

In the Colonial Zone of Contact

Kisaeng and Gangster Films

In South Korea, the genre of gangster films first gained popularity in the late 1960s and 1970s.¹ These earlier forms of the Korean gangster film were set against the distinctive historical backdrop of the colonial era.² Films such as *Men from Eight Provinces* (*P'aldo sanai*; Kim Hyochön, 1969), *A True Story of Kim Tuhan* (*Silök Kim Tuhan*; Kim Hyochön, 1974), *Righteous Fighter, Kim Tuhan* (*Hyöpkaek Kim Tuhan*; Kim Hyochön, 1975), and *Lynx* (*Sirasoni*; Yi Hyöksu, 1979) offer historical accounts of the rise of Korean organized crime in 1930s colonial Seoul, with a geographical focus on the market districts of Chongno and Tongdaemun as the principal sites of masculine action. The social themes of violence and order, group hierarchy, and status mobility intersect with colonial questions of Korean identity, culture, and politics. If the colonial questions deal with the inner domain of personal belief and devotion vis-à-vis the idea of nation, the social themes enact in dramatic terms the societal logic of affiliation, loyalty, and entitlement within a subculture of illicit practices and violent crime. The gangster film's presentation of the male protagonist's rise to the top of the gangster organization also mirrors the growing anticipation of confrontation with the Japanese adversary. South Korean gangster films carry an allegorical message of anticolonial struggle and resistance in what is otherwise a fantasy of individual success and social mobility in a hostile, power-driven world.

Typically in gangster films set in the colonial era, the *kisaeng* or female entertainer courtesan complements the righteous masculinity that the male gangster protagonist aspires to represent. The *kisaeng* often functions as the fixed point of the gangster's moral compass; her devotion affirms and inspires his acts of justice in a world of colonial injustice and domination. Yet the scenario of domestic

happiness almost always remains incomplete in the gangster narrative. The nature of gangster heroics hence intersects with questions of the gendered trope of morality in colonial imaginings.³

The character of the *kisaeng* also inspired its own series of colonial-era melodramas in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Films such as *Myöngwolgwán Lady* (*Myöngwolgwán assi*; Pak Chongho, 1967), *Blue Light and Red Light* (*Chongdüng hongdüng*; Yi Hyöngp'yo, 1968), *Golden Carriage* (*Hwanggüm macha*; Kim Kwisöp, 1968), *A Camellia Blossoms and Falls* (*Tongbaekkot pigo chigo*; Chöng Chinu, 1970), *A Portrait of Woman* (*Yöindo*; Kim Yönggöl, 1971), *Warrior Kisaeng* (*Hyöpki*; Chang Chinwon, 1973), and *Obaekhwa, the Five Renowned Kisaeng of Seoul* (*Changan myönggi Obaekhwa*; Im Kwont'aek, 1973) indicate the visibility of *kisaeng* on screen.⁴ Although few of these films feature the *kisaeng*'s participation in the anti-colonial struggle for independence, the majority underscore the individual plight of the *kisaeng* character buffeted by social prejudice and hostility.⁵ The production and popularity of *kisaeng* films show historical overlap with the growing popularity of gangster films, as both genres gained traction in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁶ *Kisaeng* were among the most visible and versatile female figures on the late 1960s screen and afforded a popular view of colonial social life.⁷

The generic identifications of “*kisaeng* film” (*kisaeng yönghwa*) and “gangster film” (*kkangpae yönghwa*) indicate the centrality of these figures in the organization and progression of the film narrative. But these labels also reflect changes, during the postcolonial period of the 1960s and 1970s, in the kinds of characters that represented the colonial experience. These figures focus the viewer's attention on a different type of social interaction and struggle. Consequently, this chapter explores how the narratives of socially marginalized figures like gangsters and *kisaeng* inform a different matrix for portraying colonialism. For instance, the marginal status of these figures introduces and elaborates themes about the hierarchies, divisions, exclusion, and discrimination that operate in, and constitute, social life in colonial Korea. The exploration of these subjects shows these films' very different orientation from earlier films' logic of exclusion and negation. The entangled visibility of *kisaeng* and gangster hence demands a comparison of these two genres' perspectives on social marginality and ethnic interaction as these were incorporated into the changing historical imagination of the 1960s.

Before delving into two key texts—*Kang Myöngghwa* for the *kisaeng* film and *A True Story of Kim Tuhan* for the gangster film—I would like to examine the larger issue of colonial representation and its logic in the 1960s. The notion of social marginality is salient for this theme; it not only represents a new social perspective but also offers a larger critical window onto how the overall cinematic rendition of colonial space changed in the 1960s. Although much of this chapter focuses on issues of marginality—the dynamics of social mobility and the logic of exclusion and integration—I begin by addressing the seismic shift in the colonial

configuration of the 1960s and beyond. I do this in order to address the changing cinematic discourse on colonialism and its historicity within the circumstances of the 1960s.

South Korea's normalization of relations with Japan and, later, its deployment of troops in the Vietnam War caused major changes in how the colonial past was discussed and how it was depicted in film. As the new bipolar vision of the Cold War disrupted the framework of anticolonial discourse and ideology, the repercussions in cinema were visible in several changes in subject matter, thematic focus, and sensibility. Among these were new sociocultural motifs and tropes of social space and cultural activities that reflected the changing construction of Korean identity and its relation to the colonial power. I examine the colonial tropes of socially marginal figures such as the *kisaeng* and the gangster as part and parcel of this crucial representational pattern and its development. These tropes were conceived as a narrative form of response to South Korea's speedy integration into the Cold War bipolar structure and the accompanying renewal of debate and controversy about the cultural heritage of colonialism in South Korean society.

PROBLEMATIZING CULTURE IN THE COLD WAR BIPOLAR GEOPOLITICAL ORDER

To account for the broader implications of this change in attitude toward colonial culture and representation, I draw on Rey Chow's insights into ethnography and the subjective origins of postcolonial visibility. In Chow's formulation, "the binary structure of observer/observed," with its inherent inequality, is central to the construction of the ethnographical fascination with a "primitive" culture, and postcolonially the state of being looked at is internalized as "part of the active manner in which such cultures represent—ethnographize—themselves."⁸ Chow brings up this notion to resolve the epistemological deadlock created by the persistence of a Western understanding of ethnography in non-Western intellectual discourse: "We cannot write/think/talk the non-West in the academy without in some sense anthropologizing it, and yet anthropology and ethnography, atrophied in their epistemological foundations, remain 'very much still a one-way street.'" For Chow, a focus on visibility is essential for challenging a particular pattern of knowledge production in anthropology and ethnography, the latter of which can be defined as "a kind of representation with subjective origins," contrary to its claims of scientific objectivity. She asserts that "a new ethnography is possible only when we turn our attention to the subjective origins of ethnography as it is practiced by those who were previously ethnographised and who have, in the postcolonial age, taken up the active task of ethnographising their own cultures."⁹

The condition of possibility that Chow calls "the subjective origins of ethnography" has great relevance for understanding the various forces, conflicts, and inflections that made up the cultural landscape of South Korea in the 1960s.¹⁰ Her

insight, in supposing the palimpsestic nature of the postcolonial self-representation of culture, can be used productively to explain the complex film scenes of the 1960s, when the subject of colonialism gained urgency and when debate on the nature of cultural identity in and of South Korean cinema changed. The film aesthetics and discourses of the 1960s that I examine in this and other chapters are located at a crucial historical juncture, a point when colonial imagery and imagining gained new currency, shaping the South Korean film industry in the years to come.

In Chow's formulation, *visuality* emerges as the organizing field of discourse by which the ex-colonized invent and furnish their own authorial views of the nation's past culture. The new filmic tropes of colonial culture therefore signify the meeting point between two regimes of looking: the historical one that embodies the past colonizer's way of looking at Korea as an object of fascination, and the contemporary postcolonial view that registers new ways of looking at Korea's own culture. As Chow reminds us, the postcolonial view retains troubling traces of the previous, colonial *visuality*, forming what she calls the "optical unconscious." Chow describes this complex rewriting and reappropriation that the visual narrative medium of cinema performs so effectively for viewers as a process of translation, or a "vast transcription process."¹¹

I submit that the 1960s and 1970s mark a particularly conspicuous phase of this kind of translation in South Korean cinema. This epochal process involved not only restaging and revisualizing the unaddressed past, particularly that of the colonial culture, but also actively transcoding the tropes and imagery of that culture to correspond to the political inflection of the era's Cold War bipolar logic. The impetus of this translation process arose not only from indigenous reflection but also from Cold War events: it is crucial to bear in mind these films' relation to the larger context of the geopolitical events and polarization of the 1960s and beyond. The question of the historicity of the cinematic form is tied not only to the vernacularization or transcription of past cultural elements or ideas into a contemporary visual medium, but also to the political inflections and discourse that surround the rise of such new cinematic imagining.

To engage this nexus of the Cold War, I draw insight from scholars of the Cold War who have formulated alternate ways of thinking about its cultural dimension.¹² Heonik Kwon reminds us through an illuminating summary of works by Zaki Laïdi and Christian G. Appy that the Cold War involved a comprehensive meaning-making endeavor that was as important for the global bipolar structure as the domination and regulation of political institutions and relations. A "battle for appropriation of meaning" was central to the competing systems in international politics that saw different scenarios of historical progress and moral superiority.¹³ This struggle for words and meaning was not a single totalizing operation; rather, as Christian Appy notes, it encompassed plural and diverse cultural practices that were also perceived and understood in different terms by local people.¹⁴

I contend that for Korea this meaning-making process included, among other things, a particular visibility or way of imagining and remembering the colonial past that popular cinema dramatized and promulgated. Several scholars have noted the inherent semantic contradictions in the imaginary notion of the Cold War as a period of long peace. Kwon argues that such a belief is inconsistent with local histories and experiences that unfolded when the revolutionary struggle for decolonization collided with the bipolarization of politics. In fact, it was at this contested “historical horizon” that bipolar politics took their most deadly turn in the case of South Korea: the catastrophic civil war that began in 1950 and the ensuing militarization of social relations and culture.¹⁵

Kwon’s conceptualization of the Cold War helps us approach South Korea’s cinematic appraisal of the colonial experience as an inflection of the Cold War bipolar mode of thinking. The Cold War, examined from Kwon’s perspective, can be read both as the global ordering of bipolar politics *and* as the diverse cultural iteration of local histories and experiences. In the trajectory that I trace with regard to South Korea’s *kisaeng* and gangster films, the cinematic configuration of “local” knowledges and imaginaries has been called into question, recalibrated, and appropriated by the dominant bipolar political ordering of the Cold War.¹⁶

The imagery of cinematic representation informed the negotiated terrain that at first seemed to refer to a bygone era but in practice corresponded to the dilemmas of the present. It was no longer tenable to approach the question of colonialism purely through the prism of national(istic) politics when both former colonizers and colonized states had entered supposedly equalizing diplomatic relations under the Cold War bipolar order. In other words, the anterior principle of nationalist film aesthetics confronted major challenges in the 1960s and changed to accommodate the new geopolitical developments. The political dictate of overcoming Japanese colonialism, as it were, turned into a more complex and diffused visual portrayal of Japanese-Korean relations that envisioned various terms of equivalence and exchange between the two countries.

However limited or problematic in its effect, this new popular cinematic imagining of the colonial therefore constituted a fertile cultural site where global pressure and local responses produced creative and complex terms of dialogue and negotiation.¹⁷ As I previously noted in chapter 2 on the “Japanese color” controversies, the 1960s’ heightened sense of urgency over the crisis of representation of the colonial era also led to prolonged debate on the national and cultural identity of South Korean cinema.

Popular memory of the colonial experience was a particular social knowledge that was caught up in the systemic epistemological reordering of values of the Cold War. The ethnographical approaches of Chow and Kwon are useful in exploring the inherent limits of the dominant view of the Cold War and its impact on local expression of the bipolar experience. The ethnographical turn is justified here not simply because it offers a means of considering new small-scale knowledge but

also because it allows one to examine the status of national culture vis-à-vis the colonial experience as it took a different position in the matrix of intensified geopolitical ordering.

One result of this shift was an implicit change in Korea's status vis-à-vis Japan. Its autonomy was no longer imagined as national, in terms of an overarching hierarchical order and regulation, but as provincial, in terms of a delimited sovereignty of scattered, porous, island-like discrete areas and places, which would be more appropriately studied by anthropology or ethnography than by history.

IN THE ZONE OF PROPINQUITY:
HARASSMENT, STRATIFICATION, AND THE
SINPA MODE IN *KANG MYŎNGHWA*

When Kang Taejin directed the 1967 film *Kang Myŏnghwa*, which now is considered one of the signal *kisaeng*-themed films of the late 1960s, his reputation as a proficient filmmaker of melodrama underwent a revival. Kang had proven his filmmaking talent early in his career with the commercial and critical success of such classics as *Mr. Park (Pak Sŏbang, 1960)* and *The Coachman (Mabu, 1961)*. He worked steadily during the golden age of South Korean cinema, directing on average three films per year throughout the 1960s. Most of the films he directed belong to the genre of family melodrama, arguably the most popular genre form of the era. Kang subsequently earned a reputation as one of the most reliable and bankable directors in this fast-changing period of the film industry.

His modest auteurist stature reached new prominence in 1967 with a series of major box office hits. This was the period during which the subject of modern Japan and its imagery preoccupied the minds of South Korean filmmakers and audiences alike. Consequently, colonial culture emerged on the South Korean screen with a vengeance, and Kang made a successful attempt to bring the era's cultural issues to box office fruition. Starting with *I Yearn to Go (Kagopa)*, followed by the even more commercially successful *Youth Theater (Chŏngch'un kŭgjang)* and *Kang Myŏnghwa*, Kang emerged as a major director with distinctive skills to open a new popular vista on colonial culture.¹⁸ In particular, Kang's films brought up cultural memories of the colonial past by refashioning and emphasizing social and cultural interactions that had been largely excluded from filmic portrayals of colonialism.

His unique depictions of the colonial era did not go unnoticed by film critics. As one writer observed, Kang's forte lay in the way he expanded the dramatic treatment of colonialism by incorporating humanistic values and a new sensibility into stories while maintaining the necessary critical attitude toward Japanese domination. Another commentator noted that, while Kang's films hardly qualified as artworks of the era, they represented the best examples of "healthy entertainment" or "elegant melodrama." During the Japanese-color frenzy of the 1960s,

Kang Myŏnghwa was noteworthy for inspiring a trend of *kisaeng*-themed melodrama films, many of them set in the colonial period.¹⁹ Portrayed as icons of tragic love and sacrifice, *kisaeng* characters were typically featured in a culturally denigrated form of melodrama called *sinpa* in the late 1960s. The Korean film historian Yi Yŏngil criticized these *kisaeng*-themed films and their reactionary *sinpa* sentiment (*pokkojŏk sinpa chŏngsŏ*), which he regarded as a regressive development in late 1960s film.²⁰

Yet *Kang Myŏnghwa*'s favorable critical reception suggests that by the late 1960s the previous decade's treatment of the colonial era had become formulaic and stale. In contrast to heavy-handed nationalist scenarios, Kang's turn to showcasing the *kisaeng* who had previously catered to the colonial gaze signaled not only a change in subject matter and sensibility, but also postcolonial cinema's reappropriation of the legacy of colonial-era visual culture in which the figure of the *kisaeng* was the most recognizable icon. To be sure, Kang's sympathetic portrayal of these female entertainers was not unique during this period. Shin Sangok's 1967 literary film adaptation *The Remembered Traces of the Yi Dynasty* (*Ijojanyŏng*) is a serious treatment of *kisaeng* as the embodiment of colonial culture. Drawn from the literary novella by Kajiyama Toshiyuki, the film received enthusiastic accolades from film critics for its presentation of Japanese sympathy and atonement for Korean suffering under colonial domination. Yet the portrayal of *kisaeng* in Shin's film recasts the visual scheme of the colonialist gaze as an impetus to drive the narrative forward. What is unique about *The Remembered Traces of the Yi Dynasty* is its violent ending, which registers in allegorical terms the impossibility of true reconciliation between Korea and Japan. Both *The Remembered Traces of the Yi Dynasty* and *Kang Myŏnghwa* raised public interest in the *kisaeng* as a new figure of melodrama and, in doing so, reworked the cultural space of entertainment that her body traverses and makes visual. However, *Kang Myŏnghwa* takes viewers into a different realm of social life barely ventured into by the allegorically oriented *The Remembered Traces of the Yi Dynasty*.

Kang Myŏnghwa engages with, and hence historicizes, the colonial cultural discourse on the Korean *kisaeng* by framing the narrative around her pursuit of love and its tragic failure. The film projects a set of values and attitudes toward *kisaeng* that overlap with but also diverge from the objectified colonial imagery of *kisaeng*. Through a melodramatic rhetoric of pathos, Kang's film attributes a greater degree of affective intensity. It reworks the cultural memories of the *kisaeng* as it simultaneously fleshes out and marginalizes her as a new yet outmoded figure caught in the forces of social division and discrimination within colonial Korea. More specifically, it is through the *kisaeng*'s predicament that persistent social problems of discrimination, exclusion, materialism, and marginalization hitherto unaddressed in the colonial imagery of South Korea are brought into view.

The tragic dimension of romantic love in the true story on which the film was based had captured public imagination in the early 1920s. The love suicide

of Kang Myŏnghwa was the cause célèbre of 1923, as many newspapers provided full coverage of the incident. According to these newspaper reports, *kisaeng* Kang Myŏnghwa had fallen in love with Chang Pyŏngchŏn, but their love soon met fierce opposition from Chang's wealthy family. After a series of tribulations, Kang decided to abandon her *kisaeng* career to prove her fidelity to her love. However, when all her efforts ended in failure, she killed herself by taking rat poison. She died in the arms of her lover, Chang, who soon followed suit by committing suicide out of despair.

In a previous era, Kang's suicide would have remained a mere individual event, but with the proliferation of newspapers in the early 1920s it became the object of the public's enthusiasm for passionate love. According to Kwon Bodurae, the notion of romantic love (*yŏnae* in Korean) attained central significance in social and cultural discourses during this period when Korea was engulfed in a feverish passion for social reform. A new modern discourse of romantic love, Kwon contends, was one of the direct channels through which people could imagine and rationalize the urgency of social reform and enlightenment. It also was a source of personal well-being and happiness and a wellspring of inspiration for new artistic works and experiments.²¹ In the new media environment, Kang's story turned into a national headline and Kang's name became a household word that stood for the mythic dimension of tragic love.

The story inspired numerous literary fictions and film adaptations. The 1967 film version of *Kang Myŏnghwa* was not simply a direct appropriation of a story of love suicide;²² it drew heavily from the accumulated narrative elements of popular dime novels of the colonial era, and its screenplay was written by Cho Hŭnp'a, who had previously penned a radio drama version of *Kang Myŏnghwa* that aired on TBC Radio.²³

Illustrating a growing practice within the film industry since the late 1950s, the 1967 film version of *Kang Myŏnghwa* hence represents story appropriation and adaptation across a variety of media: the print media coverage of the romantic love craze that galvanized the public in the 1920s as well as the cinematic adaptation of a radio drama that had borrowed from dime novel stories and news accounts. Hence, in depicting the colonial culture, the film does not offer a direct view of the past era of sovereignty loss. Rather, it offers interconnected commentaries, references, conventions, and tropes that surround a renowned narrative of the colonial era. Through the complex reuse of the colonial archetype of the tragic *kisaeng* story, the film not only newly imagines the colonial past but also questions what constitutes colonial culture in the visual *mise-en-scène* of the 1960s postcolonial and Cold War frame.

In addition, the film shares a thematic affinity with the youth film of the mid-1960s, which was the most commercially successful filmmaking trend from roughly 1964 to 1966. In particular, *Kang Myŏnghwa*'s thematic treatment of social hierarchy and the tragic aspect of love suicide resonated strongly with the

recurring thematic concerns of youth films, including the quintessential *Barefoot Youth* (*Maenbal-üi chöngch'un*) of 1964. Furthermore, the film is an extension of Kang Taejin's own preoccupation with the youth theme, as in *Youth Theater*, which relates the adventurous heroics of a group of students in the colonial period. The male protagonist Chang in *Kang Myöngghwa* shares the youthful but naive energy and optimism that is characteristic of the young people in *Youth Theater*. More importantly, actress Yun's portrayal of a *kisaeng* was a new depiction of the old profession, with a novelty value that the film's promotion used to great advantage. The film's connections to literary works, as well as radio drama and youth films, a new film genre from Japan, all made possible the 1960s filmic revision of colonial culture.

From an analytic perspective, one can argue that the new trope of the *kisaeng* afforded a view of the space of interaction between Koreans and Japanese—namely the city streets at night and the *kisaeng* house—that paralleled contemporary attitudes toward the 1965 normalization of relations with Japan. The *kisaeng* house, in particular, gained significance because of the exceptional interaction it introduced and regulated between the two ethnic groups. In this marginal zone, Korean men are portrayed as competing with the colonizer for the attentions of the *kisaeng* and in the process, exemplifying national integrity and moral superiority. Outside this space, where respectful and romantic encounters could take place between the *kisaeng* and Korean men, lay a colonial society where materialist values and rigid rules of hierarchy and discrimination always worked against the aspirations of the *kisaeng* to be included in that society. What typically ensues, as in *Kang Myöngghwa*, is a conventional narrative of *sinpa* melodrama in which the female protagonist tries to realize her notion of pure love, only to face ultimate defeat.

The opening sequence of *Kang Myöngghwa* features a fateful night street encounter between the *kisaeng* Kang and the male student Chang that also introduces colonial tensions in the spatial terms of boundaries and proximity. The film begins with Korean male students strolling through the night alleys of Seoul singing exuberantly with arms around one another. The boisterous mood, enhanced by a backward tracking camera shot, dispels the somber aura of night alleys typical of cinematic treatments of nocturnal colonial Seoul. The group is bar-hopping, but protagonist Chang, played by the 1960s' most sought-after actor, Shin Söngil, bids the others goodbye and goes his separate way. His sense of exuberance and freedom that lingers from an enjoyable time with his friends quickly evaporates when he witnesses a Japanese drunkard's harassment of a Korean woman and rushes to her rescue. The ensuing commotion results in his arrest by the colonial police. Chang's chivalrous action does not go unnoticed, however. Kang Myöngghwa, the Korean *kisaeng* rescued by Chang, had treated to a hidden corner and saw all that occurred. When Chang later visits the *kisaeng* house to be entertained and to socialize with his friends, Kang immediately recognizes her savior. With this scene, the film initiates the momentum that leads to their budding romance.



FIGURE 7. The female protagonist Kang (right), rescued by Chang on a street at night in *Kang Myŏnghwa*. Courtesy of the Korean Film Archive.

The opening sequence utilizes the contrived elements of melodrama, as it introduces the two protagonists through the gendered scenario of the masculine rescue of a damsel in distress. Yet it also includes a view of the social life of an elite group of Koreans. The adult male students' boozing and boisterous socializing bring a sense of freedom to the night alley that stands in sharp contrast to the darkness and emptiness of back alley spaces in previous decades' filmic view of colonialism.²⁴ The students' clamorous fraternizing also reflects a unique social status and privilege that presupposes society's leniency.

The privileged status of adult male students was hardly new in the colonial imagery of Korean cinema. Such students appear in many literary and other cultural works as the direct recipients of modern education and social progress. The film's portrayal of male students utilizes their complex and often double cultural meanings. On the one hand, it invokes the old cultural imagery of a young social elite whose opportunities for modern education and upward mobility parallel the prospects of the modern nation's progress. Films with this enlightenment theme typically foreground the positive attributes of students.²⁵ On the other hand, the film portrays street-roaming male students as pleasure seekers who avail themselves of the many leisure options of urban life. The implications of the latter image are particularly important in this and other films of the late 1960s because the sociocultural backdrop that the films presuppose informs the changing cinematic depiction of the colonial social world. The *fait accompli* of colonialism hence offers something new on the screen: autonomous, albeit scattered and limited, leisure activities for Koreans that thrive under colonial rule.²⁶

The recalibration also applies to the portrayal of the Japanese but, even more importantly, to Chang's reaction in the opening sequence. Japanese men's harassment of a Korean woman had been used in earlier films to conceptualize a fundamental Japanese-Korean antagonism and to display the just action of Korean

men in defense of Korean women's integrity and chastity. A film such as *Nameless Stars* (*Irümömnün pyöldül*; Kim Kangyun, 1959) is exemplary in its presentation of this line of anticolonial reasoning and action. Based on the 1929 student protest in Kwangju, the film offers a historical view of the collective action of students protesting against colonial forces. Yet whereas the 1959 film frames an incident of harassment as leading to the collective action of the nation, *Kang Myöngghwa* defines the problem on a limited scale devoid of the political implications of the gendered violence and legal struggles of Koreans. *Kang Myöngghwa* depicts the incident of harassment as an urban mishap that incites the Korean man's courageous intervention but does not link it to anticolonial politics. The main purpose of the scene is to serve as a motive for Kang to subsequently develop favorable feelings for her savior.

Another convention is the arrival of police on the scene that typically results in the arrest of the Korean man who took action against the Japanese harasser. The film includes this motif, which underscores a key structural feature of colonial domination: discriminatory Japanese police enforcement against Koreans. Again, however, *Kang Myöngghwa* does not extrapolate political implications; instead, it downplays the problem by shifting it from the political to the social realm. The colonial dilemma is defined in the film specifically as a geographical issue: Koreans occupy the same urban space as the Japanese. The problem of harassment is not presented as the result of structural discrimination against Koreans. Rather, it signifies the unavoidable disruption that results from Koreans and Japanese living side by side. The scene of disturbance that the film features at the beginning shows how the urban streets of Seoul, which previously were the exclusive, though austere domain of Koreans, have become a zone of traffic and encounter between two ethnic groups that the police patrol to prevent disruption. Urban night streets are open and available to both Korean and Japanese men. The scuffle that leads to the colonial police action therefore presupposes an equivalency between the two groups in their overlapping use of the colonial urban streets. Here the Korean is portrayed as being more disciplined in his social behavior than the unruly Japanese, a difference that the inept colonial police fail to perceive and take into account in their patrol actions.

In other words, the colonial problem is clearly reconfigured in spatial terms, conceived now as a matter of equivalency that allows Japanese and Koreans to indulge in the same types of leisure and entertainment. The *kisaeng* is a crucial figure in the zone of equivalency because she functions as the nexus for Koreans and Japanese competition to win attention as equal clients in the entertainment sphere.²⁷ The *kisaeng* in the late 1960s is not just a figure reminiscent of the colonial legacy, but one who recalibrates the terms of interaction and tension between two ethnic groups rises even as she is always more drawn to the Korean.

The collision of Japanese and Korean individuals that presupposes an urban scene where colonized and colonizer are equal finds its most salient expression

in the subsequent standard *kisaeng* scene: a house sequence that typically features the *kisaeng*'s performance of a traditional dance. In *Kang Myŏnghwa* the sequence begins with a clear identification of the renowned *kisaeng* house Myŏngwŏlgwan, and the film cuts to show the *kisaeng* Kang's performance in front of her clients inside the Korean traditional-style living room.²⁸ In traditional dress, Kang is fully immersed in her dance, accompanied by Korean musicians. The Japanese client, the high government official Tanaka, and his Korean subordinate incessantly applaud her exceptional beauty and exquisite performance skills.

The performance setting utilizes the colonial imagery of *kisaeng*, as Kang is a body made into a spectacle and subjected to the sexual gaze of the Japanese colonial authority. Yet the film also complicates and interrupts the colonial paradigm of looking upon the Korean female body. The editing in the sequence follows the structural convention of shot and countershot: the gaze of the onlooker followed by the ensuing shot of a female body that establishes the lopsided nature of relations between the two. Yet Kang does not always gaze back at the Japanese observer client. Rather, she frequently looks elsewhere, taking satisfaction in her own performance skill.²⁹ Her averted gaze during the dance sequence suggests the space of contrarian integrity that the marginal *kisaeng* figure maintains at work. Even when she is required to serve and fulfill the fantasy projection of the powerful Japanese man at the *kisaeng* house, she finds a way to avoid meeting his sexually motivated gaze by hiding effectively behind the facade of performance that she puts on for her audience. The subtle sign of disavowal renders legible Kang's gesture of noncompliance and reveals the limit of the totalizing scopic power of the colonial authority at this leisure site.

Kang's noncompliance faces a challenge when Tanaka commands his Korean subordinate to demand more personal service from her. He pressures her to offer to pour liquor into his glass, a ritualistic act that signifies an offering of her sexual services to the client.³⁰ She refuses, but Tanaka is relentless. Once again, Japanese unruliness appears in the form of harassment of the Korean female entertainer. The colonial power is depicted here as an excessive force that does not take into consideration social propriety and decorum. Just as the pressure mounts unbearably, a waiter in the *kisaeng* house intervenes, breaks the tension, and alerts her of other clients that she is obliged to serve. When she leaves the room, Kang thanks the waiter for coming to the rescue and proceeds to another room to greet the Korean client, Kim Chusa, who awaits her.

This managerial intervention represents the *modus operandi* of a business that uses the logic of service allotment to protect *kisaeng* performers from Japanese harassment. It also shows how the *kisaeng* house, in effect, establishes equivalency between two ethnic groups by juxtaposing them in an inadvertent competition for the *kisaeng*'s service. The competition itself remains hidden and invisible, as the Koreans and the Japanese occupy separate rooms, which *kisaeng* visit in rotation for entertainment. The *kisaeng* house is the only space in cinematic representation

where Japanese comply with the rules of a Korean business site. It thus visualizes the limit of the colonizer's power, which in other instances is assumed to be total and absolute. The spatial division of the *kisaeng* house, which the *kisaeng* is able to cross at will, effectively has a regulating effect on clients who are otherwise prone to form oppositional relations. However limited it may be, this capacity to regulate the demands of both Korean and Japanese clients sets the *kisaeng* house apart from all other colonial spheres of interethnic interactions.

At a *kisaeng* house, the segregation of clients by ethnicity is an implicit rule that inhibits any ethnic enmity. However, in *Kang Myŏnghwa*, a disturbance resulting from the violation of this rule is caused by the excessive demands of the Japanese man, Tanaka, that turn into outright harassment. The conflict with Tanaka leads Kang to flee to the room next door, which Chang and his student friends happen to be occupying for a party. When Kang enters the room and hides behind its folding screen, Chang and the other students understand the situation instantly and act in unison to protect her. Soon the Japanese client and his Korean subordinate enter the room without permission to search for Kang. The students criticize them for the unruly intrusion into their zone of entertainment. Specifically, Chang frames and articulates the expected rules of propriety as the foundation of civilized society. If you are an elite person of integrity, Chang challenges the intruder, you must surely understand how this act of disturbance constitutes an offense against the principles of social decorum and civilization.

Presupposed in this argument is the shared sense of social propriety that the Japanese "neighbor" fails to exercise at the *kisaeng* house. The confidence with which Chang advances his argument catches the Japanese man off guard, and he subsequently withdraws in humiliation from the room full of Korean students. This moment of interethnic conflict soon turns into a moment of camaraderie between the *kisaeng* and the Korean students. The romantic relationship between Chang and Kang emerges out of this second act of valor against Japanese men to secure Kang's safety. Hence, while the ethnically segregated space of the *kisaeng* house may be at moments porous and exposed to transgression and danger, it nevertheless reconstitutes and cements a sense of cohesion among Koreans by means of the rhetoric of civility and decorum. Many *kisaeng*-themed films repeatedly underscore this sense of cohesion between the marginal *kisaeng* and the Korean man from a different social background, paralleling the logic of ethnic segmentation to secure entertainment and a leisure space for Koreans.

Outside the *kisaeng* house, however, the film exposes a set of problems that are deeply rooted in the internal social divisions and segregation among Koreans themselves. The budding romance between Chang and Kang takes place in the form of nighttime strolls along the quiet walled streets of the old palace.³¹ Yet these romantic moments introduce a new form of stressful gaze for Kang. After waiting in front of Myŏngwŏlgwan for Kang's departure from work, Chang escorts her to her house. While delighted, Kang expresses her concern that her lowly social

status as a *kisaeng* will tarnish Chang's reputation in the eyes of other, anonymous Koreans. Chang is oblivious to the social prejudice directed at the *kisaeng* and regards his visit to the *kisaeng* house as simply an occasion for pleasure. He is largely unaware of the social division, segregation, and prejudice that govern the social lives of Koreans under colonial rule.

Issues arising from this gulf that separates two characters from different social backgrounds recur throughout the film, especially with regard to the subject of money. In fact, much of the tension surrounding their romance has its roots not in a lack of money but rather in its treacherous use-value and its misdirected effects. The affluence of Chang's family is underscored repeatedly throughout the film and has problematic effects on people, particularly Kang's parents. Indeed, the introduction of money as Chang's gift to Kang only complicates his relationship with Kang's parents, on whom his money makes the strongest impression. Chang's money is meant to signal his love toward Kang. The sum he sends to her as a farewell gift on his departure for Japan, however, launches a convoluted series of events. He asks his *kisaeng* friend Ok-sun to deliver the money to Kang, but Ok-sun does not hand it over directly. Instead, she gives it to Kang's greedy mother to convince her how wealthy Kang's suitor is. Not only does Chang's gift of money fail to reach Kang, but its diversion fuels the fierce materialism that dominates Kang's family and friend. In a later scene, Chang offers his tuition to Kang to help alleviate her family's financial hardship, which had led Kang to descend into the *kisaeng* profession in the first place. However, his kind-hearted gesture toward Kang's family backfires as Kang's itinerant father takes possession of the offering and runs off, infuriating Kang's mother. Kang's father then visits Chang's home to blackmail Chang's parents about Chang's "ruination" of his *kisaeng* daughter and her future prospects. Chang's family, who have been misinformed about their son's whereabouts, endure this humiliating encounter and comply with Kang's father's demand.

The above two sequences illustrate how Chang's use of money, which was intended to cement his relationship with Kang's parents, fails to achieve the desired effect. Instead, the couple's relationship suffers precisely because of the disadvantageous effects of Chang's monetary gifts. Although Kang has a thriving career as a *kisaeng* with an independent spirit, her parents regard her profession as a social disgrace for which they superficially blame themselves. Concurrently, they pressure her to pursue money over all other values, including love and marriage.³² Chang's frequent offers of money to her parents inflame their materialistic impulses, impeding rather than facilitating the couple's prospects for romance and marriage. The film details the deep mismatches of expectation and value that are organized around money once the couple starts living together. It becomes increasingly clear that Kang's parents regard her as a purely money-making entity. Indeed, Kang's father tells Chang's father that he does not care what they do to his *kisaeng* daughter so long as he gets the money for his gold mine project.

The film's excessive valorization of pure and innocent love is set against a corrupt world where materialism pervades familial relationships. The couple's naïveté lies not in their inexperience in love, but in their inability to comprehend the detrimental effects of money on relations among people. The volatile dynamic of money consumes all who surround the female protagonist. The male protagonist, for his part, shares moral culpability, for he has been the steady supplier of money without a keen understanding of its effects on its recipients. The lack of money that produces so much suffering in the colonial melodramatic imagination is reframed here to underscore opposite, but equally negative, effects. Chang's money does not solve problems; rather, it precipitates a series of actions that make it impossible for the couple to form a proper conjugal relationship.

The film features two sites where the couple escape the exploitative and corrupt social world: the hot springs resort and the metropole of Japan. Chang suggests a trip, a de facto honeymoon, to a hot springs resort to avoid the pressure Kang faces at home. The resort sequence is set in two locales where the couple vow their love for each other in complete privacy: the traditional tower house for a nighttime excursion and a hotel room for the wedding night. The tower house is a serene and quiet setting where Kang, to express her love, offers Chang a precious memento she has prepared for him and Chang in return expresses his unwavering love for her. Sentimental music rises up, heightening the emotional force of the couple's growing passion. Yet the scene also registers a peculiar sense of emptiness, as there is a complete absence of other tourists. This sense continues into the following guest house sequence during which the couple spend the night together. The cinematic properties of low lighting and measured pace, along with continuous sentimental music, create an ambiance of intimacy free of social constraints. It is as if the couple dwell in a completely separate night world of their own.

The film's focused portrayal of the couple's private intimacy is certainly rare in the cinematic rendition of colonialism. But perhaps the more significant contextual factors here are the social discrimination and materialism of the colonial society against which the couple's love and intimacy are oppositionally defined. The film's negative portrayal of social interactions makes their two places of refuge particularly resonant with serenity and sacredness. That said, the film reveals, through the tumultuous narrative of young lovers, a splintered social imaginary of colonial Korea that is very different from the assumed homogeneity of the Korean nation in other political dramas. The colonial reality in *Kang Myŏnghwa* is one of oppressive rules of social division, hierarchy, and discrimination in tandem with an all-encompassing materialism. It leaves little room to imagine a radical alternative for social change, turning instead toward valorization of "pure" love. The ascendancy of *sinpa* melodrama in the late 1960s, of which the *kisaeng* narrative *Kang Myŏnghwa* is a prime example, reflects how the disproportionate power of the fixed social values and order ("the way things are") leads to tragic

consequences for the *kisaeng*, who embodies the oppositional value of love (“the way things should be”).

This cinematic discourse of individual love involves an overt stylization of love’s consummation with an acute sense of ephemerality and fatalism. The conjugal union in a guest house is rendered initially through a silhouette image of the couple cast on a paper window. Chang slowly removes Kang’s clothes and the film cuts to show her defloration by cutting to shots from different angles that generate a sense of presentational aura rather than representational transparency. The position of lighting, for instance, does not match with the images cast in the sequence. Aesthetic stylization is evident in the ensuing shot in which coitus is rendered with an image of the clasped hands of the couple in bed, leaving the actual act of lovemaking off screen. However contrived and superficial these images may be in the eyes of the contemporary film viewer, the sequence makes lucid the determined rigor of stylization used to underscore the couple’s earnest consummation. The slow but measured pace of action lacks the immediacy of the passion that previously characterized their love affair, and the act of consummation itself seems restrained and even listless, connoting a fatalistic sense of finitude, failure, and even death.³³ Yet such contrivance, in conjunction with the stately and serious pace of the act, has a transformative effect, as it gives the consummation the serious aura of ritual practice despite (or because of) its formulaic and performative orientation.

This resort to ritual, which carves out an abstract, alternate space of symbolic condensation, echoes the unique sense of time that the couple share at the moment of lovemaking. Both are keenly aware of Chang’s imminent departure for Japan. Being supportive of her man, Kang insists that he leave for Japan even when he expresses a wish to stay. Although they change their minds later and choose to live together instead of parting, the couple dwell deeply in the dejected resignation of the moment. This sense of hopelessness is explicitly expressed in the couple’s comments on the caged lovebirds within the guesthouse room. When one bird dies, Kang explains to Chang that the other will soon follow, foreshadowing the future conclusion of their own troubled affair.

In the metropole space of Japan, however, the couple find hope that they can successfully settle down together. The safe abode also provides the most explicit, hence controversial, image of a ritual expression of the couple’s pledge of love. Here, the image of Japan as a space for the newlyweds has broad implications for the overall spatial logic of colonial representation in the 1960s. Japan previously was the destination for Chang’s higher education, but the couple move to Japan for an ulterior motive: to live in secluded environs for their private moments. Much as the lovers flee to the hot springs resort, they make a rented second-story room in Japan their sanctuary. Unencumbered by social prejudice, Kang is visibly transformed in Japan, as shown by the clothing she wears: no longer traditional dress,

an iconic signifier of *kisaeng* status, but Western attire, a sign of her escape from the social logic of discrimination in Korea.

Metropole Japan offers a space of respite for the couple, whose marriage in practice is filled with blessed moments of love and harmony. The overall ambiance of relief and comfort is evident in their interaction, albeit brief, with the Japanese landlady, who greets them with a friendly demeanor and neighborly understanding. The tension and conflict that typically characterize relations between Koreans and Japanese in the colonial space of proximity are missing here. Instead, the couple blend seamlessly into the daily environs of Japan precisely because this urban retreat imposes none of the constraints of colonial surveillance or social prejudice that they experienced in Korea. Japan signifies a space of possibility for them.³⁴

The film challenges and subverts the ethnic bipolarity even more scandalously at the moment of the love pledge scene. On the first night after the couple move into their new home, Kang hears chanting in the distance and inquires about it. Chang explains that it is wish chanting from the Shinto shrine, which comes into the couple's view through the flickering lights that outline the image of a shrine gate in the distance. Impressed by its religious nature, Kang engages Chang in wish-making while pensively gazing at the shrine gate. This moment may be one of the most uncanny in the colonial imagery of South Korean cinema, for it violates the nationalist mandate regarding visualization in which voluntary acceptance of cultural assimilation policies is completely prohibited.

The distant image of the Shinto shrine gate confers on the couple an aura of solemn ritual. While the idea of finding spiritual comfort in such an iconic image may have been offensive to many Koreans at the time, I assert that the Shinto shrine gate stands in as an *abstract* ritual icon that serves a general ceremonial function. Its outline of flickering lights has no realistic substance, curtailing its historical and political implications. Japan here is a localized "foreign" country one can travel to and dwell in with curiosity. In other words, the sense of novelty that Kang experiences in Japan echoes the aesthetic effects of many contemporary South Korean films that featured location images of Japan. The seeming equalization of Japanese and Koreans that characterizes so many aspects of colonial representation in films of the late 1960s presents metropole Japan as an *apolitical tourist site* that Koreans can traverse and dwell in, free from the social constraints of discrimination in Korea. It is a level ground for the colonial elite who find opportunities for their future.³⁵

If metropole Japan optimistically stands for the future possibilities for the couple's conjugal life, their forced return to Korea marks the beginning of their tragic downfall and demise. Chang voluntarily changes his profession from student to menial worker in Japan to earn a living, but his absence does not go unnoticed. He receives a letter from his father in Korea, followed by a visit from an old friend, Pang, who criticizes him for continuing a life of disrepute and attempts to persuade him to dissolve his marriage to the *kisaeng*. Chang vehemently refuses, but

Kang, who overhears the conversation, concedes to these demands of others. What follows is a series of events that repeatedly prove Kang's fundamental misconception of the social conventions and constraints of Korea in which her marriage with Chang is challenged and disputed. When Kang decides to return to Korea with her husband, she plans to live a life according to the social norms and proprieties for a respectful daughter-in-law. However, this plan proves gravely miscalculated, as her social integration into Chang's family is completely blocked.

The situations that confront Kang in Korea are characterized by melodramatic turns of betrayal and disappointment. The disparity between her innocent intentions and the immutable barriers of social discrimination constitutes the main theme of the film as a *sinpa* melodrama. Yet the latter, melodrama-saturated portion of the film shows a striking disparity, for Chang, unlike Kang, virtually abdicates responsibility to deal with unfolding events. When the couple return to Korea, they visit Kang's *kisaeng* friend Ok-sun for temporary lodging until they can find a long-term residence. Chang tells Kang that he will visit his home to pay his respects to his parents, but he never follows through on his plan. Instead, Chang stops short as he approaches the house. Aware of the pressure he would face at home, he chooses domestic life with Kang over the resumption of relations with his natal family. For him, the two options do not converge.

His inaction, or failure to communicate with Kang about his decision, sets up a situation in which the relationship spirals downward through misunderstanding. Unaware of Chang's inertia, Kang visits Chang's family's house alone to pay her respects to her parents-in-law, only to face cold rejection. The adamant rebuff is expressed in spatial terms of segmentation and exclusion. From this moment on, Kang acts like a classic melodramatic heroine who behaves contrary to her true desire. Kang returns to working as a *kisaeng* at Myŏngwolgwān, an act consciously designed to infuriate and chase away Chang. She succeeds, as Chang misinterprets her intentions and returns home in disappointment. When he changes his mind and decides to return to Kang, the film shows the futility of his belated action.

The second part of the film, however, does examine another underside of the sanctioned colonial reality. The convoluted narrative of Kang's tragedy points to the remarkable permanence of the social order maintained under colonial rule. Kang's problems derive from her grave misperception of the likelihood of her integration into Chang's wealthy and prestigious family. In other words, the failure of a personal effort to attain upward social mobility also undermines the personal domain of love and marriage. That the film shows a great sympathy for the fallen indicates the resilience of the melodramatic moral reasoning that was the basis of many popular films of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet the film also shows how social mobility and the integration of people from different social strata are blocked in Korean society. Even though the male protagonist Chang kills himself at the end of the story, the film seems to describe the continuation of an unaltered social system of rigid hierarchy. The South Korean gangster film, typically set in the 1930s

colonial era, revisits this issue and expands the scope of spatial logic integral to the changing mode of colonial representation on screen.

I want to conclude this section on *kisaeng* film by focusing on *sinpa*, a cultural form inextricably associated with this film cycle of the late 1960s. Critics approached *sinpa* as an old form of melodrama in Korea that dated back to theater productions of the colonial era. Imported from Japan (*shimpa* in Japanese), the term has been explored ad nauseam as a sentimental mode of representation in South Korean cinema with aesthetic limits and failings. Set in contrast to the valorized “social realism,” *sinpa* melodrama has often been marked as a regressive form precisely because of its association with the past colonial culture.

The question I raise with regard to *sinpa* is the following: What was the discursive effect of the term *sinpa* in the cultural politics of the late 1960s, when South Korea experienced a major shift in attitudes toward Japan as a partner in Cold War geopolitics? The rise of *sinpa* melodrama, I would argue, was not simply a reuse of the old popular narratives of the colonial era. As the story of Kang Myŏnghwa demonstrates, its affective center lay in the despair and disappointment of a marginalized figure, often a woman, whose yearning to integrate into the larger society was doomed to fail. The repetition here is the mourning for the failure of an individual, but this persistent debacle also signals the shifting cultural logic or view of colonialism from the total negation of and opposition to imperialist politics to the rendition of various levels of equivalency and exchange. The latter development, as I will develop in more detail through an analysis of gangster films, demands identification with the select few Koreans who have the privilege to form an equal mode of exchange with the Japanese. South Korean cinema of the late 1960s moved away from the communitarian ideal of anticolonial justice and politics to an elite culturalist approach to the problem of colonial domination. As colonial imagining became dominated by the actions of social or cultural elites, the *sinpa* melodrama rose to express overwhelming empathy for those who were pushed aside by stringent Korean social norms under colonial rule. The resilience of the *sinpa* form represents a critique of the complacent logic of a colonial imagining that betrayed the communitarian mode of conceiving the anticolonial struggle—a struggle that was waged for the protection of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

COLONIAL UPWARD MOBILITY:
HIERARCHY, TERRITORY AND SURVEILLANCE IN
A TRUE STORY OF KIM TUHAN

In this section on gangster film set in the colonial era, I focus on the 1974 film *A True Story of Kim Tuhan* (*Silök Kim Tuhan*; Kim Hyochön, 1974). As a part of the chapter’s larger preoccupation with the colonial space of propinquity as a dominant and recurring thematic trope of 1960s films on colonialism, I bring attention to the various contours of social interactions as well as the cultural values and

problems that organize this specific scenario of upward social mobility. First, a brief synopsis is in order. The film begins with revolutionaries' foiled assassination scheme to eliminate a renowned collaborator. Kim Chwacin leads the attack on Song Pyŏngjun but is injured during the operation and chased by the Japanese police. The ensuing sequence shows his retreat into an elderly lady's house, where the lady's daughter, whom he later marries, attends to his recovery. Kim subsequently returns to Manchuria to continue the guerrilla operation. Shortly thereafter his wife visits with his son, Tuhan. When she returns home to Korea, she faces arrest and is ultimately killed. The orphaned Tuhan grows up to be a leader of beggars near the Chongno area, the concentrated Korean business district. He soon becomes entangled in a grand turf war between Korean and Japanese gangsters over control of Chongno. The Korean gang leader Na Kwanjung recognizes Tuhan's talents and recruits and trains him to be his successor. Tuhan embraces the new opportunity and soon shows his allegiance to Na and his organization. When Na is killed in a surprise attack by the Korean gang leader Shinmajök, Tuhan reacts decisively and defeats the enemy. The victory secures Tuhan's reputation as the *de facto* gang leader and leads to an unavoidable confrontation with the Japanese mobs who vie for control over the Korean business district. The latter send assassins to kill Tuhan's *kisaeng* wife and his men. The enraged Tuhan mobilizes a final all-out showdown with the Japanese gangsters. After this triumph, he turns himself in to the Japanese police.

The film's account of the real-life gangster boss Kim Tuhan (1918–72) traces his clear lineage from the esteemed resistance army leader Kim Chwacin (1889–1930), a story of noble origin that is crucial to the construction of Kim Tuhan's authority and leadership. In contrast to the victories of real-life guerrilla leader Kim in Manchuria, the actions of film protagonist Kim in colonial Korea are portrayed as ineffective: at the beginning of the film he barely escapes the police chase, is injured, and hides. It is noteworthy, however, that his weakness is counteracted by the action of an ordinary Korean, who quickly realizes the identity of the person under stress and offers him refuge, thereby not only saving his life but preserving his political role. As in biographical films of the late 1950s as well as the Manchurian action films of the 1960s, an aura of authority is supposed to be an inherent feature of a leader, even when he falls into a predicament due to miscalculation. The refuge scene frames a situation whereby the Korean people find an opportunity to prove political allegiance and self-worth through voluntary interaction with an important leader. Leadership, its construction and naturalization, is one of the central themes that is developed in depth in the subsequent narrative of the general's son.

The large traditional house where General Kim takes refuge is crucial to the film's formulation of his supposed authority. The elderly lady, played with unparalleled charisma and poise by Hwang Chöngsun, effectively fends off the colonial military force that breaks into the house soon after Kim's arrival. When

interrogated, she answers by explaining her nightly ritual: praying for the good health of the Japanese emperor. She also warns the military officer that his unannounced intrusion has already offended the decorum required of a colonial subject such as her to honor the dignity of the emperor. The officer retreats immediately when she implies that she might report his offense to the higher authorities. The brief exchange demonstrates how colonized Koreans could use the very ideological mandate of total loyalty to the emperor to strengthen their position against agents of the colonial power. By feigning complete loyalty to the state ideology, the elderly lady effectively carves out a space of resistance in which she is able to help the cause of nationalist struggle.

Not only her actions in and of themselves, but also their setting is significant. The elderly lady's old house has an aura of safety and security that is similar to that of a *kisaeng* house. It has no male resident, and the absence of a male character typifies in allegorical terms the broken Korean family under colonial rule. Patriarchal authority is missing, but this absence creates a situation in which women are not bound by the traditional precepts of gendered behavior in the household. On their own, they can decide to bring the injured male character into the house for proper medical care. Furthermore, the elderly lady turns out to be a former lady-in-waiting of the defunct Chosŏn dynasty who now attempts to maintain the house in a state befitting its past glory. The historical link between the dynastic court culture and *kisaeng* courtesans was noted frequently in colonial discourse, and some post-colonial films revisit this connection to underscore the special cultural status of *kisaeng* as an embodiment of the fallen beauty of the past dynasty.³⁶

In the *kisaeng* house of South Korean cinema, both the colonized and the colonizer are restricted in their scope of action: the colonized must pretend to be subservient to the colonizer, while the colonizer is unable to exert total power because of covert acts of resistance by the colonized. This film's quasi-*kisaeng* house shows similar dynamics. Much as the *kisaeng* protagonist in *Kang Myŏnghwa* puts on a masquerade of servitude to the Japanese client but evades his harassment, the house's elderly lady, through covert resistance, successfully fends off the intrusion of the colonial agents and provides a safe haven for the fugitive Korean resistance fighter. Guerrilla leader Kim and the elderly lady's daughter marry, and soon thereafter Kim moves to Manchuria to continue his nationalist mission, leaving behind his new wife, who subsequently gives birth to their son Tuhan. The house, as if to follow the filmic precepts of colonial representation, never turns into a permanent site of domestic life.

In subsequent scenes, the film makes an explicit material connection between female sacrifice and the nationalist armed struggle. When, after several years, Kim's wife travels with Tuhan to the resistance army headquarters in Manchuria, she learns about the money problems of the resistance and offers her husband the inheritance from her late mother so that he can purchase arms from the Russians. The film uses the same concept of money as the Manchurian action films in which

the procurement of war funds is synonymous with the anticolonial struggle itself.³⁷ What distinguishes *A True Story of Kim Tuhan* from typical Manchurian action films is the follow-up story of Kim's wife. In Manchurian action films, the completion of the money transfer often coincides with the Korean "courier's" unfortunate death, a death that is almost always recognized and mourned, thereby becoming properly registered in the symbolic field of signification.

Such recognition and mourning are not available for the sacrifice and suffering of Kim's wife and child. After Kim's wife delivers the inheritance money to her husband, she returns home to Korea. She soon learns about her husband's military victory at Chöngsanri. While she is looking at the family photo taken with her husband in Manchuria, the colonial police break in and arrest her, leading ultimately to her death and young Tuhan's orphan life on the street. The film does not show any subsequent communication between General Kim and his family in Korea. Nor does the ensuing narrative pay any attention to General Kim's actions or whereabouts. This is significant because the nationalist leader never acknowledges the heavy price his wife and child have paid for the nationalist cause. The subsequent narrative advances to fill this traumatic rupture in the field of symbolic meanings through Tuhan's growth into maturity and his acquisition of power and stature.

A community of beggars forms the quasi-family unit in which Tuhan grows up to become a respectful and competent young leader. Living under Sup'yo Bridge in the Chongno district, young Tuhan performs the role of eldest brother for other young orphans. Indeed, his sense of duty to protect his "family" drives him into a direct conflict with Japanese gangsters that leads him into the world of organized crime. When a young beggar enters Namsanjöng, a district heavily populated with Japanese residents, he unfortunately is attacked by a vicious dog provoked by a Japanese thug. Upon hearing of the incident, Tuhan rushes to Namsanjöng to challenge the Japanese perpetrator, who happens to be a member of the local Japanese gang. After breaking into the man's house and announcing his identity, Tuhan demands a duel and defeats the Japanese gangster.

This incident, which brings out both the physical prowess and the moral integrity of the male protagonist, functions as a turning point in the narrative, catapulting Tuhan into the turbulent currents of interests and conflicts that make up the social and ethnic geography of colonial Seoul. Though socially marginalized, Tuhan possesses a clear sense of human dignity and social justice, dispositions that cause him further trouble down the road.

The sequence also portrays the urban space of Seoul as divided by ethnic and socioeconomic boundaries and stratification. Though Koreans were surely the dominant population in Seoul, in films that are set in the colonial era, some districts such as Honmachi/Ponjöng and Namsanjöng are shown as ethnic enclaves reserved for Japanese residents. Beggars usually have an advantage in being able to traverse different regions of the city, but, as the incident indicates, trespassing on

Japanese turf can lead to dire consequences. As portrayed in the opening encounter in *Kang Myŏnghwa*, Korean urban space in gangster films is characterized by the problem of overproximity to the Japanese Other. The social spheres of Koreans and Japanese appear to overlap in the film, a sign of Japanese encroachment into the Korean sphere of activities, with terms of interaction that are highly negative and volatile.

The harassment that the Korean beggar must endure, with only his similarly impoverished fellows to turn to for help, shows the colonial state apparatus of law enforcement and surveillance patrols to be largely absent or ineffective in handling civil disorders that directly affect urban Koreans. Hence, the Japanese colonial regime is portrayed negatively in gangster films not because of its direct political domination but, implicitly, because of its inadequate domestic policing and its incapacity to apply impartial laws and regulations to the problems of Koreans.³⁸ Villainy therefore is defined in different terms: though it is definitively associated with the Japanese side, it is not solely an aspect of the colonial conquest.

Conflicts among characters in the film likewise are not simple contests between good and bad, for there are undercurrents to every encounter. Tuhan, for example, sternly announces his identity as leader of the beggars upon entering the house of the Japanese who instigated the dog's attack. On a practical level, the resolute self-introduction serves to dispel any misunderstanding that the other party may have about the speaker's true identity and stature. However, this act has a symbolic resonance that no response by the Japanese man can counter.³⁹ In other words, the sequence presents Tuhan not as an individual with innate personal characteristics, but as a symbolic figure of authority upholding the title of leader with which he fully identifies.

Fights generate meanings greater than the mere physical action in this and other gangster films set in the colonial era. The duel in *A True Story of Kim Tuhan* establishes the Korean Tuhan's aura of authority and power. Having been deprived of this symbolic dimension, the Japanese thug reacts with agitation, launching an attack on Tuhan, only to face an embarrassing defeat. Tuhan's fight proves his physical competence and agility, but his announcement that precedes it highlights something more: it has a ritualistic function, projecting an appearance of confidence that disconcerts the Japanese Other as the latter fails to respond with the same assurance.⁴⁰ The sequence's emphasis on appearance is visually embellished by the immaculate Western suit that represents Tuhan's mature masculinity and leadership.

Tuhan's first victory over the Japanese opponent is also significant for its spectatorial effects. Unbeknownst to him, the Korean gang leader Na Kwanjung and his student subordinate happen to witness the fight from a hidden corner.⁴¹ Although Tuhan remains oblivious to the secret spectators, the situation soon leads to the opportunity for Tuhan to receive proper guidance and mentorship. Na's observation of Tuhan's fighting skills anticipates the subsequent master-apprentice

dynamic between the two. Thus the film makes the theme of mentoring and education the principal concern of social activities among Koreans caught in the compressed zone of propinquity with the Japanese Other. Na states, "This is the first time I have been fascinated by another man's fist [fighting] prowess," and orders his subordinate to gather more information about Tuhan. Hence, the secret gaze indicates recognition by the hidden authority/father figure, although official contact for recognition must wait until a later moment.

Na's choice of Tuhan as the heir to his gangster operation alludes to the limit of colonial representation in the social sphere of Koreans. South Korea's gangster films of this era are generally preoccupied with the social void that occurred under colonial rule, and they attempt to fill that void by constructing a social community that can endure and regenerate itself through selective member recruitment and leadership training. Na's interest in Tuhan and his subsequent efforts to train and educate him to a higher rank within the organization create a necessary sense of group affinity and social cohesion.

The social ideology of gangster film, however, departs substantially from the cultural nationalist discourse of the colonial era in which the ideal of enlightenment encompassed all people, regardless of social background. The social ideology of the gangster film does not share this egalitarian belief. Instead of promoting the all-encompassing utility of education, the film is solely preoccupied with the question of how to select, develop, and train a capable leader.

The film's distrust toward the intellectual approach to the nationalist issue is evident in a scene where Na spends time with an intellectual friend over a drink in a tavern. Na himself has an intellectual background; he received a college education in Japan but chose the path of underground business. One of the reasons why the Japanese gangsters scheme to eliminate Na is his intellectuality, which they feel could generate subversive ideas. The sequence, however, shows Na as having a different attitude toward the options of Koreans under colonial rule than his intellectual friend does. The friend, played by Yi Sunjae, challenges Na's current illegitimate profession, asking, what good does it do to gather thugs to fight the Japanese? This criticism is based on the ideas and rhetoric of the enlightenment mode of social activism that characterized the image of the colonial intellectual in popular culture. Implicit in his critique is the belief that Na's illicit activities will corrupt the noble nature of national resistance against unjust colonial domination. Na responds by asserting that during dark times, survival itself is a form of resistance. To dwell in depression is the real failure. The conversation reaches a deadlock at this point, and the intellectual friend drops the subject by invoking his own history. He says, "I understand your frustration. Let us leave the judgment of our disagreement to the opinion of future historians."

At this point, the film not only effectively captures the friend's dismissive reaction but also brings into sharp relief the two men's reactions to an alluring female waitress across the room. Whereas the intellectual friend gazes at her body as an

object of fascination as he attempts to drop the topic, Na shows no sign of distraction but looks at his friend and finishes his statement on the failure of Korean intellectuals. What makes him sad, Na claims, is how the intelligentsia becomes corrupted in practice. The cinematic focus on the two men's differing reactions accentuates Na's censure of the friend's empty intellectualism. Although the friend criticizes Na's gang for its betrayal of the enlightenment project of nationalism, his notion of history reaches a dead end in reality and fails to offer any vision of power or agency to bring about change. History is invoked precisely at this moment to cover up the impasse that comes from the malaise of his weak and abstract thoughts. The consequence of this intellectual deadlock is, as the film's focus on his distraction indicates, indulgence in the seductive pleasure of urban entertainment.⁴²

The film plainly supports Na's position that survival can be achieved through a reordering of the social hierarchy in which educated people perform a proper support role for the leader's operation. Na's trusted right-hand person crystallizes this conceptualization of the intellectual's role. Always dressed in a college uniform, this student subordinate, played by Paek Ilsöb, is not a worker who merely follows the boss's orders. Instead, he functions as a managerial supervisor and counsel who offers incisive appraisals of the rapidly changing situation and external threats. In return, Na shows complete confidence in his suggestions. The student subordinate's supplemental role completes the wholeness of Na's authority and control over the organization. It is he who later advises Na to bail out Tuhan, who has been arrested for attacking the Japanese thug in Namsanjöng. Both men also have prior knowledge of Tuhan's background (i.e., that he is the son of the general Kim Chwachin), and they discuss its symbolic significance when they recruit him into the organization. Indeed, these men later "educate" Tuhan on the meaning of his natal origins, something that Tuhan himself was not able to gauge. The organizational stability and focus that the student subordinate brings to the group illustrate the ideal role for an intellectual. Instead of leading the way toward enlightenment, an intellectual is better equipped, the film seems to suggest, to take the secondary role of counselor and supervisor. His professional position within the Korean gang, moreover, is in sharp contrast to the homogeneity of the Japanese gang, in which no division of labor or specialization exists.

The recruitment of Tuhan into Na's gangster group epitomizes the film's theme of social integration and mobility. But the film has Tuhan enter the gang at an emotionally excessive moment. Dressed in a Western suit, Tuhan tearfully bids farewell to the crying young beggars with whom he has lived most of his life and crosses the empty bridge to join Na and his student subordinate, who await his arrival with enthusiasm. The sequence is exceptional in its overt melodramatic configuration. *Mise-en-scène*, editing, and music, for instance, construct the moment of his bridge crossing as an excruciating instance of separation, as if he were crossing the Bridge of No Return, the military demarcation line in the Joint

Security Area that separates North and South Korea. The sudden interjection of an image that evokes the Cold War does not add meaningfully to the reading of a film that is primarily concerned with the colonial geography of urban activities and problems, so I am reluctant to follow the historicist impulse to link the parting scene to the Cold War division of the nation. What should be emphasized instead are the critical implications of Tuhan's upward mobility from the lowest stratum to a rank of social privilege and power, a change in affiliation that finds expression through melodramatic excess. The sense of irreversibility that Tuhan's departure signifies does not have anything to do with his later interaction with the beggar group. He is at liberty to visit the beggars later, and they join Tuhan's final showdown with their Japanese rivals. Despite their grief over the loss of a member, the beggars maintain a continuous and close relationship with Tuhan even after he becomes a gang leader.

What is clear, however, and what the sequence attempts to underscore through excess, is the justice of the actions that Tuhan will take from this moment on. If Tuhan's leadership of the beggars was spontaneous and dedicated to protecting the most marginalized Koreans from the abuse of the Japanese, his entrance into the Korean gang changes the nature of his approach to the colonial problem of injustice. As an apprentice, Tuhan is bound to follow the *modus operandi* of his new group in its competition with the Japanese for business connections to Korean merchants. The film frames his change in association as a necessary step for social mobility. Yet the apparent *sinpa* excess of the sequence allows a metacritical view of the shift in social imagination in which no discernible figure emerges as an agent of larger political action. The lamentation in the bridge scene does not simply depict the beggars' sadness over Tuhan's departure. It also captures and expresses the foreboding sense of closure on the possibility of a populist scenario of nationalism based on calls to address the plight of the socially marginalized. The film affectively registers grief over the impending marginalization of the popular national hero by the mode of equivalency, exchange, and competition that will subsequently make up the cultural logic of colonial imaginings in the 1960s and 1970s.

In general, the gangster film defines negatively the individual act of changing one's affiliation or loyalty. *A True Story of Kim Tuhan* illustrates this tendency by showing the treachery of a rival Korean gang leader, Shinmajök, through his submission to and partnership with the Japanese. Yet Tuhan's own shift in association has no such negative implications. To be sure, there is no conflict of interest between the two Korean groups: they are similar in their close and parasitic relations with Korean businesses in the Chongno district. I would stress, however, that the efficient workings of symbolic exchange and the transformation of money cast Tuhan's change in affiliation in a positive light specifically by invoking the nation as the ultimate recipient of all symbolic transactions. Tuhan joins the gang in order to repay the kindness that Na has shown to social subordinates. It

was Na who took the dog-bitten young beggar to a hospital for medical treatment and Na who paid bail for Tuhan when he was arrested for creating the disturbance at Namsanjöng. When Tuhan tells Na that he will repay him for his kind favors, Na asks Tuhan to pay back the favors to the nation instead.

Notions of authority and hierarchy are strengthened by this transfiguration of money into a higher form of symbolic exchange. The gangster film articulates a new conception of authority, one that is structured around the nation as the guarantor of all meaningful social transactions. It is this dimension of symbolic exchange and transfiguration that also differentiates the Korean gang from its Japanese counterpart. The Japanese gangsters seek money and power through violent means of suppression and intimidation. Their use of money is purely negative: it is used to corrupt or compromise individual Korean gangsters to get them to betray their own organization. Monetary transactions are deprived of the elevated symbolic meanings that Na and Tuhan demonstrate.

The film's emphasis on the symbolic values of ritual, decorum, and appearance manifests itself on many levels, illustrating how the Korean gang establishes a stratified group culture superior to that of all competing forces. Such construction of social values and meanings also requires a specific site. The *kisaeng* house, rather than the group's own office space, is crucial as the site of new member initiation. The implication of this setting is clear. To become a new member of the gangster organization is to gain entrance to the adventuresome, if not hedonistic, lifestyle that goes along with having a reputation that garners social respect. *Kisaeng* characters are called upon to provide services and entertainment for the initiation party, but their functions go beyond this. In *A True Story of Kim Tuhan*, the *kisaeng* demonstrate a strong interest in Tuhan, as they already have learned of his heroic acts and reputation. Besides the stated purpose of member initiation, the party effectively serves as a moment for all attendees to affirm and celebrate the entrance of a heroic figure into their world. Tuhan's welcoming and enthusiastic reception is complemented by the romantic match that the attendees arrange for him. When a beautiful young *kisaeng*, Sölhwa, played by Yöm Poksun, is called upon to serve him, everyone at the party expects them to become a couple.⁴³ The *kisaeng* house in the gangster film is not a multiethnic space but a space of ritual and socialization for the Korean gangster.

It is thus only natural that the first assignment Tuhan performs is the act of espionage that his father failed to accomplish. He and his men sneak into the house of the collaborator Song and force Song to hand over the money he has accumulated from treachery, with the object of sending that money to the Shanghai Provisional Government in exile. Tuhan's act not only completes what his father could not but also displays the dominant mode of conceptualizing and managing money in the Manchurian action films of the mid-1960s. Only by transferring and thereby converting the money gained through corruption into the nation's righteous war

funds can the protagonist assume his proper role in society. Here the success of the robbery cements the reputation and leadership of Tuhan.

Surprisingly, Tuhan does not order his subordinates to kill Song. They force Song to drink a liquid that Song assumes to be poison, but it is in fact only a sedative. When Song comes to, he finds a letter addressed to him from Tuhan, censuring him for his treachery but also earnestly asking him to lead a better life. The surprising leniency toward the collaborator indicates the shift in focus of the film's rendition of the nationalist struggle. It is no longer preoccupied with the eradication of the treacherous villain. Rather, it underscores the importance of building consensus for authority and leadership. As long as Tuhan can inherit his father's legacy, which is the major determinant of his place in the new organization, he can afford to extend leniency and understanding toward an enemy of the nation.

The Japanese manipulation and control of the Korean gang leader Shinmajök shows a divergence from the Korean mode of symbolic value accumulation in the use of money and the rationale for group relations, as well as in the cultural meanings of ritual and propriety. When Wakejima, a midlevel Japanese gangster boss, and Shinmajök, a Korean ringleader in charge of the Tongdaemun district, meet to discuss a business plan, Wakejima outright bribes Shinmajök to eliminate Tuhan. Designated solely for the assassination of Na and Tuhan, the Japanese money lacks the symbolic substance that money has within the Korean gang. Ferocious yet primitive forms of viciousness characterize Shinmajök's attacks on Na and Tuhan. Na is murdered in a rickshaw after retiring from a night's social gathering. Shinmajök's cohorts subsequently carry out a surprise attack at Na's funeral, assaulting Tuhan and other mourners and demolishing the memorial altar in the condolence hall. Shinmajök's group are condemned not only for their viciousness but perhaps even more for the complete lack of the sense of propriety that any Korean social group would have. The film depicts the materialistic desires of the gangster collaborator as the cause of the absence of social propriety among his followers. In fact Shinmajök is similar to the Japanese gangsters, as both employ heinous methods to defeat Tuhan's organization.

Tuhan's subsequent vengeance involves various preparations and countermeasures, but he never loses the composure that forms the core of his authority and charisma.⁴⁴ His equanimity is evident when he makes a public announcement of his challenge to Shinmajök. Tuhan, moreover, sends his subordinate to deliver that challenge. The appearance of propriety is unmistakable here, creating a sharp contrast with the callous attack by Shinmajök's men. The film continuously underscores the performative importance of ritual, gift giving, decorum, appearance, and dress, all of which make up the social fabric of the Korean gangster world.

A True Story of Kim Tuhan also overcompensates for what is largely missing in the postcolonial imaginary of the colonial era: the social order and cohesion of the Korean people, shown here in a social group living at the margins.



FIGURE 8. The Japanese gangsters' surprise attack on Na's funeral in *A True Story of Kim Tuhan*. Courtesy of the Korean Film Archive.

In the confrontation with Tuhan, Shinmajök rationalizes his partnership with the Japanese and the full assault on Na in terms of bringing a singular line of order and hierarchy to Korean gangs. Such a change, however, would benefit only the Japanese gangsters at the top, who then would be able to control the Korean business sphere by means of Korean gangster bosses. Thus, Tuhan responds by accusing Shinmajök of betraying fellow Koreans and essentially collaborating with the Japanese occupiers. Tuhan declares that he is about to exact vengeance for his fallen boss. What is noteworthy here is that his motivation is not solely based on the desire for personal revenge. He publicly asserts that he is acting to serve the nation by eliminating traitors. Just as Tuhan's recruitment into the group invokes the nation as the guarantor of personal meaning, his act of revenge has rhetorical recourse to the nationalist ideology to ground its symbolic relevance.

Tuhan's rebuilding of the gang conveys how the small-scale turf war over the Chongno district attains national scope and significance. After Tuhan's victory over Shinmajök, men from various provinces volunteer to join his gang. Their entrance brings regional diversity and vigor. Concurrently, their provincial manners emphasize Tuhan's distinct stature and charisma. Presiding over these men who are strongly associated with different regions, Tuhan evidences no trace of lowly social origins. As these men work in harmony for the group, the film projects the image of a unified nation congregated in the space of the *kisaeng* house. The *kisaeng* again performs a significant role in the new formation of collectivity. When Tuhan is asked to give an official speech to new members, he opens the proceedings only to delegate the role of speaker to Sölhwa, his *kisaeng* girlfriend, who then articulates the importance of camaraderie and loyalty among gangster members. She also briefly but effectively interjects the rhetoric of nation at the end: "All of you new members are the pillars of this country." The film hence presents an idealized picture of collective harmony that overcomes gender and regional

differences, though only after the establishment of a new strong leader and his supreme authority. This leadership does not derive from an active effort of group building. Instead, the circumstances evolve naturally as others recognize and valorize Tuhan's leadership.

Offenses to symbolic values are a key feature of the film's recurring action sequences. After the defeat of the midlevel Japanese gangster boss Wakejima, the Japanese gang leader takes matters into his own hands. His method is strikingly similar to Shinmajök's. Söngmin has just married Chiyön, the supposed sister of Tuhan, and is traveling to the couple's new home outside the city.⁴⁵ On the way he is violently assaulted by the Japanese gangsters and returns home to die in Chiyön's arms. When Tuhan visits Chiyön to inform her of her husband's death, the Japanese assailants kidnap Tuhan's girlfriend, Sölhwa. She resists the intimidation of the Japanese boss but is sexually assaulted and then dies.⁴⁶ Her corpse is then brought back to Tuhan as he grieves with his sister over Söngmin's death. With double deaths, the film exposes the villainy of the Japanese in terms of utter disregard for ritual, custom, and civility. Their incessant attacks leave the grieving Koreans no space for proper mourning.⁴⁷ The film has shown that social custom and ritual require suspension of ordinary time and the marking of a moment of "enchanted time" out of the colonial setting. Yet the Japanese attack disturbs this temporality reserved for the symbolic and spiritual order of existence. The Japanese assailants are defined as irreconcilable Others not only because of the pure intensity of their violence but because of their ruthless disregard for even a minimal degree of humanity.

What eventuates from this traumatic encounter is all-out revenge on the Japanese. Here the action is not precisely planned to defeat the Japanese opponent. Rather, Tuhan, along with all his subordinates and his beggar friends, takes the initiative and advances into the Japanese business district, a sign that his military campaign is no longer defensive but offensive in nature. Most of the Korean gangsters and fighters under his leadership are dressed in preparation for their walk in unison toward the Japanese turf as if they were making a military march into the enemy's territory. The camaraderie even brings the repentant Shinmajök back to join the last battle. His change of heart is evident in his invocation of nation to justify the righteous use of violence against the Japanese: "If we lose this battle, we will forever live as dogs of the Japanese."⁴⁸ The lengthy ensuing battle confirms the triumph of Koreans over the Japanese. The fight ends with yet another ritual, this time performed by the Japanese. As the enemy boss accepts his defeat he prepares for honor suicide: *hara-kiri*. Tuhan helps him in this ritual of suicide by completing the final beheading. The film's last duel ends with a note on the significance of the ritual act that Tuhan himself fully understands. Whereas the two camps have been depicted as irreconcilable opposites, this moment of ritual brings them into the same realm. The film's objective—to fight and defeat the Japanese—also affirms the ending point at which the two entities are involved in the mutual completion

of ritual. At the end, Tuhan basically conquers the Japanese district only to face his real punishment. When the Japanese police arrive on the scene, Tuhan proudly faces them but also extends his arms for arrest. Although the film ends rather abruptly at this moment, the implications are clear. When the Japanese colonial force is incompetent to handle domestic policing, the local Korean gangster comes to the rescue, quelling the cause of disturbance and returning order to both ethnic communities. That said, Tuhan's voluntary act can be read both ways. Although it shows signs of resistance and pride, it also conveys the docility of the Korean gangster, who ends up accepting his proper social role within the colonial social matrix.

In *A True Story of Kim Tuhan*, the governing operations of social ritual, decorum, and performance all work to produce unique discursive effects of national allegiance, authority, and leadership. Framing the conflict between the Japanese and the Koreans on the smaller scale of competition over a business district, the film seems to underscore on the surface the economic incentives and interests that the two warring factions share. However, the social dynamics of hierarchy building, leadership education, and performative gestures carve out an autonomous realm for Koreans largely unaffected by the political forces of colonialism. The cinematic strategy of misaligning the nationalist mandate and economic interests finds its channels of expression in gangster films, which also sanction the mode of exchange and equivalence between two starkly differentiated opponents.