoned woman. The melodramatic moment is also enlivened by the weighty realities of its aftermath. These include the stark downward mobility experienced by The Education Mother's sister and the further effects of patriarchy (the sister's desertion by her husband for another woman, and her insurmountable economic distance from her natal family).

Echoing another melodrama debate, the style or character of The Education Mother's sister is also at issue in The Education Mother's telling: her boyish personality, her "inability to keep quiet if she disagreed," and her "unwillingness to hide her feelings or engage in pleasantries" "destined" her for a difficult relationship with her mother and a difficult life course. The Education Mother explained that her own fem­inity had been well suited to the strictures and structures that women in Korea have had to negotiate. She explained that a "woman like my sister would have never survived the early years of my marriage," referring to the early difficulties The Education Mother herself experienced with her husband and mother-in-law. She highlighted her sister's limitations in this way because her own marriage had become, in the final analysis, both a successful and prosperous one. The Education Mother offered not a defense of patriarchy but rather a commentary on the effects of personal proclivity under patriarchy. Her sister's personality—its origins and effects—are neither entirely interior nor personal; it is precisely this tension that makes for The Education Mother's reflexive, dialogic telling of this story.

Finally, in keeping with yet other discussions on melodrama, it is very difficult to identify the villain(esses) or hero(ines) in The Education Mother's story. Each flawed character is an intricate social product. The agent in the purse-snatching story is after all quite irrelevant or absent, and the sister's father-in-law is so remote from the story as to be rather inconsequential. The story is messy, and as such, it serves to open a moral debate.

I turn now to the talk of another fifty-something woman about a Golden Age film that mimics her own and her husband's life. The woman's narration highlights the loss of male subjectivity, which in the melodramatic mode is hard to personalize or vilify because of its profoundly social and historical character. In straddling film and personal narrative in this way, I follow Marc Silberman's suggestion that we read film by oscillating "between the textually inscribed spectator, which tends to undermine historicity in its perpetual present of formal and narrative patterns, and the socioculturally differentiated spectator with a political and institutional identity."35

The Moviegoer on Pak Sŏbang

I call the woman whose story I now relate The Moviegoer, to capture both her enduring love of film and our shared interest in movies (and television soap operas) that ran the course of much of our talk together. The Moviegoer amazed me with her vivid reminiscences of the films she had watched in her youth and frequently urged me to see Western classics I had missed (to her great surprise), from Waterloo Bridge to Ben Hui. For The Moviegoer, films recalled the happiest moments of an otherwise difficult youth. At moments when The Moviegoer seemed overwhelmed by the heaviness of her own stories, she interrupted herself to ask me, "Did you see [such-and-such] a movie?" or turned briskly from a moment in her life to the narrative of a film she had seen or a novel she had read.
For example, The Moviegoer spoke about Kim Sŏng-ho, the famous actor who played Pak Sŏbang (the father and primary protagonist) in the film of the same name. She described that his image generally, and in Pak Sŏbang in particular, was that of a “good father ... the head of a happy family.” “His image,” she continued, “isn’t that of a man who makes lots of money or has any great masculine appeal, but of a father with an abundance of love—a comfortable father.” The Moviegoer was on the way to saying that in spite of having been fond of this sort of actor and role, she herself had never thought to marry a man like that: the “good father” or “comfortable man.” Instead, she admitted, the man she chose was a much more “conservative” one. The Moviegoer’s remarks on actor Kim Sŏng-ho and Pak Sŏbang capture the way in which film memories figure in the lives and narratives of the women I spoke with, not as distinct objects of analysis, but as paths leading elsewhere, en route to other things they had to say.

Other details from The Moviegoer’s life are suggestive for thinking about her engagement with Pak Sŏbang. Her emphasis on actor Kim’s comfortable, loving image—an image that blurs with that of Pak in the movie—provides an important contrast with what she often described precisely as her lack of comfort with her husband, in large part because of his politically conservative manner and goals, and his ambition. Albeit anecdotal, her comments on the matter of “comfort,” “conservatism,” and “ambition” index critical marital struggles over the course of her own life. Her discussions readily evidenced the tensions concerning men and patriarchy in South Korea, tensions also at the heart of Pak Sŏbang. Although The Moviegoer had had a difficult marriage and suffered from her husband’s ambition and conservative ways (that is, making her uncomfortable), his life story and current situation made it difficult for her to criticize him. In her conversations about him, she was quick to understand and even sympathize with him as a figure displaced by the course of contemporary South Korean history.

The Moviegoer lives in a medium-sized apartment in a high-rise with a corridor view of Seoul’s Han River. Her family is able to own an apartment because her husband purchased it with the severance pay he received from a regional chemical company, where he had spent most of his career working as a chemical technician. In the decades since, he has had several work stints in Iran but now finds it hard to do anything professional in South Korea because he is older and does not have a college degree. After all those years of skilled work, The Moviegoer was distressed that her husband had to do common labor for paltry wages. The Moviegoer has three children: her eldest daughter who with her husband worked as a social activist educating laborers; a second daughter, a long-time Christian feminist activist, who was at the time “too old to be single” (“I tell her that I’ve left her marriage up to God”) and who was studying to become a minister; and a son who, although an “activist in his heart,” had taken a more conventional path, working for a large corporation and having just recently married.

Counting herself in the “lower-middle” or maybe “middle-middle class,” she was self-conscious of being a housewife who did not work and also made no investments to raise her family’s material standard of living. The Moviegoer was often self-critical, musing about why she never thought to work, or to somehow better her family’s circumstances, as so many women of her generation and standing have done. Her regrets in this regard were not, however, so straightforward. In part, she posed this question repeatedly because she knew that such women (the kind who make something out of their own or their husband’s money) would have made her husband happier. For her and her husband to live together, she said, “Both of us have had to bear with things (ch’am’a):” while her husband has desire (yŏksim) and ambition (yasim), she described herself as lacking motivation. Nonetheless, she felt lucky to be married to her honest husband—a hard-working and income-earning man who has given her a “comfortable” (in the other sense of that term) life.

The Moviegoer’s narratives on her husband often tacked this way and that: on the one hand, she would proclaim her inabilities in the light of his ambition; while on the other hand, she would muster self-confidence against his conservative mind-set and ways. The Moviegoer, however, was never critical of her husband for long because his dashed hopes and thwarted plans—including her own lack of interest in family finances—demanded her sympathy. This sympathy, the reader will see, is inextricable from the historical specificity of her husband’s life over a time of considerable transformation and displacement.

The Moviegoer was keenly aware of herself in contrast with—and as such, seen by—her husband. Although she rarely ventured beyond her apartment and her church, she nurtured her vivid imagination and love of stories through her passion for novels, soap operas, and movies. When The Moviegoer’s husband would overhear her effusive storytelling during our discussions, he chided her, “Why are you going on about that?” He claimed to have no interest in stories; indeed he was a man who, The Moviegoer lamented, “could not even stay awake at a movie.” For her part, she was not embarrassed about her love of stories; in fact, she once
retorted to her husband, "How can you take that away from me? It is all I have!" The Bible, which she spoke of as "the world’s best-selling novel," was one of her favorite sources of stories. What did move her husband, she said, was his interest in personal mobility and in the nation’s political stability. It was in the context of this contrast that she explained that her lack of ambition (yasim) and her rather staid lifestyle were particularly ill suited for him. The Moviegoer knew that her husband was from a poor family, and that he would have liked a prettier, more charming, and, most of all, economically more ambitious wife. Life with her husband was hardly "comfortable" in the way that she imagined it would be with a husband like Pak Sŏbang.

A brief glance at the personal history of The Moviegoer’s husband is revealing in the light of The Moviegoer’s sense of herself, her marriage, and masculinity. She retreated to the nearby kitchen when her husband and I, in the living room, began to chat about his life. When her husband first left his remote countryside village, he promised himself that he would not return until the day he could fly back in a helicopter—just like the ones he had seen in his childhood when the American military had been stationed nearby. Although that day never arrived, he did manage to finish high school and become a respectable wage-earning technician. None of his achievements, however, ever lived up to his sense of his own promise, and he had many regrets about might-have-been lives that did not come to pass (for example, going to the United States or staying in Seoul and working his way into the government).

The Moviegoer’s husband described a decision he made early in his life: to abandon the traditional lettered life of his sŏnhu (a poor Confucian scholar) father who was not amounting to anything in the “modern” era and to instead follow the ways of his father’s oldest brother. This uncle, although technically at the head of his father’s patrilineage, in fact occupied a precarious position. The Moviegoer’s husband’s father’s wife had been unable to bear children and in a measure to secure a son he had borne this uncle with another woman; shortly thereafter, however, the father became dissatisfied with this woman of low standing and brought in another woman from a yangban (gentry) family—the woman who bore The Moviegoer’s husband and five subsequent children. Thus The Moviegoer’s husband’s eldest uncle was technically not even in the family register. Although the uncle (the son of the lower-class woman—who was eventually kicked out of the household) had little scholarly ability or refinement, he managed to travel to Japan during the colonial period and succeed in business there. The Moviegoer was forthright as to her estima-

tion of her husband’s sympathies (in favor of the uncle over his own father) when she derided the uncle as “a collaborator with the Japanese.”

The Moviegoer’s husband’s father, having no real occupation himself, other than the preoccupation with classical learning, relied on the earnings of this half-brother (although not even formally recognized as such) for his family’s survival. In an act that The Moviegoer’s husband praised for its extraordinary generosity, his father decided to have the uncle formally registered as the eldest son of his father, placing him, to his own detriment, at the much-valued helm of the patrilineage. It was this eldest uncle, a man The Moviegoer’s husband admitted was a bit of a brute, whom he decided to model himself after. He described his own father, after all, as anachronistic figure who had amounted to nothing.

The Moviegoer’s husband left the village shortly after the end of the colonial period to live in the sumptuous Seoul residence of the uncle so as to procure an education. As it turned out, though, The Moviegoer’s husband’s education dreams were never fulfilled beyond high school because during the ideologically charged Korean War the sumptuous quarters and social standing of his collaborator uncle were destroyed; with this, The Moviegoer’s husband’s own world also turned upside down. Thereafter, he followed a local schoolteacher from his home village who had invited him to join a rural ammonia plant. Quiet and more like his own father, the schoolteacher was a far cry from the flashy figure of his uncle. The Moviegoer’s husband considered this move to have been the grave mistake of his life for he left Seoul, the heart of South Korean social and political life, where he would, he said, have likely secured an impressive political career. It was an ironic move, back to the countryside and following local lines of authority, hardly the path he had envisioned. Such is The Moviegoer’s husband’s personal history that figured as the backdrop to his disappointment in his wife—a disappointment that I mostly heard about from her. Her sense was that her husband wished she might have helped him realize the material dreams befitting the course of his much earlier life—a tall order really. Her husband was hardly the happy, comfortable figure of Pak Sŏbang she admired; to the contrary, he was striving, economically interested, and classically masculine.

In the years I was meeting with The Moviegoer, however, her husband’s social position had become in fact quite delicate, his early ambition and his self-modeling after his collaborating uncle aside. Indeed, it was the very instability of his social position that made it difficult for The Moviegoer to think about herself definitively in relation to her husband. Alongside The Moviegoer’s Christian wall hangings in the living room
were two framed, blown-up photographs of the ammonia plant where her husband had worked (a daylight and a nightlight view) in what had been a state-of-the-art operation, a cog in the wheel of South Korea’s technological development. However, during the early months when I was interviewing The Moviegoer, her husband had sat hunched over a glass-surface coffee table covered with plastic lace with several dictionaries at his side, trying to decipher the English language blueprints of the plant that a Japanese company was going to build in Mongolia. He and several other men with whom he had worked over a decade earlier had been called to go to Mongolia for a half-year or so to help set up this plant. As he painstakingly translated the English and the numbers into registers familiar to him, he made a discovery that kept him muttering to himself he painstakingly translated the English and the numbers into registers familiar to him, he made a discovery that kept him muttering to himself in amazement week after week of my visits to his wife: the Japanese were building an ammonia plant at the technological level of the one he had been a part of decades ago—they were knowingly building a dinosaur and a toxic and dangerous one at that. He had been called to service not as the vanguard worker he had once been but as an engineer of anachronism who could make sense of plans that were illegible to the more modern, better trained, Japanese—who would never dream of hardship stints in the likes of Mongolia.

Over the months, his sixties-something cohort one-by-one abandoned the project; their every-several-day gatherings in coffee houses had proved pointless. Limited though he was in English, he fared better with the English than they did. Finally, he was left alone to make his way through the blueprints. Not long after I left, the whole project fell through; even his chance at fossil employment had failed. In the discussion of Pak Sŏbang that follows, the reader will meet a robust portrait of a Golden Age protagonist.

Through the months we met, The Moviegoer talked repeatedly of the days of her husband’s great ambition and of her inability to match it, but checked periodically—a quick jog to the nearby living room from the kitchen table where we sat—to see if her husband had not fallen asleep over the blueprints. If he had, she would remove his glasses and cover him with a colorful afghan. For The Moviegoer, who secretly admired her daughters’ activities in the student movement, and who supported their continued political activities, her husband’s situation—suffering for want of a college degree, unemployable after a lifetime of hard work—was emblematic of an array of social ills she never tired of detailing. As it became harder and harder for her family to maintain middle-class trappings, she had begun to think that she really had failed her family with her inactivity. This is precisely the sense in which her husband’s precarious position made it difficult for her to retain a clear sense of self-confidence for not having participated in the family economy.

In her discussions about her husband, it was very difficult for The Moviegoer to separate her thoughts about him from the challenges of changing times and ways. In this context, the actor Kim Sung-ho, and Pak Sŏbang (both film and character) offered The Moviegoer a rich foothold for thinking about men and their choices (and destinies) and by extension her own life with such men. A brief reading of this film reveals parallel tensions between the sway and anachronism of patriarchy, as enacted through both her marital experience and Pak Sŏbang’s at-once triumph and defeat, and between nostalgia and a brave new world.

A Melodrama of Social Transformation

The Korean term chuch’esiŏng translates as the loss of male subjectivity and signifies an important national narrative in South Korea, one with its own historical, gender, generation, and class coordinates. For women like The Moviegoer and The Education Mother, male subjectivity refers to both the personal attributes of the men in their lives and, metaphorically, to the nation. A person without chuch’esiŏng refers loosely, for example, to one with little spine, confidence, or sense of self. In another vein, South Koreans equate chuch’esiŏng with national subjectivity or sovereignty.

Male loss or dislocation—physical, material, cultural, and social—provides a ready grammar for articulating the costs of colonialism, the Korean War, and rapid social transformation in South Korea. While men did not suffer greater losses (real or symbolic) over the course of contemporary Korean history than did women, the patriarchal and patrilineal character of the country, at least after the war, led to considerable interest in the historical loss and suffering of fathers and husbands, such as that of The Moviegoer in relation to her husband. For the generation of South Koreans that came of age in the 1950s and 1960s (with Golden Age melodramas), the interest in personal, social, and cinematic narratives of this ilk was particularly pronounced because of their vivid experience of the Korean War, the recent memory of colonialism, and the state narratives and projects of national renewal and development.

To complete a consideration of The Moviegoer’s engagement with Pak Sŏbang (Neighbor Pak), I turn briefly to the film itself, a film that I
take as emblematic of Golden Age melodramas of social transformation. Pak Sŏbang is one of many Golden Age films that screens the struggles of male subjectivity. Like the life of The Moviegoer's husband, it maintains a creative tension between patriarchy, namely the excesses of male privilege and power, and the dislocation of men on account of radical social transformation. Its staging of patriarchy, alternately comic, melodramatic, and, in certain moments, very “real” and heavy-handed, presents the father figure as being overshadowed by, the mere pawn of, larger social forces. This same structure informed The Moviegoer's conversation insofar as for precisely the same reason: the hand of history, in this narrative complex, mitigates the excesses of patriarchy—however real its local workings might be. Simply put, in the name of larger concerns, women have found it hard to pin blame on the failings of individual men.

Pak Sŏbang features a father who is portrayed as an anachronism: he is a handyman whose specialty is fixing the flues of Korean ondol floors, through which hot air passes to heat traditional homes. “Sŏbang,” when applied to a middle-aged man, refers both to his familiarity in the neighborhood and to his modest social standing. Until the film’s final scenes, Pak is featured in Korean dress, often with a Western hat and black shoes. Although by no means elite, he is well respected in his urban neighborhood and to his modest social standing. Until the film’s final scenes, Pak is featured in Korean dress, often with a Western hat and black shoes. Although by no means elite, he is well respected in his urban neighborhood (one that acts much like a village) because his children are well mannered, educated (at least through high school), and employed—his second daughter, Myŏng-son, is an office worker at Northwest Airlines, where she is called “Miss Pak,” and his son is a white-collar worker in a prosperous pharmaceutical company.

Most of comedy of the film derives from Pak’s relationship with his daughters. In scene after scene, the family scrambles to hide things associated with their romantic exploits from him. Pak’s ambivalence about the new culture of dating and romance generates a series of gags whose humor is evoked spatially; in slapstick scenes involving the opening and closing of many doors, the traditional home becomes a labyrinth for the children to evade the disapproving gaze of the “patriarch.” The power of this gaze is qualified, however, not only by the slapstick but also by Pak’s wife’s grumbling under her breath about his constant meddling in their daughters’ affairs—“I don’t know when he’ll grow up”—and her admonishments that he not be so childish. Yet in matters of social ritual, he retains the gravitas of his role. His eldest daughter is at great pains to secure his approval for her marriage plans, as she anxiously queries her mother: “Have you mentioned it yet [to Pak]?” The film’s narrative and mise-en-scène thus present us with a patriarchy characterized, in the earlier part of the film, in affectionate comedic antics and gestures. The developmental anachronism the text stages between Pak’s position (father) and behavior (as childish) allegorizes the developmental anachronisms he figures for the nation.

Two scenes, one early in the film, one late, parallel each other and indicate the charged and contradictory stakes of this anachronism. In the first, one of Pak’s customers, charmed by his provincial manner, invites him in for “Western liquor” and a snack. He comes up from the flooring, wiping his feet and hiding them from the woman, to sit in a chair at the table with her (traditionally, Koreans ate seated on the floor at low tables). The woman chortles, albeit lovingly, at his unfamiliarity with a Western table setting. She then proceeds to report that her maid tells her his family and the successes of his children are the envy of the entire neighborhood. Here and in the comedic scenes mentioned above, Pak’s traditional patriarchal role is portrayed endearingly precisely because of his anachronistic ways and line of work. His community and his family play along with his domestic and familial authority precisely because his social authority has been displaced.

Yet this portrayal has a dark side as well. In one scene, Pak hits his eldest daughter, an event that the film then comments upon by depicting a captive rat, racing furiously in his wheel to the sounds of high-pitched, hysterical music. Similarly, the sequence with Pak’s charmed customer mentioned above is answered later with another, much more sinister visit. Attended by melodramatic hyperbole—a violin crescendo, thunder, and lightning—Pak meets with the villainous aunt of the orphaned young man who would like to marry his second daughter, Myŏng-son. Myŏng-son has earlier begged her father to wear Western clothes for this meeting, but he stubbornly refuses. The aunt, who has recently returned from Hawai’i, where she has immigrated, has summoned him to her sumptuous home because his daughter’s intended is her ward. Pak enters the home to the sound of a bulldog barking, foreshadowing the woman to come. The décor is pointedly marked as foreign, from its television set to the prominently placed Japanese-style floral arrangement. The aunt has called him there to inform him that his daughter is not a suitable match for her nephew, given her family’s elevated social standing. Before explaining her real motives, though, she goads him, asking if he knows why she has called him. Pak speaks naively of his daughter’s charms and of the praise she has garnered in their neighborhood. When the aunt...
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offers Pak tea, she silently ridicules his ignorance as he opens the tea bag into the water. Gone is any neighborhood mitigation of class difference. She tells him outright that he is ignorant and unlearned (musik) and that "laborers are meant to marry laborers." At this point the melodramatic storm and its musical accompaniment envelop the scene.

The nakedness of this scene serves as an epiphany for Pak; the humiliation of this encounter—in such stark contrast with the loving coddling of his family and neighborhood—becomes a call to action. He is thrown out of the house, and the longest shot of the film captures him silently leaning against the high walls of the fortress-like house. To the filmic accompaniment of scenes from his past, he walks away, stooped over, reminiscing about the hardships of labor and of the rearing of his children. He goes to his neighborhood bar and sits alone as the furious thunder and lightning rage on.

Meeting his son, Pak immediately asks him what it is that one does with a tea bag and then weeps in the knowledge of his humiliation. He proclaims, "Others say that you are the children of a good family, but you are nothing but the children of a flue-repairman. People look down on you. How will I ever be able to bear the burden of my regret?" He vows to work himself to the bone to send his children to college. His meeting with his son at this moment is similar to another salient thematic arc in this film; its central couple involves neither of Pak's daughters nor his wife, but is rather Pak's relationship with this, his only son (played by major film star Kim Jin-gyu). At many points in the film, the two are portrayed almost as lovers, encircled in greenery, holding hands, in teary raptures, with requisite musical accompaniment. Early on, we hear the father proclaim to his son, in the midst of his consternation about Myong-sun, "You are the only one I trust."

Pak's son has been asked by his boss at the pharmaceutical company to consider a placement abroad in Thailand. When he broke this news to his father, Pak asked, "Are you the only one they can send? If you leave I have no one else to trust—don't leave!" The son had pleaded, explaining that this was the only way for him to advance, to rise up in the world (ch'ulse), but Pak persisted: "What if you die in a plane crash? The neighborhood people all say that you are filial... I didn't raise you to go abroad." Now, in the storm of this melodramatic moment, Pak decides that his son must go abroad, that he must allow him to garner the capital of a new era. He tells him, "Go and succeed in Thailand," and walks off to a melodramatic dirge.

With the visit to the vicious aunt, Pak (and the spectator) is made cruelly aware of his displacement—albeit, and importantly, away from the local eye of his family or neighborhood. He retaliates with decisions in step with the times. In this way, he safeguards his ego and makes the patriarchal proclamation that sanctions his son's departure. It is thus the father whose restored ego or subjectivity insures domestic harmony and, in this case, the upward mobility of the next generation.

The film's final scenes are the son's wedding and his immediate departure for Thailand afterward. In these scenes Pak is featured in a Western suit. The wedding is a teary celebration of the son's fealty; the son proclaims his sadness to be leaving, and the father and son leave the festivities for a teary embrace. The son tells Pak to live with hope. As the plane takes off, we see the son crying inside. Pak retreats as the music swells, muttering to himself that the plane better be strong and that his son should return with children. He then walks off down a peaceful tree-lined street of Korea's yesteryear.

This film's melodramatic flourishes and plot structure dramatize South Korea's social transformation and the vicissitudes of personal mobility. The film's tensions—the parallel sway and anachronism of patriarchy, Pak's simultaneous triumph and defeat, and the competition between nostalgia and a brave new world—invite a rich array of commentary and reflection on a changing world.

In this film and many more of this era we find the delicate play of male subjectivity amidst precarious social times and considerable status anxiety. The medium of film is apt here: it allows patriarchy to be staged such that it emerges simultaneously as exaggerated, pitiful (melodramatic), and absurd (comedic), but nonetheless intermittently powerful. Pak is humiliated by his ignorance of a changing world and thus stands for more than his personal predicament. Here we can also recall The Movieganger: draping an afghan over her husband, pitying his efforts at anachronistic employment, while at once bemoaning her fate to have married a man of such ambition rather than the "comfortable... good father" typified by actor Kim Sung-ho and by Pak in the film. The ambivalent male gaze of this popular Golden Age movie speaks to prevailing and long-standing ways in which (social and national) displacement have been gendered and narrated in South Korea generally, and particularly for the generation of women featured in this essay.

Often the most melodramatic moments in personal and film narratives—when the sky suddenly trembles in rumbles of thunder (in a film) or a story builds to an emotional climax (in a woman's personal story)—are those that assert the links between the personal and the social. These
links are evidenced in the narration of the "loss of male subjectivity" in its melodramatic, and hence dialogic, context. A dialogic approach to this narration mirrors the academic debates on melodrama with which I began. It is precisely because stories of male displacement are inextricable from the social or political context, that patriarchy is necessarily staged and narrated with considerable ambivalence. Melodrama, then, has been a mode well suited to the narration of self and nation over the course of South Korea's tumultuous social transformation. In a similar mode, in their own narratives and in their (film) viewing pleasure, middle-aged South Korean women have often voiced an ambivalent position on the excesses of patriarchy. Golden Age film has been a willing accomplice in contemporary South Korea.

Notes
2. See Abelmann, Melodrama of Mobility.
7. See also Jinoo An, chapter 3, and Reehyeung Lee, chapter 9, in this volume.
15. See also Jinoo An, chapter 3, and Keehyeung Lee, chapter 9, in this volume.
21. Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 55–56; see also Mulvey, "Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home."
In modern Korean literature, the 1913 sinp’a work Changhanmong (A Long and Sorrowful Dream) by Cho Ilche has taken on historical significance as the earliest example of Korean melodrama. Sinp’a is Korea’s modern melodrama that was imported from Japan (shimpa in Japanese) and quickly became a major popular genre in Korea at the turn of the century. Adapted from the famous Japanese shimpa drama Kônjikiyasha by Ozaki Koyo, Changhanmong features a turbulent love triangle between a woman and two men who represent opposing social values. Sim Sunae and Yi Suil are in love with each other. Sim’s family, however, pressures her to marry a wealthy man, Kim Chungbae. She resists, but then consents to marry Kim, whom she dearly does not love. She comes to regret her decision, feeling great guilt for her betrayal of Yi. Meanwhile, a resentful Yi becomes a greedy moneylender, hoping to take revenge on Sim with his new wealth. As both lovers choose a path counter to their desire, they become the victims of circumstance: namely, money-driven reality. This “antinomy between action [following money] and thought [following love]” illustrates the distinctive feature of sinp’a drama. The drama, however, ends happily. Sim becomes insane due to her guilt, but Yi’s forgiveness and resumed love resuscitate her at the end. This resolution departs from the original Japanese work, which ends with the female protagonist’s suicide. Critics have pointed out Changhanmong’s happy ending follows the optimistic worldview of the traditional Korean narrative arts where the good are always rewarded and the bad are punished.

A crucial yet largely overlooked element, however, makes Changhanmong a distinctively modern form of Korean melodrama: the theme of Christianity. When Sim and Yi reunite after a long agonizing separation, they explicitly speak of forgiveness and salvation; they are able to resolve misunderstandings, overcome ordeals, and finally bring back their