

PART II

Style

The *Après* Girl

Character and Plot

Madame Freedom (1956) opens with a depiction of contemporary Korea in a state of flux. The first several shots reveal a menacing, onrushing modernity as cars and buses jam the nighttime streets of downtown Seoul, their blinding headlights casting pedestrians into harsh relief as they try to navigate the streets, their cacophonous horns creating a sense of discord. The following shot, however, reveals a quiet residential neighborhood of traditional *hanok* houses, whose tiled roofs and glowing windows suggest the ongoing vitality of traditional modes of living. A slow tracking movement brings viewers to the door of one of these houses, and a dissolve transports them inside. The first interior shot, a close-up, centers on a shiny electric iron gliding across a piece of clothing. As the camera pulls back, it reveals a seemingly cozy domestic scene: a mother plies the iron on the floor, as her young son does homework at a small desk and her husband immerses himself in a newspaper with a charcoal brazier warming his feet. The contented tone quickly sours, however. When the son requests assistance with his homework, the mother, occupied with her ironing, asks her husband to help him. He blithely ignores her, prompting his wife to scowl and mutter “How callous.” “I’m busy with my manuscripts,” says the husband as he gets up and leaves the room, avoiding her gaze. “You always say that,” retorts the wife bitterly, as she puts down her iron and turns to her son. Clearly this is not the first such exchange, suggesting an ongoing conflict within what viewers would recognize as an arranged marriage (figure 10).

This scene introduces a debate about modernization that will run through the rest of the film. The debate is not one of tradition versus modernity. This middle-class nuclear family, with access to electricity, sufficient resources to buy labor-saving devices, and no cohabiting in-laws, is clearly embarked on a modern life.¹



FIGURE 10. Mme Oh (Kim Jeong-rim) with her electric iron, husband, and son in the opening scene of *Madame Freedom* (1956). (Courtesy KOFA)

Rather, the tension is between a feminized cosmopolitan and a masculinist cultural nationalist vision of Korean modernity. *Madame Freedom* explores this tension through the melodramatic conflict of an unhappy marriage. Oh Seon-yeong, also called Madame Oh, embodies a vision of cosmopolitan modernity: she is a modern woman who welcomes the influx of Western culture as a means of escape from a family life she finds constraining. Embracing the technological modernity of the electric iron (like the ones featured in *Yŏwŏn*), she expresses a desire for a corresponding social modernity: she wants her husband's assistance in raising their son (a variation, perhaps, on Lee Tai-young's pink- and blue-trimmed aprons). Her husband, Professor Jang, serves as a figure of cultural nationalist modernity. Shielding himself from his wife's demands with the newspaper, he enjoys the masculine privileges represented by the traditional brazier, which warms his feet alone. Serene in his patriarchal role, he dismisses the idea that he should take on any share of woman's work and is blind to his wife's disaffection with the dynamics of traditional family life. He turns away from her (and her shiny electric iron) to immerse himself in the study of the nation's cultural heritage.

With this chapter I begin my inquiry into Cold War cosmopolitanism as a film style, focusing on how it is embedded in the characterization of the modern woman

as she appears in Han's films. In crafting his film around the conflict between husband and wife, Han dramatized competing ideas about women's status that were playing out simultaneously in the debate over the revision of the Family Law. Was a woman in the 1950s still defined through her role as daughter, wife, and mother within a patriarchal family, and thus as a vessel of Confucian virtue and Korean national essence? Or was she an individual, as in the liberal West, someone whose status was determined by her own choices and actions, and thus a modern subject in her own right?

To see *Madame Freedom* as staging a debate, rather than articulating a unified position, is to understand something about Han's prowess as a commercial artist. It is to recognize *Madame Freedom* as an ideologically open text that appealed to a broad range of viewers and perhaps to conflicting beliefs within individual viewers. Han put a changing society up on screen and invited viewers to enjoy it from their own perspective. In a period of social transformation such as the 1950s, when many traditional values were being questioned but not wholly overthrown, such openness made good box office sense. It allowed a film to speak with multiple voices, some that went "with the grain" of a dominant discourse, and others that went "against the grain" to articulate emergent perspectives.

Through his female characters, Han translated the Cold War liberal ideology into what Mica Nava has called "visceral cosmopolitanism"—a structure of feeling in which a connection to the foreign is experienced at an immediate, personal level and thus accessible to ordinary women. In contrast to more elite forms of worldliness generated by international travel or higher education, visceral cosmopolitanism is an everyday experience in which the "allure of elsewhere and others" is encountered in the city street, the shop, and the dance floor. Accessed through commercial forms of culture, it is often experienced as feeling and desire and becomes a means of making sense of a rapidly shifting social order.²

Cold War cosmopolitanism found expression in Han's films via a new type of cinematic character: the female individual. In crafting his female characters, Han tapped into emergent ideas about women that were circulating widely in public culture—in US propaganda, in *Yōwōn* magazine, in the daily lives of working women, and in the public utterances of feminists such as Helen Kim and Lee Tai-young—but were not yet normative. Amidst the influx of Western ideas, Han's characters attempt to liberate themselves from patriarchal constraints and remake themselves as autonomous agents. They are members of an avant-garde, navigating the opportunities and hazards of a new society as it is taking shape around them. They are emblems of modern selfhood, the embodiment of what Steven Chung has called the "liberatory-utopian promises of postwar reconstruction,"³ and they carry the ideals of autonomous personhood that America's cultural Cold Warriors were promoting as the foundation of modern life. Han's female characters thus served as one of the most important sites within postwar public culture where a vision of Cold War cosmopolitan feminism was articulated.

THE APRÈS GIRL

What happens when a middle-class married woman leaves her home? This is the question that *Madame Freedom* poses. Mme Oh is a professor's wife who takes a job at the Paris Boutique, a Western luxury-goods shop, and embraces the new Western culture that is sweeping through Seoul. Her pursuit of "freedom," along with her exploration of what that concept means for a woman, drives the plot and gives the film its title. The film depicts the development of a woman's capacity for agency and her growing willingness to exercise it in the public realm. After making her first independent decision to take the paying job, Mme Oh subsequently chooses to discontinue her unpaid domestic duties. She rarely returns home after work, instead spending her newfound leisure time in cafés and restaurants with her friend Mme Choi, who entangles her in a scheme to smuggle in the foreign luxury goods that she sells at the shop and has come to enjoy herself. As her independence of mind develops, Mme Oh violates social conventions at will, unafraid of the gossip her actions stir up. In keeping with her new financial and social autonomy, Mme Oh decides to pursue her own sexual pleasure. Unhappy in her arranged marriage, she enters into a dalliance with her neighbor Mr. Shin, a college student about to depart for America, who teaches her how to dance. While practicing this new American skill at a dance hall, she initiates an affair with her female boss's husband, Mr. Han. As all of this is unfolding, she increasingly treats her mild-mannered (and poorly paid) professor husband with disdain, lying to him about her activities and ignoring the pleadings of her dutiful young son, who spends the entire film doing homework. She is not a wholly sympathetic character. Meanwhile, Professor Jang embarks on his own, more chaste, relationship with an attractive young woman. The film reaches its climax when Mme Oh is caught in a hotel room with her married lover and slapped across the face by his angry wife. In a brief conclusion, a humiliated Mme Oh walks through the nighttime streets and returns to her home, where she submits to her husband's chastisement of her as a shameless woman.

Mme Oh is an *apure kol*, or "après girl." Heir to the colonial era's "modern girl," the après girl was one of the 1950s' most prominent cultural figures of modernity. The term was derived from the French expression *après guerre*, meaning "after the war," and it evoked the social and cultural changes ushered in by the Korean War. To be "après" implied a willed break from the Confucian virtues that had defined Korean womanhood for centuries and continued to have broad currency. The après girl was assertive rather than selfless, sexually bold rather than chaste, and active in public rather than sequestered in the home. As Charles Kim has shown, novelists, reporters, and essayists produced a catalogue of stock après girl characters who populated postwar magazines and newspapers. These included the masculinized "contemporary girl" who rejects the role of housewife and mother and instead pursues a materialistic lifestyle; the snooty "university student" who

thinks she's smarter than a man; the "gye madam," or money-grubbing housewife, who participates in a savings club and lends out money; and the "liberated wife," a middle-class or affluent housewife who pursues her personal pleasure as a consumer of leisure, entertainment, and imported goods.⁴ Après girls engage in conspicuous consumption and spend their time dancing, going to the movies, and dating. Sexually emancipated, they date foreigners, pursue sex for pleasure rather than procreation, and seek to choose their own husbands rather than entering into arranged marriages.⁵ Above all, the après girl challenged the foundational principle that women were inferior to men and thus subject to their authority.

Han Hyung-mo populated *Madame Freedom* with the full range of après girls. Part of the film's success derived from Han's ability to put this new social type up on screen in all her permutations. Mme Oh's friend Mme Choi is a "gye madam" who runs a money club. Her niece, Myeong-ok, is a self-important "university student" who embraces Western notions of love and romance and peppers her speech with English words. Miss Park, her husband's love interest, is a fashionable "contemporary girl" who works in an American office. It was Mme Oh herself, however, who captured public attention as the quintessential "liberated housewife." Mme Oh's decision to shed her familial obligations and pursue her individual feelings was a shocking violation of social norms that prioritized duty to others over indulgence of self. *Madame Freedom* was scandalous, and thus deeply attractive to audiences.

Mme Oh liberates herself by turning towards the world beyond Korea's borders. When she leaves her home for the first time, Mme Oh crosses a small but symbolic bridge that separates her home from the street. In doing so, she reveals her characterological DNA: Han is introducing into postwar cinema a female protagonist modeled on Ibsen's Nora, whose departure from home in *A Doll's House* (1879) made her a global icon of early feminism. Crossing the bridge marks Mme Oh's transition out of a private space marked as Korean and into a public space marked as cosmopolitan. In the street, Mme Oh ceases to be a "wise mother, good wife" tending selflessly to her husband and son's needs. Instead, she moves freely amid the colonial architecture of downtown Seoul, making her way towards a paying job at a shop named for the capital of France. Leaving her *hanok* behind, she banters with her handsome young neighbor, Mr. Shin, about the German poet Goethe, Western ideals of romantic love, and the possibilities for individual freedom. Modern technology displaces the washtub and washboard at which she had previously labored, as she allows herself to be photographed by Mr. Shin and swept away in an American car by her friend Mme Choi. As the film progresses, she continues to encounter "abroad" indirectly in her everyday life. Mme Oh's cosmopolitanism is intimate and emotional, sensory and tactile. She wears a fitted gray suit, perms her hair, and applies lipstick to her mouth (figure 11). She handles imported perfume and purses. She eats steak with a fork and knife. She listens to jazz and waltzes in the arms of men who are not her husband. She kisses her lover. In all these ways, she embraces the Cold War's "ideology of freedom" as a



FIGURE 11. Visceral cosmopolitanism: Mme Oh applies lipstick in *Madame Freedom*. (Courtesy KOFA)

structure of feeling rather than as a political imperative. As Mica Nava notes, such visceral cosmopolitanism is dialogic in nature, embracing the foreign as a source of “counter-identification” that exists in tension with a nationalist traditionalism associated with the masculine. A form of “psychic revolt,” this type of cosmopolitanism expresses “a desire to escape *from* family, home and country” and into a space of greater personal freedom that is identified with the foreign.⁶

Professor Jang, in sharp contrast to his wife, is a scholar of Korea’s national language. Given the suppression of the Korean language during the colonial era and the centuries-long use of Chinese characters among Sinocentric elites, Professor Jang’s linguistic expertise has strong nationalist overtones. It also resonated with the postcolonial drive to teach *hangul*, the Korean alphabet, in the public schools and to use it exclusively in print culture.⁷ In his spare time Professor Jang teaches Korean grammar to women who work in an American office. As a masculine authority figure, he guides them towards a deeper understanding of their national culture and, perhaps, offsets the lure of their American surroundings. It is through this class that he meets and enters into a chaste romance with Miss Park, one of his students. Neither Professor Jang nor Miss Park is an emblem of unadulterated tradition. Professor Jang allows his wife to choose whether to take the job at

the Paris Boutique, and the elegant Miss Park wears the latest in Euro-American fashions and presumably speaks English with her American coworkers. Rather, they embody the ideal of “wholesome modernization,” which emphasized the adaptation of select Western norms in public life while preserving the “essence” of Koreanness in the private realm of personal relations. Miss Park is distinguished from Mme Oh primarily by her attitude towards sexuality and autonomy. While Mme Oh rejects her husband’s authority and pursues her sexual desires independently of him, the chaste Miss Park admires Professor Jang and eagerly submits herself to him as a student of Koreanness. For Professor Jang and Miss Park, as with the opponents of the reform of the Family Law, the submission of a woman’s sexuality and autonomy to the authority of a man is inseparable from an essential Koreanness that must not be sacrificed. The maintenance of gender hierarchy forms the core of the “fine, beautiful customs” that must be preserved.

Representations of the après girl in print and on screen were often derisive, depicting her as frivolous and debauched. She was an emblem of cultural inauthenticity and national betrayal, much as the modern girl had been in the 1920s. Some scholars have argued that the après girl was a stalking horse produced by patriarchal nationalists who regarded any threat to male authority as a threat to the fledgling nation. As Chungmoo Choi has written, “South Korean male nationalists . . . turn misogynic eyes” towards what they regard as overly westernized women, “not only because these women challenge traditional patriarchal authority but also because their familiarity with (materially superior, masculine) American culture may lead them to collaborate with the dominating foreign forces.” The ideological effect of the debased après girl, according to this reading, was to reaffirm the Confucian virtues that she violated and to maintain the subordination of women to the patriarchal family.⁸

I believe it is a mistake to accept this reading of the après girl as an exclusively reactionary construct. I want to recuperate her, instead, as a complex cultural figure whose meaning was not so singular and coherent. The après girl, I suggest, was a richly ambivalent cultural figure of modernity—a complex icon for the benefits, as well as the costs, of Korea’s postcolonial, postwar, and Cold War modernity.

READING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Madame Freedom is a melodrama, and it conforms to many of the conventions initially established in nineteenth-century European literature and polished by Hollywood in women’s pictures from the 1930s to the 1950s. A woman’s experiences occupy the center of the narrative, which focuses on the loosening of family bonds. Emotions are privileged over dramatic action, with music helping to express those sentiments that can’t be fully articulated, and themes of impotence, loss, and entrapment—within a social role, within a physical space—develop. Melodrama takes shape in periods of social unease. According to literary scholar Peter Brooks,

“melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue.” Moral conflicts are at the heart of melodrama, as characters struggle with shifting social norms and challenges to once-secure ethical imperatives. “The ritual of melodrama,” writes Brooks, “involves the confrontation of clearly identified antagonists and the expulsion of one of them.”⁹ Endings thus take on added significance, as the moment in which the social order is purged and the moral order affirmed. *Madame Freedom* localizes these global conventions, shaping their expression around the specificities of Korean culture and contemporary life in Seoul.

Many critics of the film, in keeping with Brooks’s approach to melodrama, have emphasized the restoration of patriarchal authority that takes place in the film’s final scene. It is an unambiguous scene of punishment, in which Professor Jang finally asserts his full masculine authority over his wayward wife. Physically barring Mme Oh from reentering the house, he angrily rebukes her for bringing shame on the family. “Driven by vanity,” he chastises, “you have abandoned your family. You gladly exchanged your duties as a mother. With what honor did you come back?” Mme Oh passively accepts this condemnation and verbally takes responsibility for the disruption of the family. The scene visualizes this restoration of the patriarchal family order with great clarity: Mme Oh crouches at her husband’s feet as he berates her (figure 12), and in the film’s final shot she kneels on the ground to embrace her son while her husband towers above them both, standing in the middle of the little bridge that she had crossed with such eagerness at the film’s outset. These are powerful images that reaffirm the Confucian principle of sexual difference and hierarchy and that validate the patriarchal authority of the father. Mme Oh’s assertion of individuality is voided as she is sutured back into her familial relationships. Her cosmopolitan affiliations likewise fade as she stands in front of her *hanok*, dressed in a *hanbok*, and is confronted by her husband who also wears *hanbok* beneath his overcoat. Her full reincorporation into the family remains uncertain as she remains outside the home, however. The public street in which she once conversed about Goethe has been restored to its ancient status as a site of female humiliation and shame.

Many scholars have read “with the grain” of this ending, accepting Professor Jang as the film’s mouthpiece who delivers its critique of the corrupting effects of liberal American culture. This is a dominant reading, one that the film makes easy to arrive at and that echoes scholars’ reading of the *après* girl as a conservative foil. Steven Chung, for instance, reads this scene, and the film as a whole, as delivering “moral lessons, elaborate illustrations of the pitfalls of sexual and social freedom.” He identifies the ending as an act of “conversion,” in which the “remorseful” woman is restored to “cultural tradition” and her proper position within the domestic sphere.¹⁰ Byun Jai-ran in turn, describing Mme Oh’s downfall



FIGURE 12. Patriarchy restored in *Madame Freedom*'s final scene. (Courtesy KOFA)

as the film's "inevitable conclusion," argues that the film "adheres to the point of view of that generation's male moralists, who rebuke the sexual depravity of women." While the film depicts Mme Oh's escape from patriarchal domesticity, "the gender ideology in the film seems to be a new form of regulation imposed on liberated women rather than a liberation of women." Han, says Byun, treats Mme Oh as a "dangerous woman" who must ultimately be contained: it is "a film that tries to limit 'Madame Freedom' and warns people of the danger associated with her rather than praising the female protagonist." Other scholars have likewise argued that the film ends up reinforcing the very patriarchal values that Mme Oh had challenged: "the film is clearly a cautionary tale about the dangers of freedom and sexual desire on the part of women."¹¹

In contrast to these scholars, I want to read against the grain of the plot's patriarchal conclusion. As Thomas Elsaesser has written, film melodramas invite a contrapuntal reading of style in relation to narrative because they invest so much expressive capacity in the formal register. Much of a melodrama's meaning, then, is expressed through the skillful deployment of film form, in which colorful nuances of style undercut the clarity of a black-and-white moral universe.¹² By paying attention to *Madame Freedom*'s style, we can see how the film is not simply a conservative critique of its female protagonist: while the film's narrative arc endorses a

patriarchal vision of domestic containment, some of the film's other formal properties do not.

I want to explore here the meaning-making abilities of the film in two ways. I begin by charting the construction of the "textual spectator," which is to say the formal properties of the film that structure any viewer's relationship to the characters. I then consider how the film's meaning might have been constructed by a "historical spectator"—an actual person watching the film in South Korea in 1956—who had access to other texts and experiences that were available at the same time. Together, these approaches reveal a far more nuanced vision of the film's *après* girl protagonist than scholars have so far recognized.

The question of viewer identification is crucial to understanding *Madame Freedom's* full meaning. Miriam Hansen, in her discussion of Shanghai cinema of the 1930s, argued that the "contradictions of modernity are enacted through the figure of the woman, very often, literally, across the body of the woman who tries to live them but more often than not fails." The woman's failure to navigate the transition to modernity—expressed at the level of narrative—is not, however, the key issue for Hansen. Rather, her significance as a character is that she offered new "models of identification for being modern." She offered new subjectivities to historical viewers, new ways for women in the audience to "imagine their own strategies of survival, performance, and sociality, to make sense of living in the interstices of radically unequal times, places, and conditions."¹³ This question of identification is central to *Madame Freedom's* meaning-making. Although Professor Jang stands in for postcolonial traditionalism's socially dominant view of Korea's path to modernity, the film makes it very difficult to identify with him. Rather, it is Mme Oh whom the film constructs as the viewer's primary object of identification and proxy.

I want to begin reading against the grain of the film's ending by situating Han's film in relation to the best-selling novel of the same title from which it was adapted. Written by Jeong Bi-seok and originally published in 215 installments in the *Seoul sinmun* between January and August of 1954, the novel was an immediate *succes de scandale*, boosting the paper's daily circulation by 50,000 and driving conversations throughout the city for months. When it was published in book form later that year it sold 140,000 copies, making it Korea's first best seller.¹⁴ With its popularity, the novel did much to establish the *après* girl character in print culture. Many filmmakers were attracted to the novel because of its tremendous popularity, but Jeong decided to sell the film rights to Han and producer Bang Dae-hun because he valued them as skilled filmmakers and trusted that the film would not be a "failure."¹⁵ And indeed, Han's film remains faithful to the novel in many respects, reproducing much of its story, narrative structure, characters, settings, and themes. Han follows Jeong's lead, for example, in casting Mme Oh as a revolutionary, Nora-like figure swept up in the social changes of the period. "Revolution does not necessarily mean that shots be heard and blood be spilled"

wrote Jeong in the novel. “There can be bloodless revolution, peaceful revolution. Seventy years ago, a woman named Nora left behind her child and husband and ran away from the doll’s house. At the time, it was one kind of revolution.”¹⁶

Han’s departures from the novel, however, are crucial to the film’s meaning. One major point of departure involves the structuring of reader versus viewer identification. In the novel, Jeong deploys an authoritative third-person omniscient narrator who comments directly on the characters’ thoughts and actions and firmly guides the reader’s sympathies towards Professor Jang. The narrator consistently presents Professor Jang’s thoughts and actions favorably, while assuming an overtly negative stance towards those of his wife. The narrator presents Mme Oh, for instance, as having only a very superficial understanding of the ideals of freedom and democracy, concepts that the novel takes pains to explore. The narrator describes Professor Jang as wanting “to teach proper democratic ideology to his wife,” a lesson that Mme Oh does not understand because she “confused freedom and license.” Where Mme Oh selfishly understands democracy as the freedom to engage in licentious behavior, Professor Jang affirms democracy as something that takes place within the family, and he puts forth an ideal of a more egalitarian relationship between husband and wife who yet retain much of their traditional social roles. Similarly, Mme Oh is “unaware of the importance of *hangul*,” the Korean alphabet that is her husband’s research specialty, and thus fails to realize the value of the “holy business” of her husband’s work.¹⁷ The narrator consistently contrasts the husband’s proper understanding of modernization with his wife’s improper one.¹⁸ The strong voice of the narrator, and its overt condemnation of Mme Oh, makes it difficult for the reader to fully identify with Mme Oh and to see her in ways other than those that the narrator suggests.

In Han’s film, however, the viewer has little choice *but* to identify with Mme Oh, despite her morally questionable behavior. Through the dexterous manipulation of film form, Han constructs a textual spectator that is closely aligned with his female protagonist. Han eschews the novel’s strong third-person narrator, thereby eliminating the authoritative voice that articulates patriarchal Confucian values. Instead, the film delegates control of the narrative to Mme Oh. The film allocates most of the screen time to her, charting her transformation from dutiful “wise mother, good wife” into an après girl in great detail, and allowing her choices and actions to drive the plot forward. The film relegates Professor Jang to the subplot, where he has limited screen time and even less control over the main plot’s momentum. Spending so much time with Mme Oh, the viewer learns the process of individual self-invention alongside her. She serves as the viewer’s proxy: when she leaves the house and enters the city, she brings the viewer along with her. Watching her, the viewer learns how to order coffee in a coffee shop, how to flirt with a man, how to put on lipstick and powder, how to dance to Western music, how to eat Western food, and even how to lie to one’s husband and dismiss his protestations against her behavior. Ultimately, the viewer learns how to escape the

patriarchal constraints on womanhood. By encouraging this identification with Mme Oh through temporal duration and on-screen presence, the film constructs its heroine as a mediatory figure who guides viewers through the very same tumultuous social conditions in which they, too, are immersed.

The film also cultivates the viewer's identification with Mme Oh by privileging the female gaze through editing and point-of-view shots. In a number of important scenes, as Kathleen McHugh has pointed out, both "the gaze and its object are emphatically *female*." Mme Oh's gaze is privileged in the women's luncheon scene, in which a series of point-of-view shots depicts Mme Oh and her friend Mme Choi "looking closely at the lavish jewelry and stylish clothes of their fellow club members." A similar exchange of "female-to-female gazes" takes place in the Paris Boutique, when Mme Oh's female boss watches her make a lucrative sale and winks at her with approval, a look that Mme Oh returns with a smile of pleasure. Han creates parallel point-of-view shots in the scenes where Mme Oh and her niece watch each other interact with Mr. Shin, who is later revealed to be toying with both of them: Mme Oh watches disapprovingly as her niece kisses Mr. Shin in the street, and the niece later glowers as Mme Oh dances with him at a dance hall.¹⁹ Finally, when Mme Oh and her lover are interrupted in the hotel room, it is a woman who charges in—the lover's wife and Mme Oh's boss—rather than Professor Jang, who has also learned of the affair. The spurned wife flips on the light in the darkened room and, seizing control of the camera, turns her furious, exposing gaze first upon the couple and then on each lover separately, both of whom visibly shrink and turn their faces away. (One can read Mr. Han's averted gaze as a textual acknowledgment of the 1953 adultery law that Lee Tai-young fought for and that for the first time criminalized the adulterous behavior of married men.) Her withering look is matched by a violent gesture, as she slaps Mme Oh across the face twice. Significantly, it is a female character who bears the powerful gaze of society that exposes and condemns this adulterous affair.

This privileging of the female gaze is another way that Han aligns the viewer with his female protagonist, while making it difficult for the viewer to identify with Professor Jang. Throughout the film, Han denies Professor Jang any correspondingly authoritative point-of-view shots of his wife. Unlike the women in the film, he is unable to control the camera's gaze. In many scenes with his wife, he either averts his gaze from her entirely or is deprived of a reverse shot to balance her gaze at him. Not until the final scene, when he chastises his wife, does the camera align generally with the husband's scornful look. Yet even here he is denied a fully subjective point-of-view shot, and the camera is positioned low on the ground alongside the crouching Mme Oh, capturing her upward look at him rather than his downward look at her. The viewer identifies here with Mme Oh's submission to patriarchal authority, rather than with the patriarchal male gaze itself. Han thus severely limits the camera's ability to fully express patriarchal subjectivity, impeding the viewer's ability to identify with male authority.

In privileging Mme Oh's subjectivity, the film reinforces her claim to autonomous selfhood. The careful deployment of film form succeeds in creating a unique and independent personhood that the viewer can recognize, thereby validating her experiences and her worldview. This alignment of the viewer with Mme Oh creates a cultural space in which viewers can inhabit, at least temporarily, an anti-patriarchal and cosmopolitan feminist consciousness. The film's style thus serves as an ideological counterweight to the final scene's work of narrative closure. This tension between style and narrative closure is itself historical evidence of the experience of modernity in the 1950s and the anxiety it generated. While the style allows the viewer to share in the expansion of a woman's possibilities, the narrative attempts to shut most of those possibilities down. Far from being a simple bearer of patriarchal ideology, then, the film should be read as historical evidence of the powerful challenges it was facing.

Han also made changes to the novel's plotting—specifically its ending—in ways that undermine its restoration of patriarchal authority. Author Jeong Bi-seok concluded his novel with a series of scenes in which Mme Oh fully and sincerely repents for her transgressions. In these scenes Mme Oh realizes that her husband has been right about the beauties of domesticity all along. It dawns on her that her husband was correct to see democracy not as individual license, as she had, but in terms of a household in which “the couple respects each other and collaborates.” Embracing her previously abandoned domestic role, she realizes that “the home that she had thought was a house of slavery was, now that she thought of it, not a house of slavery but a paradise.” She realizes that her “true freedom” was “in her living room” and not in “the street,” and it dawns on her “that she could have enjoyed all the freedom she wanted in her living room since her husband was a progressive scholar.” Undergoing a complete change of heart, she embraces all that she had previously rejected: her husband's authority, her home, her family, her role as wife and mother. The narrator amplifies Mme Oh's reversion: “Home! It didn't appear that women could have freedom or happiness away from home. Women's freedom and happiness can be achieved only on the foundation of marriage.” This ending reasserts a core tenet of Confucian gender ideology: that a woman's existential happiness can only be achieved within the collective structure of the family, in which she holds a subordinate position. After this realization, Mme Oh for the first time suffers emotionally the consequences of her actions and cries over the loss of her children, whom her husband, in accordance with Confucian norms, has forbidden her to see: “losing her rights as a wife and mother,” she laments, “was a bone-wrenching sorrow.” The novel wallows in Mme Oh's suffering: it renders her “homeless,” describes the “lump in her throat” and “her eyes brimmed with tears,” and lingers over her feelings of “wretchedness” as she wanders the street.²⁰ It also reaffirms the gendered division of space by reentrenching Mme Oh in the domestic space of the home.

The novel reaches its climax in a grandiose scene in which Professor Jang delivers a speech in the highly symbolic National Assembly building. A noted

linguist, Professor Jang has been called upon to speak about a proposed simplification of the Korean alphabet, a reform that he opposes on democratic grounds, arguing eloquently that a small number of people should not have the power to change the people's language when it is evolving naturally according to actual usage.²¹ With this speech Professor Jang becomes a symbol of the new nation and defender of its culture. Far from being "feudal," as his wife has so often characterized him, he is presented as a figure of authentic democratic and progressive ideals who is yet cautious about changing Korea's long-standing culture. While reading about this upcoming speech in a newspaper, Mme Oh has an epiphany wholly in keeping with the novel's patriarchal sensibility: "I was the most vicious and stupid wife!" Later, as she watches her husband speak in this nationally resonant space, she sees him with new eyes: he is "majestic," "sublime," "noble," and one of the true "representatives of Korea's 30,000,000 citizens."²² With this realization, Mme Oh undergoes a dramatic 180-degree transformation and embraces the very nationalist and patriarchal values that she had previously spurned. Her husband is restored to his position of patriarchal authority and redeemed in Mme Oh's eyes.

The ending of Han Hyung-mo's film is sharply different. There is no scene in the National Assembly, nor any patriotic defense of Korean culture. Neither is there any declamation of the tenets of patriarchal authority. At no point does Mme Oh express a renewed commitment to patriarchal ideals or express enthusiasm for her role as wife and mother, or even express any fondness for her husband. Above all, Mme Oh does not have an epiphany in which she sees her actions in a new light. She expresses regret for her actions only in the final thirty seconds of the film and only after getting caught in a hotel room with her lover, slapped in the face by his wife, and barred from her house by her husband. Even then, she can only deliver a single line of dialogue in which she takes responsibility for her actions without apologizing for them, and which she directs to her son rather than her husband: "It's all mom's fault." Mme Oh does physically submit to her husband's authority, wiping tears from her eyes and crouching at his feet as he chastises her, but she does so in a moment of extreme emotional duress and with no indication that she has actually changed her views. She submits because there exists no alternative course of action. In contrast to the novel, which devotes about thirty pages to Mme Oh's moral rehabilitation, the film's brief patriarchy-restoring ending feels quite rushed. In a film with a running time of over two hours, the final scene lasts only four minutes. The sudden reversal of her character from defiant to submissive happens so quickly that it rings somewhat false. The concluding minutes of screen time in which she is punished are hardly sufficient to counter the preceding two hours in which Mme Oh, with the viewer in tow, has been thoroughly enjoying herself. Despite the iconic power of the film's final shots, this abrupt act of narrative closure cannot fully counter the previous story time in which Mme Oh has acted as the viewer's surrogate, vicariously ushering her into a new modern

lifestyle and mentality. The ending may be an ideologically necessary conclusion, but it also constitutes something of a rupture in the viewing experience.

Which brings us to the historical spectator. It is always difficult to make claims about how ordinary viewers would have understood a film at the time of its release. We do know, however, that Han's revised ending caught the attention of at least one viewer inside Seoul's Sudo theater, the novel's author Jeong Bi-seok. In an otherwise positive newspaper article in which he praised the film's overall fidelity to his novel and acclaimed it as "a great work," Jeong reserved his lone negative comment for the ending. "I am very displeased with the ending of the film," he wrote. "In the novel, Seon-yeong . . . goes through many tribulations before she is 'purified' and realizes the true worth of Professor Jang Tae-yeon." Jeong was clearly troubled by the absence of Mme Oh's genuine repentance, and he lamented that "the intention of the novel" in this respect had clearly not been kept "intact."²³ Given the tremendous popularity of Jeong's book and its publication only two years before the film's release, it seems safe to assume that many viewers likewise read the film intertextually, mentally comparing Han's ending to the novel's, in which case what might have struck historical viewers—just as it struck the novel's author—was not so much the restoration of the husband's patriarchal authority as the flimsiness and insincerity of the wife's submission to it. Perhaps it was the absence of her genuine moral "purification" and her refusal to celebrate her husband's authority that resonated with viewers most deeply. While the reassertion of sexual hierarchy is powerfully made at the visual level in the final shots, the absence of any verbal assent to these values by Mme Oh is quite notable. In comparison to Mme Oh's explicit and repeated assertions of her renewed faith in patriarchy in the novel, her near silence in the film could be read as forced submission to, but not belief in, patriarchy.

As Scott Bukatman reminds us, however, historical spectators are not slaves to narrative closure. The experience of reception is vital to a film's meaning. Referring to women in Hollywood screwball comedies of the 1930s, Bukatman weighs the expressive power of extended screen time against the privileged position of the ending, and concludes that "5 minutes of 'good' behavior" by women at the end of a film "hardly obviates or obliterates the previous 85 minutes of their wreaking madcap havoc." The shocking sight of a powerful woman violating patriarchal norms, he suggests, likely had a greater impact on viewers' consciousness than did the brief, perfunctory scenes of punishment. Bukatman quotes Molly Haskell on the inability of Hollywood narratives to fully contain the power of the women up on screen:

Sure, they had to be punished every so often, particularly as women's real-life power in society and in the job market increased . . . As women represented real threats to male economic supremacy, movie heroines had to be brought down to fictional size, domesticated or defanged. But even so, and in the midst of mediocre material, [these stars] rose to the surface and projected, through sheer will and talent and charisma, images of emotional and intellectual power.²⁴

Feminist scholar Janey Place makes a similar argument about the treatment of women's sexuality in film noir. She argues that the "potent stylistic presentation" of the *femmes fatale*—via lighting, costume, cinematography—made a greater impression on viewers than did their obligatory punishment at the end. "It is not their inevitable demise we remember," writes Place, "but rather their strong, dangerous, and above all, exciting sexuality." Despite film noir's regressive ideology at the level of narrative, the "uniquely sensual visual style" through which they put powerful women on display often "overwhelms" these narratives completely.²⁵ These critical observations apply directly to Mme Oh, who both enters public life as a wage-earning worker at the moment that her husband is unable to maintain the family's middle-class status and displays a bold sexuality that threatens his authority. "Domesticated" and "defanged" as she is by the ending, the film can't quite undo the sheer volume of images devoted to her "will and talent and charisma."

Han's abrupt ending may have made it possible for viewers to experience *Madame Freedom* in a divided way. Film scholars have long noted Mme Oh's simultaneously "dangerous and desirable" appeal to viewers.²⁶ I want to suggest something different, namely, that the restoration of the familial patriarchal order at the end may have *allowed* female viewers—who were understood to be the primary audience for melodramas—to identify with Mme Oh's assertions of female autonomy, by protecting them from the psychic consequences of that identification. In other words, the punishment of Mme Oh at the end of the film in some sense enabled the prior scenes of Mme Oh's transgressive behaviors, by giving the viewer a free pass of plausible deniability. The restoration of traditional gender roles in the final scene is not necessarily the true expression of the film's meaning, but can instead be seen as a rhetorical device. If the body of the film allowed the viewer to temporarily inhabit Mme Oh's assertive individualism—to "try it on," as it were—the patriarchal ending allows the viewer to step back out into a more familiar female subjectivity. The ending is thus not necessarily a conservative endorsement of patriarchal control, but rather an acknowledgment that patriarchy is still a powerful force in society.

Film viewers in the 1950s—*Madame Freedom's* historical spectators—would have had plenty of experience recognizing the ideological reversal of the abrupt ending and choosing whether to embrace it as central to the film's meaning or disregard it as peripheral. Korean cinema had been subject to censorship since the early twentieth century, and these regulations shaped the endings of many films. Colonial-era films, which were subject to Japanese censorship laws, often had tacked-on endings that affirmed Japanese imperial values or articulated support for the colonial enterprise. Choi In-kyu's *Street Angels* (1941)—the film that launched Han Hyung-mo into a film career—stands as a fine example. While the body of film largely sidesteps colonial ideology in its story about the creation of a group home for orphaned Korean boys, a brief moment in the final scene depicts the boys gathered below a Japanese flag and pledging allegiance to the Empire. This ending provides political cover for an ideologically ambivalent film

that could be seen as asserting the viability of self-governing Korean institutions, and brings it into alignment with censorship rules forbidding any advocacy of Korean independence. This brief episode is very efficient: the image of Korean children bowing to a Japanese flag condenses the dense web of imperial ideology, and especially the idea of Korean-Japanese unification, into a single, instantly legible image. Such a tacked-on ending opened the film up to multiple readings by diversely situated viewers. Those who supported the colonial enterprise, such as censorship officials, could focus on the ending and project its values back onto the body of the film, while those who valued the film's vision of a Korean community free from Japanese oversight could disregard the ending and focus on the body of the film alone. Politically inflected films of the postwar 1950s often had similarly abrupt endings that papered over ideological contradictions. *Piagol* (1955), for instance, tells a nuanced story about a female North Korean partisan guerilla who proves herself morally stronger than her male comrades. When the film ran into trouble with Rhee's censorship office for being too sympathetic to its North Korean characters, director Lee Kang-cheon solved the problem by inserting an ideologically correct ending. Like *Street Angels*, its final shot resorted to the condensed shorthand of an icon. It superimposed a fluttering ROK flag—redolent with associations of anticommunism and opposition to North Korea—over a shot of the heroine walking out of the mountains, visually affirming that she has renounced communist ideology and is on her way to joining the South Korean nation. These addendums allowed filmmakers to explore controversial characters and stories in depth simply by adding a brief, ideologically correct ending.

Madame Freedom ran into its own censorship difficulties, based on its sexual content. Forced to meet the censors' demands, Han trimmed the offending scenes and cut several minutes from the film's running length. But Han also, like Choi In-kyu and Lee Kang-cheon, concluded his film with an instantly legible iconic image—kneeling woman, standing man—that, like the Japanese or ROK flag, functioned as visual shorthand for a dense web of meaning. Han Hyung-mo called attention to the ideological work of the ending when he publicly defended his movie against the censors by characterizing it as an “educational” film that could teach viewers a “lesson” about the consequences of depraved behavior.²⁷ Scholars who have taken Han's characterization at face value as an expression of the film's conservative intent have ignored its instrumentality as a defense against censors' demands to cut the film. We can read the “educational” ending as self-serving on Han's part, allowing him to depict his heroine's social transgressions in great detail by briefly condemning them at the end.

THE FEMININE '50s

Madame Freedom launched the “feminine '50s” as a distinct moment in Korean cinema history. The film's success at the box office stimulated an outpouring of modern melodramas that depicted women grappling with the social and economic

transformations of modernization. Strong, independent-minded women had appeared in several films released in the preceding eighteen months, such as Han's *The Hand of Destiny* (1954), Lee Kang-cheon's *Piagol*, and Park Nam-ok's *The Widow* (1955). But it was *Madame Freedom* that proved the commercial viability of the woman-centered modern drama. The film's success emboldened other directors, who began producing a steady flow of films featuring *après* girl characters who challenged patriarchal norms in the realms of work, family, and sexuality. Popular with viewers, these women's pictures dominated theaters for the rest of the decade.

Alongside the visual culture of *Yŏwŏn* magazine, these films cemented the figure of the modern woman as a central mechanism through which the transformations of postwar society were debated. Many of these films depicted what Eunsun Cho has called "women out of familial order": women who venture into public life and take on social roles beyond the familiar ones of filial daughter, self-sacrificing mother, powerful mother-in-law, and chaste widow.²⁸ As *après* girls and Korean Noras, they struggle to become the modern selves that Ibsen's heroine aspired to. Some of these women succeed admirably. In Lee Yong-min's *Holiday in Seoul* (1956), Yang Mi-hee plays a childless obstetrician in a happy companionate marriage who protects vulnerable women from suffering at the hands of men: she defends one pregnant young woman from abuse by her father and a seducer, and saves the life of an older woman, whose husband is a murderer, during a difficult childbirth. Other characters fare less well. When a naive coffee-shop waitress (Um Aing-ran) in Gwon Yeong-sun's *A Drifting Story* (1960) puts her ideas about free love into practice by having sex before marriage with a man who doesn't truly love her, she gets pregnant, has an abortion, becomes a prostitute, loses her mind, and ends up killing herself. Still others occupy a middle ground, such as Sonia (Choi Eun-hee) in Shin Sang-ok's *Flower in Hell* (1958), a worldly and morally corrupt prostitute who creates the life she wants for herself, yet ends up dead at the hands of her lover. Taken together, these films create a continuum of modern female characters whose lives, and fates, vary.

Han Hyung-mo holds a privileged position within the "feminine '50s." Between 1954 and 1967 he directed more than a dozen modern dramas featuring *après* girl characters who systematically violate Confucian gender precepts and counter-identify with liberal Western values. He produced the largest and most consistent body of films that feature Korean women as individuals. Han's characters were not sociologically representative, as many of them belonged to the numerically small middle or elite classes. They did, however, offer visions of future possibility, ways of being a Korean woman that were becoming imaginable if not yet common in the 1950s. As he did with *A Jealousy* (1960), Han popularized some of the ideas that feminists such as Helen Kim and Lee Tai-young were expressing in more intellectual venues, although as a filmmaker working in the classical Hollywood vein, Han focused on the exploits of individual women rather than, as Kim and Lee did, the collective improvement of the lives of women as a social class.

Although Han's films cross many genres, their après girl characters share certain qualities. Many of them reject sequestration within the domestic realm and freely inhabit urban space. They ride in cars, stroll the streets, visit parks, and go to country clubs. Some, such as In-sun (Kim Ui-hyang) in *The Pure Love* (1957) and Margaret (Yoon In-ja) in *The Hand of Destiny*, live on their own. Those who do live among family often push back against the authority of the male relatives who try to control them. Most of these women have jobs and quite a few have professional careers, including Song-hui (Kim Ui-hyang) in *Men vs. Women* (1959), who is a doctor. Many of them stand out for their assertions of individual autonomy. Like Mme Oh they drive the plots, by committing murder, treating patients, and hiring new employees. Sometimes these women behave admirably, as when the doctor Song-hui risks her safety to tend to a sick child. Other times they are rude, self-centered, morally compromised. And that is often precisely the point: it is the mastery of their own will and the fierceness of their inner drives that make these women notable, not the morality of their behavior.²⁹ Han liberates his characters from the demands of "womanly virtue" (*p'udok*) and frees them to be selfish. Because they are not defined by their virtue, they are free to participate in public life without fear of sexual humiliation, which has long served as the rationale for domestic confinement. While this inversion of normative behavior was often treated as comedy, the very existence of such characters was regarded as remarkable. According to his colleague Kim Kee-duk, Han was unusual among Korean directors in portraying "active women" who were "aggressive or enthusiastic," rather than the familiar women who were "passive and always dependent on men's lead." Such women were very rare "in our society and in our lives," says Kim, and Han's depiction of them had "no precedent."³⁰ Their independent action was often matched by their independent minds. Like the young Helen Kim who defied her father's pressure to marry, they ably resist social conformity. This quality receives its most sustained exploration in *My Sister Is a Hussy* (1961), in which Sun-ae (Moon Jung-suk) rejects the social rules of femininity, resisting her family's encouragement to marry and mocking her suitors for their overinflated egos; even when she does marry, she defies her husband's expectations and continues to follow her own path.

Sexuality often serves as the arena in which these après girls assert their independence. In a patrilineal society that values women for their ability to produce male heirs, sexuality becomes a logical arena for asserting female agency. A married woman who is sexually active outside the confines of her marriage threatens the purity of her husband's line and by extension the entire social order. She thus becomes a source of social, as well as personal, anxiety. In Han's films, writes Kim Sun-ah, "patriarchal oversight and the prohibitions against sexual promiscuity, adultery, and homosexuality were routinely rejected."³¹ Han's female characters flirt (*Hyperbolae of Youth* [1956]), seek love marriages (*Poor Lovers* [1959]), pursue men they find attractive (*A Female Boss* [1959], *The Pure Love*), engage in extramarital sex (*The Hand of Destiny*), have affairs (*Madame Freedom*), and express

homosexual desire (*A Jealousy*). At a time when romantic love was still on the margins of social acceptability, Han showed women taking the initiative to pursue their romantic interests outside of the mechanisms of arranged marriage. These violations of patriarchal sexual norms across Han's many films serve as a metonym for the characters' larger challenge to the Confucian principle of female submission.

As in *Madame Freedom*, the female characters in Han's other films are often punished for their assertions of individuality and independence. Sometimes, like Mme Oh, they are punished with humiliation and a return to patriarchal authority. Other times they are punished with violent deaths, as in *The Pure Love* and *The Hand of Destiny*, or with acts of violence such as rape, as in *Men vs. Women*, or physical beatings, as in *My Sister Is a Hussy*. Still other times these punishments take the form of "happy" endings that recontain independent-minded women within the patriarchal marriages and homes that they sought to avoid, as in *A Jealousy*, where Jaesoon is cured of her lesbianism and restored to heterosexual "sanity." But as in *Madame Freedom*, these punishments and "happy" outcomes are often delivered in abrupt, sudden-reversal endings, the significance of which sinks under the weight of the lavish deployment of screen time and formal resources that have privileged these women stylistically throughout the preceding hours of screen time. Such punishments are rarely accompanied by expressions of genuine remorse by the women, and thus often fail to fully persuade. As in *Madame Freedom*, these endings can be read as rhetorical devices to provide ideological "cover" for the preceding depictions of female autonomy.

Han's emphasis on punishment is most significant for what it replaces: female suffering. Suffering was a crucial dimension of Confucian femininity, what Lee Tai-young called the "deep pain that was inscribed in our bones" and what Helen Kim identified as "the typical unhappiness of the Korean woman."³² The valorization of such suffering was deeply ingrained in Korean culture, as seen in the popular folktale "The Story of Chunhyang," which David James describes as one of the "master myths of Korean culture" and an "all but sadomasochistic" story about a young woman who willingly suffers imprisonment and torture to protect her virtue.³³ The aestheticization of female suffering was alive and well in 1950s cinema, as evidenced by the success of Lee Gyu-hwan's *Chunhyang Story* (1955), which was Korea's first blockbuster. The films of Shin Sang-ok, the other major director of women's pictures during the late 1950s–early 1960s, often seemed to celebrate female suffering. Several of Shin's films made during these years reach their emotional climaxes in scenes of deep female anguish. Shin's wife and muse, actress Choi Eun-hee, suffers from unrequited love for the son she gave away in *It's Not Her Sin* (1959), puts the happiness of others ahead of her own in *A Sister's Garden* (1959), tearfully resigns herself to never marrying the man she loves in *Dongsimcho* (1959), and forcefully represses her sexual desire in *The Houseguest and My Mother* (1961). These women suffer because they adhere to traditional ideals about motherhood, virtue, sacrifice, and self-abnegation. When faced with

the opportunity to claim greater individual freedom, they willingly choose to embrace patriarchy's constraints instead. Shin renders their suffering noble and admirable. As the male romantic lead in *A Sister's Garden* observes, "They say a woman looks most beautiful when she is drenched in sadness, and that is so true." Shin's masterpiece, *The Houseguest and My Mother*, is a moving elegy for a body of virtues rooted in Confucianism's "fine, beautiful customs." It is a postcolonial traditionalist tour de force, one that honors a self-sacrificing woman's choice to preserve traditional values within the private domestic sphere, even as the world outside modernizes. Shin depicted female suffering most ostentatiously in *Seong Chunhyang* (1961), a lurid retelling of the folktale that presents gruesome scenes of the heroine's physical and mental pain in widescreen Technicolor.

Han largely liberated his après girl characters from the logic of suffering. By and large, Han's women do not agonize over past actions; they do not lie awake at night fretting over future decisions; they do not fearfully anticipate the social condemnation of others. They do not succumb to wasting illnesses. They do not spend time in jail. Above all, they rarely shed tears.³⁴ (*Men vs. Women* is one exception, in that the après girl doctor does suffer in the second half of the film after being raped.) Han's romantic comedies, such as *Hyperbolae of Youth* and *A Female Boss*, eschew female suffering in keeping with their adherence to genre convention. But even in films where female suffering would be generically appropriate, Han pares it down. *The Hand of Destiny* is a film noir melodrama featuring a female North Korean spy named Margaret (Yoon In-ja) who falls in love with a South Korean police detective. In the final scene, her cover is blown and she faces imminent death. Instead of creating an extended scene in which she wallows in her misery, begging for her life and apologizing for her treason, she requests that her lover shoot her ("I don't want to die by an enemy bullet. Please . . . kill me by your hand") and then kisses him—a shocking scene at the time, and Korea's first on-screen kiss. In films that do revel in suffering, Han shifts that burden onto his male characters. In *The Pure Love*, for instance, it is the male protagonist who spends much of the film blind and in jail, wrongly accused of murder and praying to God for relief. Han deploys lighting and mise-en-scène in ways that elevate his suffering and infuse it with an aura of spiritual ennoblement. His female love interest, in contrast, remains free, her distress paling in comparison to his spectacular—and stereotypically feminine—suffering. Han's lone foray into historical drama, *Prince Hodong* (1962), depicts two women rescuing the eponymous hero after he has been imprisoned in a dungeon, suspended from the ceiling by his arms, and flogged into unconsciousness. The women, one of whom spends much of the film in drag as a highly competent male soldier, then complete the secret mission that the hero failed to accomplish because he was sidetracked by love.

In freeing his female characters from suffering, Han freed them from *han*, the distinctly Korean psychic condition of anger, resentment, and fatalism rooted in the country's history of invasion, colonization, division, and war.³⁵ Throughout

Korean film history, and especially within the work of cultural nationalist filmmakers such as Im Kwon-taek, women have often served as embodiments of *han*, representing the nation as a feminized victim. As Joshua Pilzer has written, suffering women were “powerful figures in the consolidation of national identities and class sensibilities and in the consolidation of modern masculinities that arise to administer or protect the suffering woman.” As such, they “often legitimized whole new regimes of gendered domination.”³⁶ Han Hyung-mo likewise liberated his female characters from the conventions of *shinpa* melodrama, which presented women as passive victims of forces beyond their control and appealed to viewers’ emotions by emphasizing their protagonists’ tears and suffering.³⁷ While *shinpa* films spoke to women’s real experiences of class and gender oppression, they embodied a conservative film style that provided an outlet for women’s expression of *han* without imagining any alternatives to women’s suffering. Han’s rejection of the figure of the suffering woman was thus a significant intervention in a long-standing cultural discourse about Korean women’s essential nature.

Han’s rejection of *shinpa* conventions and female *han* was crucial to his assertion of feminine individualism. According to Oh Young-sook, it was precisely this rejection of the logic of female suffering that marked Han’s films as modern for his audiences.³⁸ Han’s female characters are punished for their own individually chosen actions, rather than succumbing to a collective and unavoidable fate. They are not victimized by forces beyond their control, so much as punished for their audacious efforts to assert control over their own lives. Ultimately, if seemingly paradoxically, Han’s choice to depict brief scenes of punishment rather than extended scenes of suffering had feminist undertones: like his choice of abrupt endings, it allowed him to elaborate the possibilities of female individuality at length, while providing him with a veneer of compensatory conformity to still-dominant patriarchal values. As film scholar Yu Chi-na notes, “There must have been a special kind of pleasure” for postwar women “in seeing the new, dangerous women on screen, no matter that they were always punished in the end.”³⁹ One can also read the punishment in his films as the price his female characters willingly pay for their assertion of individual autonomy, the coin that they must expend in order to purchase their freedom. This price is part of the transaction that Han’s female characters enter into as individuals, in contrast to the suffering that women endure as a consequence of their existential status as women.

The *après* girls with which Han populated his films were not an exclusively South Korean phenomenon. In 1953, Japanese writer Ono Saseo published an essay, “[These] Jazz-Crazed Times,” whose main character is an *apure musume*—or *après* girl.⁴⁰ In 1956, two years after the publication of Jeong Biseok’s novel *Madame Freedom* and the same year that Han released his film version, the Japanese magazine *Chuo koron* serialized a novel about a professor and his wife who each pursue an extramarital affair; as with Mme Oh, the wife’s sexual appetites, long dormant in her unhappy marriage, are ignited through her encounter with a younger man.

That same year, the Japanese women's magazine *Fujin koron* published a special issue devoted to "women's desires." As Jan Bardsley has explored, the magazine limned a new social type that had emerged at war's end: the "exceptional postwar woman." According to Bardsley, the magazine defined this new woman as one who gave "rein to her desires, whether they are for sexual pleasure, money-making, self-assertiveness, public stature, or personal growth." A product, in part, of the occupation's wide-ranging gender reforms, she had a "foreign-influenced approach to life." Eager to step outside her historic confinement within the home, she sought out paid employment, civic engagement, and her own sexual and social liberation. She was a member of Japan's *apure* generation, and she displayed a distinctly "postwar morality" that violated long-standing behavioral norms for women.⁴¹ Portrayed as ambitious, materialistic, masculine, and promiscuous, she was a source of social anxiety and an object of derisive satire. She was also an object of intense interest.

A variation on the après girl likewise appeared in Hong Kong cinema in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Grace Chang and Linda Lin Dai, big stars at MP&GI studio, regularly performed as modern women who were breaking out of traditional social roles by embracing Western popular culture, embarking on careers, pursuing love on their own terms, and engaging in new levels of material consumption. These films presented upbeat visions of a feminized, Free Asian modernity in which women's expanding opportunities paralleled Hong Kong's social and economic development. Unlike many South Korean films, which cast the modern woman as a scandalous figure who threatened core national values, these films presented their female characters, especially those played by Grace Chang, as able to finesse the balancing act between exciting modern woman and good Chinese girl. Produced with lavish studio resources and echoing Hollywood's genres and story lines, they presented capitalist modernity in a largely positive way. The après girl, it turns out, was a transnational figure as well as a cosmopolitan one—a multi-valent icon embodying the shifting gender roles and transforming societies across East Asia.⁴²