

The Manchurian Action Film

A New Anticolonial Imaginary in the Cold War Context

THE ERA OF THE MANCHURIAN ACTION FILM

The Manchurian action film cycle emerged in the mid-1960s, revisiting and refashioning Korea's colonial history. The cycle began with Im Kwon-taek's *Farewell to Tumen River* (*Tuman'ganga chal ikkōra*) in 1962, peaked from 1963 to 1965, and entered an eclipse in the early 1970s. Along with the 1970s action films that frequently feature Hong Kong as a romantic backdrop for masculine romance and action, Manchurian action films occupy a special place in the constellation of South Korean cinema.¹ They highlight the physical actions of masculine heroes as the principal means by which to figuratively render the colonial past and manage the era's unique social and historical dilemmas.

These films typically present the stories of Korean resistance guerrillas and their heroic struggle against the powerful Japanese military force in Manchuria during the colonial period. Forced into exile, the nationalist warriors engage in guerrilla warfare and eventually defeat the Japanese army in local battles through espionage operations, uncommon valor, and exceptional prowess. The films project the militant struggle of anticolonialism into the multiethnic space of Manchuria and affirm the relevance of a combative anti-Japanese nationalism in the shifting sociocultural landscape of South Korea in the 1960s. The Manchurian action film, in other words, codifies and expands the cinematic vocabulary of nationalism anew by romanticizing and mythologizing the militant nationalist struggle of diaspora Koreans against the Japanese.

While the dream of a unifying nationalism is the most obvious feature of the films' narratives and characterizations, a closer analysis shows the ambivalence

these films have about portraying the dark times of the nation's history. In particular, the melodramatic trope of family as an allegory for nation, along with the military aspect of campaigns, brings into question the dire cost of clandestine operations for particular individuals or families. The films also concurrently project a different set of views and discourses on the space of Manchuria. Whereas Manchuria had been crucial to Korean nationalist historiography as an irredentist national space, Manchurian action films distance themselves from such presumptions by framing the actions of anticolonial agents (and criminals) in the language and imagery of war and action genres.

In the second half of the chapter, I make a radical interpretive turn from the critical merit of melodramatic excess in Manchurian action films to the thematic undercurrent that informs the varied ideological dimensions of these films. While the genre captures the oppositional terms of the nationalist struggle, it also reveals a distinct discursive formulation of the nationalist campaign and goals when set against the larger backdrop of war narrative films in South Korean cinema. In particular, the ways in which Manchurian action films invoke the economic aspect of warfare prepare us to approach the genre as a unique instance of war narrative logic in the contemporary Cold War setting. To illustrate the Manchurian action film's location in the war imaginary, however, requires a substantial remapping of South Korea's war narrative films. The long detour is needed to bracket the dominant war narrative films and to distinguish the Manchurian action film's unique yet disruptive ideological operation within the assumed political structure of the time. Hence, the second part of the chapter offers a reading of Manchurian action films against the Korean War films that have provided the dominant war narrative and imagery in South Korea and that have historically overdetermined how war in general has been understood and imagined.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF KOREAN MANCHURIA

Early in the century, when Korea underwent the turmoil of annexation to Japan, many intellectuals turned to history and history-writing to find solutions to the political crisis. One of the leading intellectuals of this movement was Sin Ch'aeho, who, in publishing his bold treatises on Korea's history in newspapers, forcefully argued for Manchuria's territorial importance to the nation.² Sin rejected the peninsula-bound territoriality of conventional history-writing, instead defining the territory of the Korean nation as extending into the land of Manchuria. His irredentist view of the Korean Manchurian connection was meant to forge a particular nationalist history that proclaimed the glory of the ancient dynasties without a constraining notion of territorial sovereignty.³ According to this view, the nation's success or failure rested on reclaiming the lost northern land.⁴ As colonial scholar

Andre Schmid aptly points out, the nation as the subject of history and the territory of Manchuria were inextricably linked in Sin's treatment—Manchuria stood as the ultimate yardstick by which to describe the history of the nation.⁵

Issues of the national border and territorial sovereignty gained strong currency at the turn of the century as newspapers frequently reported the encroachment of foreign forces, incidents of border violations, and territorial controversies.⁶ The most notable example was the Sino-Korean contention over Jiandao (“Kando” in Korean), the area north of the Tumen River. For Chang Chiyŏn, a nationalist historian of the colonial period, national geography and borders were particularly crucial to the study of national history. He asserted that the historian's job was to discover and clarify the location of old geographic names.⁷ By recasting the premodern account of national space, Chang was able to contextualize earlier premodern texts in strongly nationalist terms, making past knowledge directly relevant to the contemporaneous “Kando” controversy.⁸ An empirical study of geopolitical arrangements functioned as a historical anchor for furthering the modern concepts of national rights and sovereignty.⁹ The works by Sin and Chang represent a discursive pattern in which Manchuria became a crucial part of Korea's national and historical imaginary in modern times.¹⁰

It should be noted that Japanese historians had developed their own historical argument on the importance of Manchuria by structurally linking Manchuria and Korea. Japanese historians such as Shiratori Kurakichi used the term *Mansenshi*, which literally means Manchurian-Korean history, to argue for the inseparable connection between the two regions. They then placed the combined history of *Mansenshi* under the rubric of “Toyo” (the East), the new and broad geocultural term in Japan's modern historical narrative that displaced China from centrality and elevated Japan to the dominant position in Asia.¹¹ In *Mansenshi*, Manchuria and Korea do not signify independent nation-states but precisely a historical lack thereof. They have always been inferior to Japan and in need of Japanese instruction, assistance, and protection.¹²

These diverging theses inform the importance of Manchurian space to both camps. Both imperialist and anticolonial scholars wrote history by claiming Manchuria on their own terms. They also employed the motif of vacancy and emptiness in writing Manchuria, making it a frontier space akin to the West in the history of the United States. This spatial motif was then used as the basis for a call to action to occupy and possess the land. The discursive malleability is an integral part of the representation of Manchuria in various cultural works and ideological treatises. In short, Manchuria became a contested site in opposing historical arguments, which nevertheless were similar in their calls for national action to occupy the “vacant” space.

If Korean historians designated Manchuria as the cradle of the nation, actual migratory history had a different resonance in the social memory of colonialism.

Early Korean migrants to Manchuria were farmers from the northern border who moved to the Jiandao area in pursuit of economic survival. After the Japanese annexation of Korea, Korean nationalists steadily moved to that part of Manchuria to continue their armed campaign for independence. However, migration and settlement often met a hostile response from Chinese residents and officials who were suspicious of Korean people's colonial linkage to the Japanese government. Japanese officials also kept watchful eyes on Korean settlers' activities, alert to anything that might signal an alliance with the independence movement, and responded brutally to suspected Korean involvement in militant nationalist activity. Counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1930s murdered thousands of innocent Koreans.¹³ The differing views of Korean settlers' citizenship and political affiliation created enmity and suspicion from both sides, making Koreans' life in Manchuria difficult to navigate.

A sense of loss and hardship, therefore, ran deeply through the nationalist discourses and collective social memory of Manchuria.¹⁴ However passionately Sin Ch'aeo believed in the irredentist dream or Chang Chiyön advocated for Korea's territorial rights over Kando, the postcolonial reality of Korea simply did not sustain their arguments. Thus, as much as Manchuria became an important site in the nationalist debate, it subsequently became a space charged with a deep sense of loss and resignation. Migrants' memories of their experiences were infused with the pain of hardships and alienation, recorded by the many guerrilla fighters and farmers who wrote painfully of the trials they had endured to carry out their campaigns for independence and human dignity.¹⁵

This sentiment of loss is an important dimension in the affective dynamics of Manchurian action films, for it was through the *displacement* of this sense of loss and powerlessness that these films were able to promulgate their codes of masculinity, family, and nation. In particular, the conventions of war narratives carved out space for a new configuration of a manhood that was powerful and resolute. Men in these films do not dwell in resignation over the doomed irredentist dream, nor are they preoccupied with the daily adversities of the immigrant experience. Instead, the films depict Korean men of action who are capable and determined in dealing with crises. Chased by Japanese forces, these men often take refuge in guerrilla hideouts in remote mountain areas, where they analyze military information, train young recruits, and plan new attacks. When they return to urban areas, they are involved in secret covert operations, such as espionage, surveillance, guerrilla attacks, and, most importantly, the procurement of war funds. The masculine discourses of loyalty and comradeship function as significant sources of narrative progression, rendering Manchuria a stage of romantic and self-affirming adventure for Korean men.

The multifaceted generic features of the Manchurian action film deserve close attention and bear some comparison to those of their American counterparts.

According to Robert Burgoyne, the war film, along with the western, is a genre with a long history of articulating images of nation and played a vital role in molding a sense of national identity in the twentieth-century United States.¹⁶ The Manchurian action film is structurally similar to these American film genres in its performance of ideological work. In fact, the two genres—the western and the war film—come together in this South Korean model, making it a distinct cinematic hybrid. Instead of gazing passively on the bygone glory of the past, Manchurian action films project the romantic impulse onto a new geographic space, a quasi-frontier comparable to the West in American cultural myth, where men of action ultimately claim their place. Yet the Korean narrative of Manchuria is also grounded in its colonial history and anticolonial struggle, highlighting guerrilla fighters' armed struggle against the foreign enemy. However short-lived or imaginary, Manchuria thus speaks of the romantic dream of reclamation and repossession of the land that is engrained in the discourse of anti-Japanese nationalism. The Korean film cycle, in other words, demonstrates a way to deflect the trauma of territorial loss by visually specifying the grounds of nationalism anew in Manchuria through perpetual recourse to a generic imagining of military campaigns, espionage activities, and dreams of the frontier.

Despite overcoming the sense of loss, however, these films are permeated by an ideological sense of double removal or impediment. The reality of postcolonial Korea was that the two contending states of North and South Korea could not, in the end, gain control of Manchuria. More importantly, the ideological stance of South Korea during the Cold War made it difficult for its people to engage concretely with the nationalist assessment of the Manchurian experience. Since partition, the two opposing states in Korea have engaged in intense and acrimonious warfare, ideological and actual, to nullify each other. The contending camps have used history as an ideological tool to ground their political legitimacy and popular support, and each state has inculcated its members with its own version of anticolonial history. In the case of South Korea, this has meant locating its anticolonial struggle in the spirit of the March 1st Movement of 1919 and claiming the institutional heritage of the Shanghai Provisional Government in exile.¹⁷ Such a scenario was designed to suppress, in part, the communists' role in anticolonial struggles, particularly those that took place in Manchuria, including the guerrilla activities of Kim Il Sung. Construction of Manchuria as a hotbed of anticolonial activity was a dangerous ground to venture onto in the contentious Cold War atmosphere of 1960s' South Korea. Seen from this ideological perspective, the South Korean cultural productions on Manchuria, such as the films I focus on here, operated through multiple ideological filters in presenting narratives of anticolonial struggle. In other words, the logic of the Cold War imbued the thematic conventions of Manchurian action films—a feature that I explore in depth in the latter part of this chapter.

AMBIVALENT NATIONALISM: THE CASE OF
THE CONTINENT ON FIRE (1965)

Among Manchurian action films, *The Continent on Fire* (*Pulputnün taeryuk*; Yi Yongho, 1965) stands out as an exemplar, for it complicates the idea of family as an allegorical stand-in for the nation. It borrows the vengeance motif manifest in predecessors such as *Farewell to Tumen River* to anchor the moral thesis of its narrative. The film rehearses and tests the loyalties of national and familial allegiance through the main character's shifting perception of and attitude toward the militant nationalist campaign. To be sure, the film's narrative development is contingent on the binary polarization of good Koreans versus evil Japanese; however, new themes, including double identity, education, and conversion of allegiance, are introduced to support as well as complicate the dichotomized worldview.

The film's narrative principally concerns the transformation of Kang Chisök from a servant of the Japanese military into a born-again guerrilla combatant. It focuses on a series of incidents through which Chisök slowly develops a new awareness of his national identity. His changing political affiliation parallels his troublesome yet transformative relationship with his father, who eventually dies in the course of the nationalist struggle. Chisök, who works as a spy for the enemy, confronts the familial self he has long set aside and eventually comes to terms with his "righteous" political allegiance and "true" family. The film is thus a narrative of conversion, around which the family's dilemma is staged and resolved, and nation conflated with family. Curiously, however, the film's nationalist preoccupation impedes completion of this familial reunification and thereby leads the narrative to a cliff of ambivalence, despair, and nihilism. The film, in other words, casts significant doubt on its own ideological drive, questioning the feasibility and permanence of the familial restitution and nationalist creed at its close.

The film begins at a train station in Manchuria where the shrewd guerrilla combatant Han Tongmin is following Kim, a pro-Japanese collaborator, who possesses a map of a mineral deposit—information crucial to both sides of the military campaign. Han chases Kim to his house in Seoul, executing him mercilessly and repossessing the map, then heads back to the guerrilla fort. The Japanese military investigates Kim's death, assigning the investigation to Chisök, a talented Korean official. Fully committed to Japanese imperialist ideology, Chisök begins his mission by tracing Han's whereabouts.

As a typical collaborator, Chisök exists in a servile relation to his Japanese superior. His perfectionist work ethic has earned him a speedy promotion and won him praise from his Japanese boss, who permits and supports Chisök's courtship with his daughter. This interethnic romance signals Chisök's assimilation into the Japanese establishment through marriage.¹⁸ The courtship echoes the complex relations of family name and ethnicity in Japanese colonial law and policy. In 1940, the

Japanese system of family names was introduced to replace Korean surnames in family registers. In addition, the Japanese adoption system, *siyangcha*, was implemented to integrate Japanese and Koreans under the system of Japanese family names. Accordingly, an adopted child could become simultaneously an adopted son and a son-in-law through his marriage with the daughter of the adopting parents.¹⁹ Seen against the backdrop of this controversial legal discourse of family names and adoption, Chisök's prospect of marriage to a Japanese woman does not simply mean his upward social mobility. More importantly, it signals, through the new family law and its practice, his complete integration into a Japanese family without any traces of his Korean origins. That is, he can become, through the marriage, an adopted son and a son-in-law of the Japanese family. It is at this juncture, where the Korean man is about to lose all connection to his Korean heritage, that the theme of familial roots returns to alter Chisök's destiny.

Opposite to Chisök's interethnic consummation is the courtship between Han and Misaë (the only daughter of the nationalist leader, who also is Chisök's step-sister), which promises the ideal heterosexual consummation of two nationalist agents. The latter relationship does not, however, conform to conventional gender relations. Han and Misaë's relationship takes place outside the domestic domain, a feature that speaks volumes about the nature of conjugal relationships in the nationalist scenario. In fact, the film seems to disapprove of private spaces for any wartime romance, even though Misaë does express her desire for marriage and settling down when she spends intimate time with Han. Mutual attraction clearly exists between the two; however, they speak and act to sublimate their passion for the larger political cause. The ideal of nationalist struggle functions as a grand substitute for the desire for domestic happiness.

Misaë's professional activities go beyond expectations of the social roles often associated with conservative gender norms. Instead of being subservient and passive, she has two jobs: she works as a singer in a nightclub by night and as a nurse in the guerrilla fort by day. At the fort she helps her father, a medical doctor devoted to the independence struggle, by tending to battle-injured men. Misaë works at the nightclub to, in her own words, comfort and console the Korean settlers in Manchuria who have grown homesick for their mother country. Her dual occupations serve the nation by attending to the needs of emotionally and physically injured Korean men in and out of the military.

Yet the nature of her performance and the stage environment do not fit comfortably with her noble motivation. In fact, these factors complicate, if not undermine, her intention and point to the flexible parameters of the nationalist ideology to accommodate diverse tropes of femininity. First of all, the lyrics to her songs are not in accordance with the theme of nostalgia that she articulates. In fact, they stress the contrary, emphasizing the importance of settlement and assimilation into the foreign land. She sings, "If you live long and grow to like the place, it is then your hometown." Although never explicitly political, these lyrics nevertheless

have some ideological resonance. They render social messages that can be construed in various political terms, for these words are spoken not only to Koreans but also to other ethnic men in the nightclub. A similar ambiguity is found in Misaë's stage performance. She veils her Korean ethnic origins and creates an aura of exotic attraction by appearing in Chinese clothing. Her moody song and suggestive gestures then invite the erotic interest of male patrons rather than the tranquil nostalgia she intends to evoke. In fact, her sexual allure is so powerful that it soon incites men; drunken Chinese men approach and harass Misaë after her performance, which then immediately triggers a brawl at the site. As a nightclub singer, she is closely associated with profane and sexual sensuality rather than the sublime and sober sincerity of nationalism.

What is unusual in this figuration of femininity is that Misaë's self-eroticizing act poses no significant threat or problem to her fiancé Han, through whom her social merit is largely defined. Set right after Han's escape from his dangerous mission in Seoul, the nightclub sequence functions as musical compensation to the male protagonist who has just completed a difficult mission. The romantic communication between Misaë and Han is introduced and mediated through her stage performance. I would stress that this positive appraisal of the woman's use of her body, here sexualized in the context of night entertainment, is not unusual in Manchurian action films. Indeed, other films communicate a similar sensibility. For instance, Im Kwon-taek's *Farewell to Tumen River* features the noble *kisaeng* courtesan character Yönhwa maneuvering and exploiting Japanese military men to help the resistance. Her profession never raises any moral question, nor is there any discriminatory attitude toward it. Contrary to many colonial narratives, which figure *kisaeng* characters as objects of shame and humiliation from a male perspective, Manchurian action films show remarkable tolerance of and lenience toward their sexual(ized) labor.²⁰

What further distinguishes the film from other works is the degree of feminine sexual allure. Misaë's performance is almost a separate musical number, a brief but self-contained sequence. As the performance progresses, its representational value quickly subsides as the formal apparatus directs close attention to her physical attractions. In other words, the convention of musical presentation distracts, momentarily, from surrounding sociopolitical concerns. It offers, instead, the glamour and magnetism of the female body, which far exceeds the logic and economy of the narrative. The dramatic concern is quickly taken up again as the performance ends. However, the shifting generic feature has created a moment where the woman's sexual allure is not in the service of any purpose other than pure spectacle.²¹

The theme of integration, as rendered in the motif of the usefulness of female labor, functions as an ideological counterpoint to Japan's imperial ideology, exemplified by the incorporation of Chisök into the Japanese power circle. For this scenario to work, however, the laboring woman must always be defined in relation to the men who are the agents of the campaign. Misaë is fully supportive of and

devoted to her man's altruistic mission. In this regard, the patriotic man is not just an object of the woman's romantic interest but also the woman's moral anchor; a woman can transgress the boundaries of the conventional feminine role and still retain respect and integrity because of her exclusive relationship with her man. Thus, what matters ultimately in the film is the social utility of Misaè, which is measured primarily in relation to Han.

This scheme of consummation distinguishes and secures the position of the Korean man against the backdrop of many other ethnic men who are as powerful as the male protagonist in terms of physical strength and political networks. The male protagonist and his mission function to empty out the ambivalence of feminine propriety and sexuality. But, at the same time, the female protagonist sanctions and displays the masculine power of the Korean man through her sexual availability, which is only for Korean men. Misaè is portrayed as the only sexually attractive woman in this part of Manchuria, and her exclusive romantic interest in Han makes him an exception among the group of men who are without any female partner. This reassessment of Korean femininity is particularly revealing considering the marginal ground that Korean men actually occupied in the social reality of Manchukuo.²²

This ethnic hierarchy is obvious in the nightclub, where Korean men like Han can occupy only a constrained minority position. As a microcosm of Manchukuo, the nightclub forms a matrix of ethnic relations through its various male patrons. The Chinese constitute the greatest number (here the owner is also Chinese), while the Japanese soldiers and military officials form another group of patrons. Through the work of spies like Chisök, the Japanese military employs a secret force to patrol and inspect any activities that might breed subversion. Yet their control over spaces like the nightclub is incomplete and ineffective. In fact, the Japanese military force shows consistent failure to contain the violence that breaks out. Nightclubs in Manchurian action films are generally charged with an air of intimidation and the potential for violence, which largely is derived from miscommunication and hostile contentions. Hence, the nightclub signals a specific "contact zone" where all ethnic groups commingle and interact, only to underscore the espionage prowess of the guileful Korean agent. By contrast, the presence of Japanese military men in the nightclub typically signals the power of surveillance and vigilance over Koreans and other ethnic groups, even while it reveals their inability to distinguish the Korean agent in disguise and to halt the subversive operation in progress.

The issue of allegiance reverberates in the form of recruitment and resocialization at the guerrilla fort, where Chisök undergoes a radical transformation. Chisök arrives pretending to be a new recruit to the training program. Han, now in charge of instruction, instantly recognizes Chisök, who helped him escape from the danger at the nightclub, and thus pays special attention to him. Chisök, however, is oblivious of Han's gaze of surveillance and remains committed to his goal of carrying out the espionage mission. Han eventually becomes aware of Chisök's

secret identity but does not take immediate action. Instead, he quietly observes Chisök's actions and awaits Chisök's change of heart. Central to Han's decision for discretion are the family tensions, in which he too is implicated, that are closely tied to participation in nationalist fighting. Misaë alerts Han to her familial relation to Chisök and informs him of her stepbrother's secret profession, hinting at Chisök's involvement in the failure of the recent campaign. She does *not*, however, inform her father about Chisök, perhaps because she fears that such a meeting between her stubborn father and her stepbrother would produce a disastrous outcome. Simultaneously, Chisök also learns about his father's whereabouts but never confronts him in person. A complex web of family relations is thus formed, threaded by masquerade as well as ideological enmity.

For the straightforward Han, who is now aware of the infiltration, Chisök represents a unique conundrum. Chisök's familial connection to Misaë and her father, whom he not only respects as his future father-in-law but also admires as a political mentor, makes it virtually impossible for Han to resolve the matter quickly by punishing Chisök's treachery. Han's predicament—being caught between familial ties and nationalist obligations—illustrates the distinct rift in the familial-national nexus that is the most recurring theme in Manchurian action films. The elements of the familial are typically subordinated to the grand nationalist ideal; however, such conventional conflation does not quite occur here. Han's passivity suggests a certain lacuna in the all-encompassing might of the nationalist ideology, in which serving the nation usually guarantees the personal fulfillment of all those who participate in it.

In *The Continent on Fire*, the moment of reconciliation does not derive from any input from the nationalists at the fort. Instead, Chisök's transformation gradually takes place as he assumes a quasi-paternal role to the orphan girl Soryö, a child flower vendor. Chisök rescues Soryö, whose ethnic identity remains ambiguous, when she faces abuse by some drunken men. He takes Soryö safely to her house, where he learns of her real plight: her father was killed by the Japanese, and her mother is now bedridden. Later, when he hears that Soryö has become an orphan in his absence, he takes her to the barracks at the training camp to care for her. Her alienation and misery have a significant impact on Chisök and lead him to make a commitment to take the role of father for this child.

Chisök's new paternal role leads to his dawning realization of Japanese brutality as well as his development of a humane perspective on social reality. The episode rehearses, in a displaced form, the deep contradiction that blocks the resumption of a familial relationship between Chisök and his father, whose differences in political orientation are irreconcilable. As the film clearly illustrates, Chisök's father is a man of impeccable integrity, a true patriot whom everyone admires. Yet privately he is troubled by a serious family problem in the past. As he tells his daughter Misaë, he abandoned his wife and son in Korea to commit himself fully to the nationalist cause in Manchuria. This decision led him to remarry Misaë's

late mother. The allegorical ties that bind family and nation together are severed in this scenario: the family, Chisök and his natal mother, suffered for the nation without a reward. Furthermore, Chisök's affiliation with the Japanese illustrates the grave consequence of his father's failure as the head of the family. Han's reluctance to alert Chisök's father about his son's identity results from a dilemma far weightier than mere problems of generational conflict, for it could exhume the past and potentially tear down the patriarchal leader's respectable reputation and the moral authority that he holds over the nationalist camp.

Chisök's assumed father role to Soryö functions as a mode of transference by which Chisök, not his father, comes to terms with the hurtful family history. The quasi-parenthood connotes the formation of a new family, composed of two generations who have undergone a similar experience of parental neglect and loss. Soryö's ambiguous ethnic background furnishes the additional dimension of the inclusive ideology that the film repeatedly showcases. That is, Chisök, who once tried to enter the Japanese circle, now adopts a street girl with an ambiguous ethnic background to form an entirely different social unit that is in accord with the anti-Japanese campaign. The family that he forms is based on choice and affiliation rather than the blood ties that dictate familial relations in normal Korean families. The positive outcome suggests the possibility of a new type of collective that is not biologically determined or ethnically exclusive.

The new type of family is complicated by the imperative of moral retribution against the Japanese enemy. Soryö asks Chisök to carry out a vendetta against those who killed her parents. Such a plea for vengeance makes Chisök's effort to form a family deeply contradictory, for Chisök himself is a part of the evil that must be punished and eradicated. In other words, Chisök's allegiance to the Japanese is the impediment not only to his relationship with his own father, but also to his connection to his new "daughter." The film hence stresses that one can never be simultaneously a genuine member of a family, however alternatively imagined, while also being affiliated with the Japanese.

It is at this juncture that the film's narrative takes a dramatic turn to resolve the familial entanglement by employing the traumatic death of Chisök's father. Pressed to perform his duties by other Japanese spies, Chisök finally carries out his mission: stealing the map from the guerrillas. Yet as he runs away from the fort, his father is simultaneously attacked and killed by a Japanese secret agent. The cross-cutting editing suggests the structural linkage between the son's betrayal and the father's death. With his last breath, Chisök's father tells Han his dying wish: to see his son in person. Han chases and soon captures Chisök and informs him of the death of his father. Moreover, Han delivers the late father's wishes: he had wanted his son to be a warrior for the nation's independence. Engulfed by regret and sadness, Chisök rushes to his father's side and breaks down at his deathbed. He realizes that he has forever lost a chance to reconcile with him.

The film thus restores a stark moral economy in which serving the enemy Japan and reconciling with a family member are fundamentally incompatible options. That is, as a servant of the colonial power, Chisök's treachery eventuates in patricide. And having lost the opportunity to resume relations with his father, Chisök suffers from irrecoverable moral damnation and grief. A motif of familial vengeance is then instantiated as Chisök vows to commit himself to the nationalist struggle. Chisök's endeavor here signifies his moral repentance and resumed responsibility for the nation to which his father has been closely tied. The father's education of his son is fulfilled only belatedly through his death.

What remains *unchallenged*, however, is the centrality of the father's position in relation to his children. Because Chisök's father dies suddenly without really resolving his tension with Chisök, the question of his parental responsibility is never addressed. Instead, it is the son who disproportionately bears the burden of moral judgment. It is all the son's fault that their relationship could be not healed. This structural disequilibrium then signifies the film's drive to maintain patriarchal power in the narrative of the nation. In other words, the nexus of nation and family demands a strong father figure who is not only a parent to his children but also a paternal figure to the entire nationalist campaign. Consequently, personal concerns, however painful they may be, must be set aside to protect the moral certitude of the patriarchal leader.

The film's conclusion, in which Chisök proves his valor and dies heroically on the battlefield, conveys another dilemma of the nationalist imagination despite its seemingly propagandistic confidence. His death casts a lingering shadow of moral guilt; although he denounces his past wrongdoing, it ultimately costs him his life. Death seems the only fitting punishment for the initial act of betrayal that he has committed against the nation (and his father). The past haunts the present here to work to the extreme disadvantage of the protagonist. The elimination of the bad seed leads to the formation of another family based on the scenario of vengeance. At his last breath, Chisök asks Han and his stepsister Misaë to take care of Soryö, and the couple complies. The three surviving members form a new family where the patriotic parents will raise and educate another warrior for the nationalist cause.

Yet Soryö's excessive reaction to Chisök's death goes beyond and challenges this easy assessment of family formation. Her grieving over the man who took care of her with genuine love suggests that no one can truly replicate Chisök's role as father. Despite the idea of adoption and integration, the sequence thus entails self-doubt concerning the feasibility of perpetual regeneration of the family unit, here visualized specifically to serve the eternal struggle for the nation. The haunting reverberation of Soryö's sobs frustrates the happy but fabricated outcome of the nation's permanence and optimism, which appear to be in trouble even as the drumbeat for a continuing campaign is highlighted at the end.



FIGURE 5. Han carries the body of Chisök in *Continent on Fire*. Courtesy of the Korean Film Archive.

MANCHURIAN ACTION FILMS AS WAR NARRATIVE FILMS

From the 1950s to the present, more than ninety South Korean films, both narrative and documentary, have dealt with the subject of the Korean War, treating the conflict as a historical calamity that had a profound impact on the subsequent development of both Koreas. Yet as an unending war, the Korean War hardly marks a closed historical chapter, as many of these films imply; rather, the war is at the foundation of continuing tensions on the Korean peninsula, where Cold War politics continue to structure reality for people both north and south of the thirty-eighth parallel. Since the formation of North and South Korea as inimical states, both sides have witnessed massive ideological campaigns. Within this ideologically driven context, cinema has performed an effective cultural function by disseminating state ideology to the masses. South Korea's Korean War cinema has sought to establish a negative image of the enemy Other. As Theodore Hughes notes, North Korea in the cultural imaginary of South Korea has over time been increasingly associated with decline and collapse. South Korea itself, in contrast, has been rendered, in overtly visible terms, both present and alive.²³ Through this discursive process in which South Korea is implicitly set against a negative reflection of the counter-regime to its north, the South Korean state, within war narrative films, is represented as the sole rightful Korean nation. Revealing little about South Korea's positive substance but a great deal about its anxieties about legitimacy and security, South Korea's Korean War films have rendered visible and tangible the various scenarios of struggle against the communism that the state has maintained as an immutable political *raison d'être*.²⁴

South Korea's 1960s filmmaking scene is of particular interest and relevance because the period ushered in various new types of war narratives. Certainly, anticommunist Korean War films were a dominant type of war cinema whose

production dated back to the early days of the Korean War conflict. The South Korean government mobilized film personnel and resources to produce documentary and newsreel films about the nature of the Korean War to inculcate the masses then living under the hardship of total war.²⁵ In the 1960s, the collaboration between the state and filmmakers reached a zenith, as the state provided a complex form of institutional support for the production of anticommunist Korean War films. At the same time, the success of Yi Manhŭi's *The Marines Who Never Return* (*Toraoji annŭn haebyŏng*, 1963) and Shin Sangok's *Red Muffler* (*Ppalgan mahura*, 1964) proved the commercial viability of the Korean War theme. These works were followed by a slew of Korean War or war-themed films, such as *The Inchon Landing* (*Inchŏn sangryuk chakchŏn*; Cho Kŭngha, 1965), *Bloody Kuwol Mountains* (*P'idorin Kuwolsan*; Chŏe Muryong, 1965), *War and the Woman Teacher* (*Chŏnjaenggwa yŏgyosa*; Im Kwont'aek, 1966), *A Journey* (*Yŏro*; Yi Manhŭi, 1968), and *Seven People in the Cellar* (*Chihasilŭi ch'ilin*; Yi Sŏnggu, 1969), which largely adhered to the state's mandate of anticommunism and, in the case of Yi Manhŭi's films, offered critical humanist perspectives on the futility of war. The conspicuous visibility of these films has given rise to an impression among film scholars, however, that Korean War films are the sole type of war narratives that gained recognition in the 1960s, leaving out much-needed discussion on the Cold War as a political structure of war.

It was in the 1960s that Manchurian action films emerged as a different type of war narrative film, accruing a popularity that rivaled that of government-backed anticommunist Korean War films. Unlike the latter, Manchurian action films did not receive any institutional support from the government. Since they dealt with armed exploits of the colonial past, these works often were regarded as a separate film entity, set apart from the contemporaneous concerns of the Cold War politics that Korean War films reflected. As I will illustrate, however, the distinctive critical stance of Manchurian action films affords us an opportunity to engage with the formation and naturalization of South Korea's political discourse of war and experience. They register the perverse logic of Cold War politics in a way that few explicitly framed "war" films do. Although remote in generic, historical, and geographical relation to the Korean War, these films enable us to view how state power is consolidated through the state's involvement in perpetual war as an illicit underground business.

As a category, "Korean War films"—insofar as they are narrowly focused on the war of 1950–53—render the Cold War as largely elusive, if not invisible. Here, it should be recalled that the Cold War, as a geopolitical system, gave rise to a state of war as an ongoing conditioning structure of Korea and its neighboring countries. In the service of US hegemony in the region, this complex system has organized and regulated sociopolitical, economic, security, and cultural relations and operations. In projecting and naturalizing a binary worldview in which the liberal United States and its allies are set against their communist counterparts, the

Cold War system has had a discursive and logical sway that must be theorized and narrated beyond specific instances of military action and engagement.

For this reason, inquiry into Cold War politics in cultural representation needs to go beyond the confines of Korean War stories, which, as a result of the South Korean state's intense ideological programming, offer limited purchase for interrogating state power. As a body of film whose prescriptive parameters have been closely determined by South Korean state regulation and scrutiny, South Korea's Korean War films depict military battles and conflicts, yet they curiously close off the larger matrix of perpetual war that structured the 1950–53 war in the first place. Instead of expanding a critique of war to encompass the protracted nature and ubiquity of the state's military logic and militarized culture, South Korea's Korean War films, including antiwar films, produce the opposite effect: they paradoxically foreclose critical debates on the complexity of war as a structuring imaginary of the Cold War culture of South Korea specifically and of the region as a whole.

Nihilistic in character, South Korean antiwar films critique war and its destruction by highlighting humanistic values. Yet these films are not fundamentally different in kind from state-sanctioned, anticommunist war films insofar as both promote a pessimistic view toward politics without calling into question the structure and practice of state power. Although differences do exist, these can be understood along the lines of an expansion and contraction of narrative focus. Antiwar films include a general critique of the state machinery of war. However, this critical expansion is complemented by an inherently reactive move; instead of problematizing the South Korean state's practice of violence, these films revert to the very framework of liberal humanism that anticommunist war films have developed as an ideological foil to the ostensible depravity and monstrousness of North Korea.

The broadened focus of the antiwar variant of Korean War films, in other words, does not lead to critical analysis of the expanded purview of South Korean state power and authority enabled by the Korean War, much less a reading of it as a sign and symptom of the larger geopolitics of the Cold War. Rather, South Korea's antiwar Korean War films obsessively resort to a nihilistic form of humanism and, in so doing, limit the discursive parameters of inquiry into the relationship of South Korean state violence to the overarching Cold War structure. Enlarged yet paradoxically myopic, the focus of these films may compass a universalizing critique of war violence in the abstract; yet by disavowing the broader structure of the Cold War, Korean War films, classified narrowly as such, remain obscurantist texts. Whether anticommunist or antiwar, South Korea's war films impede critical understanding of the Cold War as a permanent system, effacing the Korean War's geopolitical origins and context. More specifically, they block from view the business side of South Korea's military mobilization—a dimension of the war that has buttressed the South Korean state's role within the coordinates of the Cold War in East Asia.

The impulse to foreclose the war and its meanings from the viewpoint of nihilistic humanism, I thus contend, is constitutive of South Korea's "Korean War films." Central to the reality of the unending Korean War, yet effaced from view in South Korea's ideologically regulated Korean War films, the South Korean state seldom, if ever, surfaces as a meaningful object of perception. Sovereign in its capacity to dictate representation while simultaneously remaining beyond the ambit of representation, South Korean state authority can be understood as a constitutive ideological limit of "Korean War film" as a Cold War cultural text. Hardly passive, South Korean state authority wields its power in its demarcation of interpretive limits. Thus, to explore Korean War discourse—its rationale, mobilization, and logistics—beyond the confines of that body of films conventionally recognized as "Korean War films," I contend that its scope must be expanded to include cultural scenarios of the 1931–45 Pacific War, more specifically, the proto-Korean nation-state during the colonial period that waged a military campaign against the Japanese Empire and its colonial apparatus. By directing attention to allegorical representations of the unseemly origins of the South Korean state, we are able to challenge how Korean War films can and should be understood.

The structural limitations of Korean War films relative to the perpetual politics of the Cold War raise the question of whether South Korean war narratives are capable of directly addressing the state's Cold War political function. Even as the argument can be advanced that the South Korean state consistently appears in Korean War films as a problematic entity in that it is represented as lacking full political authority or initiative, this depiction nowhere accords with the historical truth: namely, that the South Korean state asserted its dreadful power and violence against its own population before, during, and after the war. Indeed, the authoritarian state promulgated a developmentalist ideology accompanied by massive programming to control its populace for decades after the 1950–53 war. The inconsistency between filmic representation and sociopolitical reality compels us to consider whether South Korean cinema is capable of critically reflecting upon the contradictory features of the state as it has functioned within the Cold War system. Are there any filmic texts, in other words, that confront the contentious issue of the state's culpability within the "business" of warmongering?

Manchurian action films furnish a critical opening by way of which the war profiteering of the South Korean state can be scrutinized. In that this body of films imaginatively reflects upon the colonial past, however, the historical connection of these films to the contemporaneous condition of the Cold War—the juncture in which they were produced—is far from self-evident. This lack of obvious connection is compounded by the historiographical constraints of South Korea's Cold War culture, in which the colonial past is often myopically conceived as a demarcated time that preceded the emergence of the South Korean state. However, Manchurian action films of the 1960s are remarkably reflective of the capitalist war

politics of the Cold War South Korean state and in particular offer insight into the role of state power in rationalizing and maintaining the war as a perpetual business. Though set in the colonial past, these films extend beyond their temporal setting in terms of their significance. They demand analysis relative to the Cold War as a system. Offering crucial insight into the structural dimensions of the Cold War, they assert what most other popular war narratives fail to thematize: the workings of the partitioned capitalistic state in authorizing and managing the prolonged business of war.

Manchurian action films can be read through the conceptual lens of genre even as we attend to the constitutive problematics of genre-based analysis. In examining Manchurian action films as war narratives rather than as action films or westerns, as they are more typically categorized and addressed in existing scholarship, I argue against narrow preconceptions of genres when it comes to cultural narration of the Korean War. By situating the Korean War within the broader political economy of the Cold War, I aim to show how Manchurian action films complicate the generic template and periodized framework of Korean War films. Proceeding from the observation that constant war and military mobilization have structured—indeed produced—a false sense of stability and prosperity in the East Asian region, I argue that Manchurian action films reflect the material contradictions of South Korea's Cold War culture.

FOLLOWING THE MONEY

Growing criticism of Manchurian action films has strongly favored the later-period films at the expense of a close overview of the early works. By *later-period*, I mean the late 1960s and early 1970s films in which the genre's hybrid features were more pronounced and its anti-Japanese nationalism was more ironically represented. Whereas the early Manchurian action films had a strong generic affiliation with war films, the later works began, so to speak, to don western garb. As the critical ascendancy of *Break the Chain* (*Soe sasürül kkünöra*; Yi Man-hüi, 1971) illustrates, the generic shift of South Korea's Manchurian action films to the western, the most recognizably transnational genre of the time, facilitated a reading in which the later examples of the genre appear to mark a departure from the dominant state ideology. By valorizing the later films over the earlier ones, film critics, perhaps inadvertently, implied the earlier war narratives of Manchurian action films to be uncritical repositories of state propaganda. As the logic goes, the earlier works show total support for the nation, whereas the later works deviate from such political programming. It thus is widely held that only the later works—that is, the generically western Manchurian action films—deserve critical analysis and retrieval.

Yet such a narrow analytical focus neglects critical features of this hybrid genre's subversive potential. The questions I would like to pose speak to the changing contours of cinematic nationalism, but they also relate directly to how South Korean

war narratives engaged the structuring context of the Cold War. In particular, I would like to inquire toward what end male protagonists in war situations, specifically, the armed anticolonial struggle, exert their power and strength. What are the specific gains and rewards of their actions and endeavors? And, how are these actions related to the overarching anticolonial discourse of the nation that seems to dominate this war imaginary? On the surface, the answer is service to the nation and its struggle for independence. However, when examined closely, the answer to these questions is money. By *money*, I am referring to the way money as well as its metaphorical forms and configurations gains structural significance in the war imaginary of Manchurian action films.

Cinematic representations of colonialism prior to the advent of the Manchurian action film depict money or wealth in a purely negative fashion—in the form, more often than not, of ill-gotten gains. This negative depiction of material acquisition enables a dichotomous mapping of the world in which virtuous Koreans are set against treacherous Koreans. Collaborators, for instance, are always associated with material enrichment; their wealth, these filmic narratives make clear, is the direct outcome of their treachery. The binary of seeking money or serving the nation dominates the narrative of films like *Farewell to Tumen River*, an antecedent of Manchurian action films in which Japanese monetary reward for Korean collusion is depicted as pure evil—a system of colonial collaboration that must be eliminated. The imperative of identifying and punishing Korean traitors who receive reward money from the Japanese while exonerating those who are wrongfully accused as collaborators structures South Korea's representations of colonialism in the early postcolonial era.

The role of money changes substantially by the mid-1960s, however. In fact, the advent of the Manchurian action film signaled a radically different conception of money within the anticolonial war imaginary of South Korean film. Money is no longer conceived as a sign of corruption or betrayal—as something, in other words, at odds with the sacred aura of nationalist struggle. Instead, the guerrilla force now needs money desperately to carry out military campaigns. Films like *The Continent on Fire* and *Soviet-Manchurian Border* (*Soman kukkyöng*; Kang Pömgü, 1964) are prime examples of this narrative reconception of money. In these war narratives the procurement, the transfer, and the management of war funds constitute the principal action. In *Soviet-Manchurian Border*, for example, the male protagonist's prolonged suffering and melancholia derive precisely from his failure to complete a business transaction—the delivery of war funds—with the Soviet Army. In the wake of this failure, burdened by guilt and shame, the protagonist is unable to return to the guerrilla headquarters, becoming instead a leader of a local gangster organization. Only with his delivery of lost war funds to the guerrilla force is he morally redeemed by the end of the film.

The narrative of many 1960s Manchurian action films is often structured around the theme of “following the money.” The procurement of the war funds

by whatever means necessary is featured as central to the struggle against the Japanese, so much so that this economic endeavor is virtually identical to, rather than inconsistent with, upholding the political mantra of nationalism. Here the political creed and the economic agenda of the South Korean state appear to be in total unison. To serve the nation, one must bring money to the table. Patriotism, accordingly, is defined in terms of purloined property or canny resource procurement. This, I argue, is a distinctively capitalist way of imagining the anticolonial struggle particular to South Korea's war narrative films.²⁶

It must be noted that war funds never appear as actual banknotes. Instead, they appear in the form of objects, properties, or resources with monetary value: gold bullion, treasure maps, Buddhist statues, jewelry, mineral and ore mine maps, and so forth. Strikingly, identifiably Japanese government notes or banknotes—the actual legal tender of Manchukuo as a Japanese colony—never appear as circulating currency in Manchurian action films. Like Japanese settlers and residents in Korea, who never appear in the nationalist imaginary of colonial Korea, Japanese money is structurally absent in Manchurian action films, even though the genre is thematically preoccupied—indeed obsessed—with money. Manchurian action films, in other words, are largely preoccupied with money in nonmoney forms—in other words, money unmarked as the legal tender of the Japanese Empire.

As I note in other chapters, South Korean films depict Japanese rule over Korea predominantly as a quasi-military occupation. Framing Japanese colonial rule as an unlawful foreign occupation signals the political crisis of a temporary loss of nation. The colonial occupation becomes manageable through the resistance politics of armed struggle. However, depicting the settlement of Japanese residents and the circulation of government notes would engender a different, less recognizably anticolonial nationalist imaginary. Depicting Japanese settler colonialists and the circulation of Japanese *yuan* (yen) would signify the deep penetration of the Japanese colonial power into the economic sphere of Korean people—into arenas of their daily activity. Outright depiction of this penetration could mean, then, the absorption of all Koreans into a system of colonial rule so total that a space of resistance would be difficult to conceive. Any such signifiers of a permanent colonial economy necessarily were omitted from the nationalist imaginary. In Manchurian action films, the male characters, whether villains, good guys, or nationalist fighters, are in competition, forming alliances or committing betrayals to get the prized objects, which are never explicitly Japanese banknotes. Korean nationalists cannot, after all, be seen in pursuit of Japanese currency—such a quest would signal the totality of Japanese colonial hegemony.

Manchurian action films depict the original ownership of properties in intentionally murky terms, yet these filmic narratives are premised on the assumption that the guerrillas *always*, in fact, have rightful ownership. In *Return of the Wanderer* (*Toraon pangrangja*; Kim Hyoch'ŏn, 1970), it is nearly impossible to figure out to whom the gold bullion originally belonged. All the involved characters

dispute its history, but the original owner is never verified. The logical disarray over anterior ownership of the property, which produces a series of unintended campy moments, becomes immediately clear once the nationalist guerrillas enter the picture and declare their claim. This conception of guerrilla treasure as the nation's anterior possession is achieved by portraying the nationalist guerrillas as having greater and more precise knowledge of the properties' whereabouts and "true" value. Although the individual guerrillas are often depicted as not initially understanding the true value of the properties, they acquire such information as they are drawn more deeply into their mission. Guided by a higher authority, the desire of the nationalist guerrillas to pursue the property thus appears to be aimed at restoring the rightful order of things.

Not open to questioning, the authority of the nationalist group is tied to its apparently unchallenged ownership claim to the treasure. This rightful lien is matched by the total commitment of the guerrilla agents, who simply follow their orders without reservation. Here the Manchurian action film is explicit in its psychoanalytic figuration of the authority of the nation-state. Although Korea lost its sovereignty to Japan during the historical period described in Manchurian action films, the proto-state nevertheless asserts its authority over its subjects through a dyad of two psychoanalytically drawn subjects, who complementarily constitute the symbolic order of nationalism. On one end of the spectrum is the subject who is supposed to know (the leader of the guerrilla camp), and on the other is the subject who is supposed to believe (guerrilla agents).²⁷ What sustains the authority of the proto-state, as figured by the all-knowing guerrilla leader, is the leader's knowledge of the specific location of the prized object. The leader, in other words, always already knows the whereabouts and value of the properties; at the same time, the agent unequivocally believes in the leader's knowledge of the properties. The pairing of these two subjects in their shared quest for treasure is indispensable to establishing the symbolic order of the Korean nation and society. Whereas war could easily signify the breakdown of the normal order, war as business, as rendered in the Manchurian action film, serves to solidify the power and authority of the state.

The war funds that structure, define, and regulate militant anticolonial struggle in these early Manchurian action films have an amorphous character. Their depiction clearly echoes the Marxist notion of money as the matrix of social relations. Yet the peculiarly topological aspect of money, devoid of any reference to actually existing Japanese legal tender, encourages us to conceive of war funds in these films in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms as "objet petit a": namely, as that which remains perpetually out of reach but, as a trigger, structures desire, setting it in motion.²⁸ In this regard, the proto-state, or the subject who is supposed to know all about money, not only commands service to the nation but also tantalizes each individual, compelling the guerrilla into a cycle of action that never reaches final fulfillment. After all, the money that the nationalist guerrilla forces attain

ultimately belongs to the state. In this sense, Manchurian action films offer a portrait of a state that regulates not solely through the severity of order and coercion, but also through a powerful scenario of desire.

Not only do Manchurian action films compel a reconsideration of the South Korean proto-nation by figuring it as an anticolonial guerrilla force, and of money by depicting it as ill-gotten gains, they also unveil the seamy underside of war as a profitable state enterprise. Its authority far from righteous, the nation in these films appears as an underground quasi-criminal organization whose main business operations require the liquidation and laundering of stolen goods into money—the conversion, in other words, of plunder into legal tender. In their refusal to figure the nation as a transcendental entity whose legitimacy is beyond question, Manchurian action films perversely identify war profiteering as the motor of the nation. In so doing, South Korea's Manchurian action films offer the possibility of a new interpretation of the Korean War narrative: set within the colonial period yet produced in the decade following the 1950–53 conflict, these films expose the shadowy—indeed, illegitimate—underside of the nation. Founded on ill-gotten gains and perpetuated by the same, the capitalist nation in the throes of war has recourse, in this filmic cycle, to perverse acts of criminal violation and transgression.

The radically ambivalent, primitive setting of Manchurian action films serves to displace the obscurity of the nation's self-sustaining activities by, in effect, relegating and sequestering it to the arena of fiction. In the Manchurian action film, the deeply ideological spatial imaginary of the Hollywood western genre has been grafted onto the making of the South Korean nation. Unable to lay claim to the historic anticolonial revolutionary legacy associated with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung in the region, South Korea's Manchurian action films construct a different lineage—one that borrows from the settler colonial logic of Manifest Destiny in the United States. Indeed, the generic influence of the western, particularly on those films that come later in the Manchurian action film cycle, is unmistakable. Western films generally portray the West as empty, chaotic, and violent but ultimately in the process of becoming part of the nation's sovereign territory. Their narrative simultaneously erases local history and turns the space into a battleground for competing ownership claims.²⁹ It is a space, essentially, that is up for grabs. Often, the outsider who has no clear historical claim to the space emerges as the proprietor by virtue of being the victor of a violent contest. South Korea's Manchurian action films appropriate this generic configuration of the West as the open, yet-to-be-claimed space. Borrowing their atmosphere of lawlessness from the western genre, Manchurian action films feature westernized spaces in which the guerrillas assume prior ownership of property and resources and legitimize their endless pursuit of the same. Those who know about or discover the valued objects first can claim ownership according to the rationale of "finders keepers."³⁰

Yet here the ethics promulgated by spaghetti westerns must be distinguished from those particular to classical westerns, which have little to do with the former's explicit emphasis on personal greed and materialism. Whereas many classical western films are preoccupied with the establishment of law and order in a frontier community, the former are not concerned with such lofty ideals. Instead, the main characters in spaghetti westerns are focused on individual gains and private material rewards. Manchurian action films' persistent emphasis on resource procurement reflects how the narrative logic of individual greed and materialism in the spaghetti western can be incorporated into the particular capitalist logic of South Korea's cinematic nationalist imaginary.

Manchurian action films thus project a distinctively capitalist way of conceiving of anticolonial nationalism and, in doing so, expose the operations of war as a business. They furnish us with a critical opportunity to consider how Cold War bipolar politics and neoliberal logic have deeply permeated South Korea's anticolonial imagination. Here the nation is represented as a political entity that constantly demands individual action to procure money equivalents: namely, objects, properties, and resources that can be transformed into operational resources. The anti-Japanese guerrilla campaign is thus less about logistical specifics—where to fight, how to fight, with whom to fight, with whom to form alliances—than it is about how to secure war funds. According to this logic, bringing money home is the paramount nationalist act.

Produced during the Cold War, Manchurian action films feature war troves comprising sundry material objects, the ambiguity of which, I argue, can be read critically against the historical juncture in which these films were produced. Uneasily recalling the structural amorphousness of the Japanese economic assistance so central to South Korea's economic miracle, the fungibility of funds—and the mystery of their origins—in Manchurian action films must be understood, I argue, against South Korea's historic normalization of relations with Japan in the 1960s. It is no secret that Park Chung Hee's principal reasons for normalizing relations with Japan were economic. And, without question, money from Japan in the form of compensation, grants, and loans was vital to the early stages of Park's development project. Considering this, I would argue that Manchurian action films' persistent conjuration of money allegorizes how the secret of South Korea's financial rise remains hidden from view in South Korean society, much as the concept of "enemy properties" in the postliberation period effectively erased Japanese capital and properties. The fact that the original ownership of the properties is never in question in Manchurian action films is important insofar as it reinforces, in legerdemain fashion, South Korea's social myth of autonomous development and industrialization.

But we must ask: If the basis of the nation is represented as war profiteering, what happens when that nation no longer is associated with war as a business?



FIGURE 6. Three protagonists in *Break the Chain*. Courtesy of the Korean Film Archive.

Put differently, will the profit-seeking individual still fight for and serve the nation when the latter has nothing to offer in material terms? Here, it is worth briefly turning to Yi Manhŭi's 1971 Manchurian action film, *Break the Chain* (*Sesasŭrŭl kkŭnŏra*), in which a decoupling of money and politics occurs. Many critics valorize the film for its seeming resistance to the nationalist call of duty. The film ends with the dispersion of its main protagonists, three men who refuse to join the nationalist campaign, yet I would note that their decision comes after they realize that the object of their pursuit, the Tibetan Buddhist statue, has no monetary value whatsoever; rather, the statue has the names of the guerrilla force inscribed inside—identities that must be protected at all cost. In other words, the statue is important to the guerrillas alone. Upon realizing the purely political value of the pursued object, these men depart. If Yi Manhŭi's film is unusual, it is not because the characters' action signifies a willful rejection of nationalism in its totality. Instead, his film is uncommon because the anticolonial struggle is presented without any promise of material reward: it has emerged as pure politics. The protagonists leave behind the nationalist campaign because it is no longer attractive to them materially. The film's ending then reminds us of the disturbing truth of a state caught in the logic of the Cold War: without monetary objects that it can offer up to compel action, the state is stripped of its authority. The only way to reverse this situation is for the nation-state to assume what is expected under Cold War politics: namely, to maintain war profiteering as its *raison d'être*.

Set in Manchuria during the colonial period, Manchurian action films are war narratives of a particular kind. These films inherit their nationalist ethos from biographical films of earlier decades that glorified the heroic anticolonial independence struggles of Korean patriots. Manchurian action films, however, replace the didacticism of the earlier nationalist films with a new narrative approach toward colonial history. Instead of highlighting the lives of actual historical figures, these

films feature the adventures of armed militants who wage war against the Japanese imperial army. In the late 1960s, these war narrative films incorporated conventions of both the western (hence the hybrid generic term *Manchurian western*) and the martial arts action film, while maintaining the masculine ethos of loyalty particular to earlier nationalist films.

As I have examined, this body of films poses questions about the changing terms of cinematic nationalism during the 1960s. On the surface, Manchurian action films can be read as an attempt to reformulate and reenergize anticolonial and anti-Japanese nationalism during a period when—in response to the pressures of Cold War realpolitik but against the overwhelming opposition of the South Korean people—the South Korean state normalized relations with Japan. Just as the Japanese colonial Other reemerged as the refashioned partner in the bipolar politics of the Cold War, the ways of seeing and imagining the colonial past and space show the deeper repercussions of the historical changes that were under way. The expansive extraterritorial space of Manchuria launched a new imagery of the colonial past filled with masculine adventure and camaraderie for the nation. Yet the promise for the masculine characters was strongly circumscribed by the logic of war and its business, through which the state emerged as the figure of authority and command. It was through this shift in the representation of the political authority from a moral figure to the regulator of materialist desire that South Korea's popular imagination of the colonial past remained under the spell of the authoritarian state.