

# Under the Banner of Nationalism

## *The Changing Imagery of Anticolonial Leadership*

Liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945 galvanized on an unprecedented scale a new fervor for a uniquely national culture in Korea. In the social euphoria of liberation, intellectuals and cultural critics advocated the need to overcome Japanese domination in the broadest sense. Yet the effort to forge a new national culture soon faced a complex set of challenges deriving from the political confusion of the time and factional rivalries, as well as the pressure of the new occupying force. The US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) that replaced the former colonial regime introduced new measures of control and regulation over cultural activities to block the spread of leftist ideologies subversive to its political objectives in Korea.<sup>1</sup> Often, USAMGIK reemployed the agents and mechanisms of the former colonial regime to oversee social activity and cultural production in Korea, provoking the ire and discontent of Koreans.

Film production, distribution, and exhibition, in particular, faced stringent constraints from the neocolonial authority.<sup>2</sup> Film production, which had been hampered by the vicissitudes of Japanese wartime mobilization, was in need of the material and institutional support of the occupation force.<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, the new authority imposed strict censorship over film content to inhibit anything deemed subversive to its domination in Korea.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the lack of resources for commercial filmmaking, such as shortages of production funds, raw film stock, production equipment, and postproduction facilities, delayed the resumption of full film production in the immediate liberation period.<sup>5</sup> Film distribution and exhibition sectors also faced challenges of their own under the control of USAMGIK.

The formative years of liberation under the US occupation (from 1945 to 1948) hence were marked by new tensions. How to narrate the colonial experience

became entangled with the neocolonial interests of the United States from the beginning, contributing to a highly convoluted view of the colonial experience.<sup>6</sup> Decolonization efforts, moreover, become mired in the polarizing Cold War politics that led to Korea's political unrest, partition in 1948, and devastating civil war in 1950. The incipient but growing ideological conflicts were an important backdrop to the cinematic construction of the collective memory of the past.

The films under analysis here are Ch'oe In'gyu's *Hurrah! For Freedom* (Chayu Manse, 1946; hereafter *Hurrah!*) and Shin Sangok's *The Independence Association and Young Syngman Rhee* (Tongnip Hy'ophoe-wa Ch'ongny'on Rhee Syngman, 1959; hereafter *Independence Association*). Whereas *Hurrah!* features a fictional account of a nationalist resistance fighter during the last years of colonial rule, *Independence Association* is a biographical film about the early years of Syngman Rhee, president of South Korea from 1948 to 1960. It showcases the rise of Rhee as a young leader at the tumultuous political time of Korea's precipitous downfall and loss of sovereignty. Produced after epochal events, both films express views toward the colonial era at key junctures in the modern history of Korea. As the first feature-length commercial film after the liberation, *Hurrah!* is the earliest cinematic expression of the era's urgent affirmation of anticolonial nationalism as the ideological foundation of Korean cinema. The years that followed it, before *Independence Association* was produced, were filled with seismic events that shaped the course of South Korean history: the Korean War (1950–53), the anti-communist dictates under the National Security Act of 1948, Syngman Rhee's own authoritarian rule, and prolonged economic privation.<sup>7</sup> *Hurrah!* and *Independence Association* thereby represent shifts in cultural attitudes toward the colonial past that were born out of two vastly different historical circumstances: the postliberation period and the post-Korean War era.

On the level of filmmaking practice, the two films mark significant turning points in the careers of their respective filmmakers, Ch'oe In'gyu and Shin Sangok, who had been bound by the master-apprentice system of film training. Ch'oe, who had an illustrious career as the director of such colonial-period films as *Tuition* (*Su'omnyo*, 1940) and *Angels on the Streets* (*Chib'omn'ün ch'önsa*, 1941), responded to the era's call for nationalist filmmaking after the liberation. *Hurrah!* signified for him a successful career transition from being a filmmaker with tainted pro-Japanese collaborationist credentials to becoming an exemplary artist with a new commitment to nationalist filmmaking in postliberation Korea. His liberation-era films made an indelible impression upon aspiring young filmmaker Shin Sangok, who started his film career as Ch'oe's apprentice and assistant director. After the Korean War, Shin emerged as a major talent on the South Korean film scene by excelling at the sort of popular political filmmaking that his mentor Ch'oe had previously mastered. But Shin went further by introducing a new visual splendor and excess to the depiction of history on screen through his *Independence Association*.

The success and impact of *Independence Association* catapulted Shin's rise as the commanding movie mogul of the ensuing decades.<sup>8</sup>

The two films share a pedagogical ambition to inculcate the political ideal of collective resistance. As my analysis suggests, they do so by exploring the Korean people's loss of sovereignty and prolonged subjugation, while also carving out a space of resistance and highlighting the integrity of Koreans to portray perseverance in a nation under duress. In particular, both films employ the trope of a hero leader who rallies the resistance and emphasizes the righteousness of the cause and the moral authority of the nation under colonial domination. Together, these two films represented major advancements in the cinematic construction of a distinctive historical view toward the colonial past. Their aesthetic effects and narrative features introduced new ways of seeing and understanding the colonial past that strongly influenced subsequent films with colonial themes. They also marked a knowledge production specifically related to the collective memory of the colonial past that was an integral part of the Cold War culture and structure of Korea. In this chapter, I first discuss how these films convey in dramatic and rhetorical terms the unifying force of nationalism and the substance of the anticolonial struggle. I then move beyond the manifest message to explore how these films' portrayal of oppositional politics is embedded in the larger situation of Korea in the Cold War.

#### HURRAH! FOR FREEDOM AND MOBILIZATION OF PASSION FOR THE PERPETUAL STRUGGLE

Any discussion of South Korea's filmic portrayal of the colonial past must begin with an examination of the "liberation-era film" (*haebang yŏnghwa*). Produced at the height of social euphoria over the nation's independence, postliberation films are the earliest onscreen expressions of anticolonial nationalism. They include works such as Chŏe In'gyu's *Hurrah!*, Yi Kuyŏng's *The Chronicle of An Chunggŭn* (*An Chunggŭn sa'gi*, 1946), Sŏ Chŏnggyu's *The Immortal Secret Envoy* (*Pummyŏl-ŭi milsa*, 1947), Chŏn Ch'anggŭn's *My Liberated Country* (*Haebangdoen, nae koyang*, 1947), Yi Kuyŏng's *The Chronicle of the March 1st Revolution* (*Samil hyŏngmyŏnggi*, 1947), Yun Pongch'un's *Yun Ponggil, the Martyr* (*Yun Ponggil ūisa*, 1947), Kim Chŏnghwan's *The Angel Heart* (*Ch'ŏnsa-ŭi maŭm*, 1947), Chŏe In'gyu's *The Night before Independence Day* (*Tongnip Chŏnya*, 1948) and *An Innocent Criminal* (*Choe-ŏpnŭn choein*, 1948), and Yun Pongch'un's *Yu Kwansun* (1948).<sup>9</sup> As the titles indicate, many are biographical films that showcase those who devoted their lives to the nationalist cause. They illustrate a type of filmmaking that, while commercial in nature, was part of the era's collective effort to forge a national culture and consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

*Hurrah!* is the earliest and most explicit expression of such nationalist filmmaking and became the archetype for liberation-era film. As the first feature-length commercial film made after liberation, it exemplifies the nationalist fervor that

swept Korea at that time.<sup>11</sup> Film critics and historians have acclaimed the film for the historical value of its strong anticolonial message, but this emphasis has led to a short-circuiting of nuanced interpretation.<sup>12</sup> The film's damaged prints are a contributing factor to this critical negligence, for it is difficult for anyone to discern the complete plot.<sup>13</sup> One critic (Yi Hyoin) who deftly reconstructs the film's plot is largely unswayed by its nationalist creed and sees *Hurrah!* merely as an artwork that fails to achieve its promise because of an outmoded style, sentimentality, and a lack of dramatic plausibility.<sup>14</sup> But Yi, like other critics, curiously leaves out analyses of specific narrative details and attendant issues.

While acknowledging critics' insights into the film's historic importance, I want to shift attention to its narrative details in order to show how the theme of militant nationalism garners appeal and legitimacy. Rather than approaching the film as an unmediated conduit for the preestablished doctrine of nationalism, I argue that it uses several key tropes and themes that ground the political ideals of nationalism in visual terms. As Travis Workman has observed, the issues of heterosexual romance, gender, and pro-Japanese collaboration serve a dramatic function as they drive the film narrative and contribute to an aesthetic of liberation.<sup>15</sup> While agreeing with Workman, I also stress that the early cinematic expression of anti-Japanese resistance is not without ambiguity concerning the new possibilities associated with the liberation. This problem of ambiguity is particularly evident toward the end of *Hurrah!*, which shows the tragic fate of the male protagonist, Hanjung. I focus on the timing of his death, as well as the peculiar timelessness of the anticolonial struggle that it entails, as these make the film exceptional among South Korean films about the colonial past.

The film is set in the last days of Japanese colonial rule. Hanjung escapes from prison with his comrade, first taking refuge at his friend's place and later moving to a safe house that a young nurse, Hyeja, and her mother provide. He attends a meeting of elite Korean leaders where he argues for an immediate armed uprising against the colonial power, but he fails to draw the others' support. Later, Hanjung, learning of the arrest of his comrade, attacks the arresting policeman on the streets and rescues his compatriot. The action triggers a police chase, and Hanjung takes refuge at Mihyang's place. Mihyang is a *kisaeng* married to a policeman, Nambu, who is a pro-Japanese collaborator; nevertheless, she develops a romantic passion for Hanjung. She later offers money to Hanjung to support the nationalist cause but inadvertently attracts the attention of the Japanese police. The ensuing shootout between Hanjung and the police results in Mihyang's death and Hanjung's injury and arrest. At the hospital, the young nurse Hyeja attempts to rescue Hanjung. She drugs the guard and leads Hanjung to an escape route. Hanjung, however, is shot and killed on the day of liberation.<sup>16</sup>

The film's emphasis on resistant nationalism centers on the volatile actions of Hanjung. The theme of nationalism as an uncompromising political creed finds its pure realization in this male character, played by the actor Chŏn Ch'anggŭn, whose

stoic face and reserved demeanor effectively convey the lofty and serious aura of the struggle. It should be noted, however, that the male protagonist's charisma and authority rely structurally upon the support of other Koreans. For instance, the two main female characters, Mihyang and Hyeja, intervene at crucial moments in the narrative to provide much-needed protection and help for Hanjung, without which he would not be able to sustain his quest.<sup>17</sup>

More specifically, Hanjung's nationalist fervor distinguishes itself from his other personal interests. Female desires rank lower in value than the supremely valued nationalist cause. The two women whose romantic interest Hanjung attracts represent opposite scenarios of Korean femininity. The director, Ch'oe, clearly draws on the popular trope of the love triangle, yet uses it to underscore the priority of the political plot. The narrative shows that two forms of passion, Hanjung's adherence to the nationalist cause and the two women's desire for him, belong to different registers, and a convergence emerges only through the transformation of female desire as it is subsumed under the higher ideal of altruistic devotion.<sup>18</sup> The configuration of women's desire, political involvement, and political conversion hence is central to the political discourse of nationalism in the film.

The film fleshes out this theme by allocating substantial segments of the narrative to two contrasting versions of femininity. Though Mihyang and Hyeja both offer help to Hanjung, the film valorizes Hyeja's contribution while denigrating Mihyang's. In the latter case, this devaluation is made immediately clear by her profession. Since the *kisaeng* is a familiar emblem of colonial Korean femininity that serves the colonizer, Mihyang is marked negatively from the beginning. But it is her suffocating marriage with a pro-Japanese collaborator, not her supposedly debased profession per se, that causes her misery. The film thus draws upon two colonial icons—the *kisaeng* and the policeman—to present a couple who, in their collaboration with the colonial regime, are irredeemable in and fundamentally unassimilable to the film's construction of the national body and imaginary.<sup>19</sup> Mihyang's sentimental and histrionic outpourings illustrate the cardinal logic of colonial social life in postcolonial cinema: a total conflation of the personal and the political. Conjugal relations with a pro-Japanese agent can only lead one to suffer the consequences of a bad marriage. The portrayal of Mihyang's unhappy marriage is part of an overarching strategy that sublimates the personal concerns of romance to the larger political precept of anticolonial struggle that is necessary to construct the nationalist subject.

Mihyang's excessive self-pity is portrayed in thoroughly negative terms, as Hanjung shows no interest in her dilemma. Moreover, it is through his denial of her desire for comfort that Hanjung's nationalist fervor comes into sharp relief. Against the emotional excess of the female character and her narcissistic self-indulgence, his passion for the political struggle contrasts as formidably austere. When he mistakenly assumes that she is untrustworthy in terms of the nationalist struggle, he goes so far as to physically punish her.<sup>20</sup> Hence, while the women

in the film initially function as indispensable support for the male protagonist's endeavor, their worth is reassessed through their capacity to embrace the political mandate, which requires the individual to sublimate personal needs to a higher political need. Mihyang's humiliation and subsequent death thus signal the elimination of an undesired femininity. The film approvingly underscores the unwritten code that came to dominate South Korea's filmic depiction of the colonial past: whatever potentially impedes the male protagonist's progress toward fulfilling the larger political purpose must be overcome at any cost.

In contrast, the transformation of Hyeja informs the symbolic economy of female labor and worth that is central to the film's configuration of the nationalist struggle. It is also the distinguishing feature that separates Hyeja from Mihyang. Hyeja is a fresh-faced young nurse, and her religious affiliation, Christianity, speaks volumes about her conservative and righteous moral character.<sup>21</sup> Yet she is also adept at articulating her desire to Hanjung in a subtle and friendly manner. The difference between Hyeja and Mihyang is brought into sharp relief through the domestic spaces that they inhabit. As opposed to Mihyang's gaudy showcase of furniture and objects, Hyeja's abode has an aura of comfort and warmth.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it is a site of labor and production where her mother constantly works on a sewing machine. Because Hyeja and her mother are alike in their devoted support for Hanjung's clandestine political operation, their labor at home already possesses the positive values relevant to his struggle. The film therefore sets up a clear dichotomy of femininities in order to punish and eradicate the materialistic and self-absorbed while sanctioning and commending the virginal and industrious. From the outset, the liberation film makes clear the value of female labor, both emotional and material, in the service of the nationalist struggle.

In both interactions, Hanjung is not the subject who supposedly knows and empathizes with the plight of the people. Rather, the dynamic operates in reverse. The film portrays him as the rightful *recipient* of the other Korean characters' a priori support for the cause. In fact, the film makes a great effort to establish Hanjung as the leader of the political struggle by making all surrounding figures *presupposedly* recognize him as such. This supposition then leads other Koreans to make efforts and sacrifices for the value he embodies. A construction of proper leadership thereby takes precedence over other concerns in the thematic axis as the film progresses toward its end.<sup>23</sup> The disparity between Hanjung's plan and his action is not depicted as a drawback; rather, it functions as a catalyst that inspires the involvement of other people, which ultimately cements his status as a figure of authority.

The projection of assumed leadership compensates for the narrow, if not myopic, field of vision that the male protagonist maintains in his interaction with other Koreans. Depicted formally as the beneficiary of others' devotion, Hanjung effectively funnels the help of others toward the nationalist struggle. However, his focus on immediate actions is set against the vast sphere and reach of colonial



FIGURE 2. Hanjung and Korean leaders discuss the method for political struggle in *Hurrah! For Freedom*. Courtesy of the Korean Film Archive.

domination. He embodies a nationalist creed that is spatially defensive and reactive in nature, and this becomes a recurring pattern in biographical films of later periods. Postcolonial cinema's typical portrayal of colonial rule as dark, austere, and hostile is a necessary counterpart to the portrayal of an anticolonial struggle that is bounded and narrow in scale. The imaginary projections of both registers—that is, the broad realm of occupation and surveillance on one hand, and the punctured site of resistance and subversion on the other—complement each other in a vast national allegory. The nationalist struggle is shown only as scattered, sporadic “tactical” acts against a permanent system and network of empire. The criticism that a leader like Hanjung does not generate any meaningful chain of actions (as he himself is killed in his escape from hospital) therefore misses the point here. The anticolonial political resistance can be imagined only on a small and myopic scale, in terms of sporadic but continuous disruption of the larger colonial order.

These limitations of this portrayal become conspicuous in the film when Hanjung attempts to advocate nationwide struggle against the Japanese colonial power. This occurs when he has his meeting with the Korean leaders who have gathered in the mountains to discuss the future direction of Korea. The meeting takes place on August 14, a day before Korea's liberation, and the leaders have already been informed of Japan's imminent surrender.<sup>24</sup> Hanjung makes a passionate call for an

armed uprising. Given the magnitude of the issue, what he advocates can mean only a military attack on a total, nationwide scale. Other leaders are apprehensive about Hanjung's plan, fearing that such volatile action could lead to unnecessary heavy casualties. Hanjung nevertheless continues to insist, and the difference of opinion leads to an acrimonious exchange of personal attacks for which Hanjung later apologizes.<sup>25</sup> The sequence alludes to an important thematic issue within the nationalist camp that other postcolonial films barely touch upon. It illustrates conflicts and divergences within the group over the direction of the struggle as well as multiple competing views on national affairs and leadership. It also makes clear that Hanjung's advocacy of violent uprising is geared more toward establishing the precept of ceaseless struggle than toward reflecting upon the situation of Korea on the cusp of a new historic development.

Yet the exceptional historic moment of transition also calls into question the efficacy of armed struggle in the first place and makes it difficult to construct a sound argument for the nationalist position. Put simply: Is violent revolt, which may cost Korean lives, justified when the nation's liberation is destined to occur in a foreseeable future? The question challenges the straightforward logic of a nationalism that has been largely defined in opposition to the colonial ruler. When the suffering nation is habitually imagined as stuck in perpetual subjugation to the enemy, Japan, all-out resistance is justifiable. With impending liberation, however, the Korean subject's position can no longer be conceived in a binary anticolonial framework. In fact, the situation is peculiarly open, as national subjectivity can be conceived without necessary reference to the colonial domination that is destined to disappear. Instead, the focus shifts toward the "future" of Korea, where an independent state is the new foreseeable reality. Furthermore, this conception of the Korean nation already possesses an all-encompassing scale in contrast with Hanjung's struggle, which is a reactive, bounded, local, and parochial effort.

In the subsequent sequences, Hanjung's continuing devotion to militant struggle must be considered in terms of the political vacuum and confusion of the postcolonial situation and its impact on the shifting perception of Korean reality. On the surface, the film makes a clear connection between Hanjung's sacrifice and the nation's liberation. However, the apparent prospect of liberation complicates such a facile reading. Though Hanjung's previous actions were reactive in nature, now they are contrarian gestures in the face of the reluctant, if not passive, response of other Korean leaders. With the prospect of liberation on the horizon, the other men have already shifted their focus away from militant anticolonial politics toward the future prospects for Korea and its governance. Hanjung's continuing struggle gains its significance against the expected "transition" of power that will lead to Korea's independence. Read in light of this complex juncture, Hanjung's death at the daybreak of liberation not only signals an individual act of sacrifice but also refers broadly to a larger ideological rationale to affirm persistence and

integrity in the new political reality of liberation.<sup>26</sup> The nationalist discourse, as expressed in the film, is not in tandem with the shifting reality of Korea at the time of liberation and instead operates as an unwavering political constant. The film therefore illustrates the atemporal drive of anticolonial politics even at the moment of ultimate fulfillment. That said, Hanjung's altruistic action creates and heightens the symbolic density of the timeless struggle upon which the nation ultimately rests.

Ch'oe's liberation-era films, such as *Hurrah!* and *The Night before Independence Day*, express the hardship of Koreans under Japanese colonial rule, but they do not feature the visual embellishment and realistic depth that Ch'oe brought to his late colonial films. Stylistically, Ch'oe's liberation-era films depict the bare essence of the oppositional gestures and energy that promoted the nation's survival and integrity. The budget constraints and technical limitations of the era are conspicuous onscreen, revealing visible signs of low production values and a technical unevenness. The dim lighting and sparse production design of these films, as well as a general paucity of ambiance, engender an austere aura in the diegetic world. A lack of luminosity and of narrative flourishes renders the films uneven and jumpy at times; the damaged prints compound the problem with their narrative loose ends and lack of character motivation.

Concurrently, these films fail to turn the narrative of crisis into a genre of historical drama on colonialism. It would have been difficult for both the filmmaker and film viewers to secure temporal distance or historical perspective when the colonial experience was still a vivid memory. Furthermore, such films structure their narratives around the event of liberation and thus resolve all problems and tensions as they transmute the characters' suffering and sacrifice into meaningful components of the new reality of Korea. Though they do underscore oppositional rhetoric, the overall effects of such contrarian gestures do not elevate these films to the popular scenarios of anticolonial history that films of the later period realized. Being preoccupied with the immediate reality of liberation, early films lack the larger discursive framework or the self-awareness of grand history that constitutes the larger temporal "stuff" of anticolonial representation. To have a broader perspective on the colonial past and project it onto the screen, Korean films had to wait for an influx of new factors and forces. Shin Sangok in the postwar period soon took the lead in creating a new type of historical film that offered a view of the colonial era as a discrete and distant time period.

#### HISTORY AND HERO MAKING IN INDEPENDENCE ASSOCIATION

The biographical films of the 1950s narrate the nation's history by portraying the political turmoil that led to colonial rule and the rise of collective resistance. This new configuration of history involved three contributing factors that made the

1950s films distinct from the films of the preceding liberation period: the adoption of a longer historical view that encompassed times before the colonial era and put the colonial era in a new perspective; industrial change and the effects of its vicissitudes on genre forms; and an increased self-consciousness about history in general. By utilizing the decline of the Chosŏn dynasty as their principal backdrop, the 1950s films achieved a unique historical distance that was necessary for the construction of a new critical viewpoint toward the political dilemmas of the past. The new productions also achieved an effect of historical verisimilitude as the growing partnership between the state and the film industry made large-scale political film production possible. The 1950s films show increased attention to historical details, which, along with the use of generic tropes, enhances the more serious, if not weighty, ambiance of history. Furthermore, the various textual signs and rhetorical features, as well as the extratextual discourse on film production and unique film exhibition practices, all elevated the status of the 1950s historical drama films close to that of an official discourse of national history.

A discussion of 1950s biopics involves a bit of backtracking because a similar treatment of nationalist heroes began in the earlier postliberation period. The late 1940s witnessed the release of several biopics on patriots whose stories of devotion to the nationalist cause would again be turned into films in the 1950s. Examples of 1940s biopics are *The Chronicle of An Chunggŭn* (*An Chunggŭn sagi*; Yi Kuyŏng, 1946), *The Immortal Secret Envoy* (*Pulmyŏl-ŭi milsa*; Sŏ Chŏnggyu, 1947), *The Chronicle of the March 1st Revolution* (*Samil hyŏngmyŏnggi*; Yi Kuyŏng, 1947), *Yun Ponggil, the Martyr* (*Yun Ponggil ūisa*; Yun Pongch'un, 1947), and *Yu Kwansun* (Yun Pongch'un, 1948). These works share thematic affinities with staunch nationalist dramas like *Hurrah!* and both groups of films portray solid anticolonial resistance politics against colonial oppression.<sup>27</sup> On the surface, the 1950s biopics seem like repeats of the 1940s biopics that dramatized the heroic tales of anticolonial nationalists. The list of historical figures who were made the subjects of biopics in both decades includes Min Yŏnghwan (1861–1905), Yu Kwansun (1902–20), Yun Ponggil (1908–32), and An Chunggŭn (1879–1910). Repetition is significant here in that the filmmakers of the 1950s, by restaging these individuals' resistance narratives, exalted the national history. Through an act akin to palimpsestic inscription, they made the stories of these historical figures an important component of the nationalist imagination directed toward the colonial past.<sup>28</sup>

The drive to produce biopics seems to have been a ritualistic obsession. For instance, the historical figure Yu Kwansun, a female student activist of the historic March 1st Movement of 1919, was transformed into an icon of the nationalist resistance by four films honoring her sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, three biographical films depicted the life of An Chunggŭn, the nationalist who assassinated Japanese statesman Ito Hirobumi in 1909 as a protest against the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty of 1905.<sup>30</sup> The repeated dramatization of select political figures hence served not only the biopics' didactic and memorial functions but also the continuity and

predominance of the nationalist historical discourse in the making of Korea's national cinema in the 1940s and '50s.

In the late 1950s, biographical films set in the precolonial and colonial eras reached the pinnacle of their success and popularity. These films—including Chŏn Ch'anggŭn's *King Kojong and Martyr An Chunggŭn* (*Kojong Hwangje-wa ūisa An Chunggŭn*, 1959), Yun Pongch'un and Nam Hongik's *A Blood Bamboo* (*Hanmal p'ungun-gwa min ch'ungjŏnggong*, 1959), Shin Sangok's *The Independence Association and Young Syngman Rhee* (*Tongnip Hyŏphoe-wa ch'ŏngnyŏn Rhee Syngman*, 1959), Chŏn Ch'anggŭn's *Kim Ku, the Leader* (*Ah! paekpŏm Kim Ku sŏnsaeng*, 1960), and Kim Kangyun's *Nameless Stars* (*Irŭmŏmnŭn pyŏldŭl*, 1959)—represent the mature stage of the genre, offering high production values, a sense of historical grandeur, and a sense of future time as well as historical perspective distinct from those of their antecedents. The new films also were directed by a younger generation of filmmakers who brought a different sensibility, style, and approach to the historical content. One of the most conspicuous features of these films is their pessimistic tone, as the urgent actions of the patriot characters gain their significance against the prolonged enfeeblement of the Korean Empire (Taehan Cheguk, 1897–1910) that ultimately resulted in a complete loss of sovereignty.<sup>31</sup>

These films share the nationalist impulse of the films of the earlier postliberation era but broaden the scope of that nationalism by reframing political concerns in expanded historical terms. Specifically, they interrogate the origins and patterns of the political crisis and explore how the crisis gave rise to the formation of a nationalist consciousness. A particularly salient feature of these films is a visual rendition of radical political activism that chronicles the process through which the patriot leader gains the trust of his fellow Koreans. Depicting the new political leadership, then, is one of the dominant projects of 1950s biopics. The films trace the trajectory of growth or transformation of these patriots. Possessing precience, courage, and intelligence, they undergo ordeals to emerge as great men and women of history. Stylistically, their unwavering commitment to serve the nation is fashioned in a manner deeply imbued with melodramatic tropes of the Manichaeic moral imagination.<sup>32</sup> The authenticity that these heroes represent is a distinctive dramatic effect that also alludes to the ontology of the nation itself. In other words, the concrete stories of great individuals are equated to the abstract notion of nation.

Shin Sangok's 1959 film *Independence Association* marks the most ambitious and comprehensive undertaking of this cinematic experiment. The film chronicles the early years of Syngman Rhee's political career, spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was the period when Korea tried to change its dynastic political structure, only to lose its grip on sovereignty and independence to the predatory encroachment of foreign powers, particularly Japan. Although the film's time span predates the span of the colonial period (1910–45), it formulates

and accentuates several key themes and issues in the historical imaginary of anti-colonial nationalism in the postwar cinema of South Korea.

Before delving into the narrative content, however, I provide a brief production history of *Independence Association*, for it illustrates the close collaboration between the filmmaker and the state in the making of history on the screen in the late '50s. *Independence Association* also represents the clearest use of film as a propaganda tool under the Syngman Rhee administration. In fact, explicit political interests drove the production of the film in the first place. In particular, the mobilization of political networks, financial resources, and coercive measures not only buttressed the film's production financing but also secured special distribution channels and exhibition practices.

The idea for producing a biopic about the sitting president originated from an executive committee meeting of the Liberal Party in early 1960. As a part of a larger scheme to influence the upcoming presidential election in March, the committee members decided to make a film in support of Rhee's bid for reelection. The job was handed over to Im Hwasu, who then resorted to his network and influence to force celebrities and film personnel to participate in or help with the film's production.<sup>33</sup> The Division of Public Information came on board, transferring the seed money drawn from the Liberty Party to Im's film production company, Korea Entertainment Corporation, to initiate the production.<sup>34</sup> Im then ordered all members of the Anti-Communist Artists Association, which was under his direct control, to appear in the film as either actors or extras.<sup>35</sup> In the meantime, the Office of Presidential Security joined in the film's planning and screenwriting. Its involvement in preproduction in particular was widely publicized at the time. Rhee's oral account of his early political activism provided the basic framework for the film's narrative.<sup>36</sup> To facilitate the close collaboration between President Rhee and Shin, Kwak Yŏngju, chief of the Office of Presidential Security, functioned as an intermediary between the two to flesh out biographical details, all of which were faithfully reflected in the film.<sup>37</sup>

With the concerted effort of several government agencies, the film's production proceeded smoothly. Its production budget was 100 million *hwan*, a figure that far exceeded the cost of average film production in the 1950s. It had a cast of 170 actors and additionally mobilized tens of thousands of extras.<sup>38</sup> Palace buildings and other open sets were constructed at Anyang Film Studio in order to increase the sense of historical authenticity and the opulence of the drama.<sup>39</sup> The film was released in twenty-five theaters in ten major cities in December 1959.<sup>40</sup> In addition, hundreds of 16mm prints of the film were distributed to various noncommercial outlets like military units and local cultural centers for free screenings.<sup>41</sup> The traveling roadshow exhibitors who had close ties to Rhee's political machine also joined in, offering people in rural areas unprecedented access to the film. This widespread release was complemented by a prolonged exhibition arrangement. After its initial

release in major cities, the film moved to secondary or ancillary chains and stayed in circulation continuously until March 1960. Hence, a combination of resources, talent, and influence was in place to garner public consensus in support of the regime. In short, the film was made with a precise political goal: to glorify incumbent president Rhee and promote his reelection in the following year.<sup>42</sup>

Close collaboration between state machinery and the film business dated back to the colonial period. It continued and intensified into the 1950s under the special circumstances of the Korean War.<sup>43</sup> *Independence Association* was made at the peak of this dynamic whereby members of government agencies and their informal groups of associates used resources and influence to produce films for specific political ends. For the Rhee regime, legitimation was an urgent matter in the late 1950s as it faced the widespread and deepening social problems of corruption, poverty, and malaise that had plagued the country since the devastating civil war.<sup>44</sup> But the discursive effects of the film as an elaborate historical set piece succeeded in doing more than merely valorizing a political leader. They actively promoted to the mass audience a particular view of the past whereby a current statesman was portrayed as the great man of history, the one endowed with a grand view of modern world history itself.

The obsession with the image of a great leader also shows the regime's effort to counteract the similar political trope that dominated the screens in its enemy state, North Korea. Although completely prohibited from circulation, North Korea's cultural productions of the parallel period depicted its leader Kim Il Sung as a figure of inspiration for revolutionary struggle and used this vision to articulate its national cinema. Given that Kim was portrayed almost always as the leader of the uncompromising armed struggle against the colonial power, South Korea's film propaganda needed to create its own trope of political leadership in response. Rather than locating new political capital in the revolt of the oppressed, *Independence Association* showcased the trajectory of a political modernity through which its own version of charismatic leadership gained legitimacy and appeal.

But what, precisely, is the substance and meaning of the leadership that *Independence Association* articulates? Here I want to draw attention to the various moments in the film that relate to the political mode of modernity that undergirds the ascendancy of Rhee as the solution to the nation's crisis. The film's elaborate depiction of the failure of Chosŏn Korea reveals a necessary step in the discursive construction of the modern national subject that the leader Rhee cumulatively exemplifies.<sup>45</sup> The making of modern enlightened nationalism represents a progressive notion of history in which there is an ultimate horizon of modernity that Korea is destined to reach. Configured in this fashion, the film's treatment of the national crisis exceeds the temporal parameters of colonialism. Whereas colonialism, as a concept, always signifies various and systemic constraints, the enlightened nationalist thought that Rhee comes to represent is characteristically excessive, expansive, and future-driven as it strives to chart an alternate trajectory of history

in which the nation ultimately is triumphant and permanent. The traumatic and prolonged loss of political independence sets in motion the rise of the modern leader whose prescient ideas and actions generate the momentum to inspire and transform Koreans living in a critical phase of history. The film functions as a didactic text precisely because of this higher dimension of moral indoctrination.

The film is also unique for its projection of an epic sense of history with its display of high production values, scale, and mobilization of labor and capital. Vivian Sobchack astutely explains how Hollywood historical epics of the 1950s offered visual plenitude that registered with viewers as a “temporally reflexive and transcendental” notion of time called History.<sup>46</sup> Sobchack’s work focuses on the close relations between the genre’s popular notion of history and the phenomenological form of temporal existence that shapes the experiential field of an embodied subject. But the insight she offers has conceptual purchase for the expanded and reflexive aura of history that South Korea’s biographical films of the 1950s project onto the screen. In particular, *Independence Association*’s exceptionally high production values, drawn from the large-scale mobilization of talents, resources, and props, significantly promote the perception of the staged drama as a serious reenactment of history.<sup>47</sup> The film’s casting embellishes the grandeur of the historical time through its self-reflexive rendition of the late Chosŏn period as a crucial historical juncture. The film, moreover, utilized casting for extratextual references particular to the 1950s biographical film. For instance, in the 1959 biopic *A Blood Bamboo*, prominent actor Kim Tongwon played the role of Min Yŏnghwan (1861–1905), the minister of the Korean Empire who committed suicide to protest Japan’s annexation of Korea. The actor Kim reappears as the same patriot Min in the film *Independence Association*, released just two months after the opening of *A Blood Bamboo*, creating a clear sense of continuity.<sup>48</sup> The film’s casting hence is an aspect of how 1950s biographical films already formed a greater realm of popular history in which one text echoed another.

The main narrative of *Independence Association* captures the vicissitudes of the political crises that brought about the rise of Syngman Rhee as the nation’s leader. The film’s diegesis chronicles a brief ten-year period (1896–1906) when Rhee, in his twenties, undergoes three major phases of development: from a novice student of Western education, to an active member of the Independence Association, and finally to a renowned leader in national politics. In the aftermath of a series of national crises that include the Kapshin coup (1884), the Tonghak Rebellion (1894), and the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), Rhee resolves to acquire new Western knowledge at a modern school, but without abandoning his Confucian beliefs. He makes speedy progress at school, but drastic changes in political circumstances impede his studies. The assassination of the Korean empress Min by Japanese forces prompts Rhee’s involvement in protest politics, resulting in his need to seek refuge at a temple to escape political persecution. Rhee returns to Seoul afterward but becomes disillusioned by the stifling situation of Korea under the two competing

imperial powers of Russia and Japan. He responds with renewed vigor by becoming active in the campaign of the Independence Association (*Tongnip Hyŏphoe*) for progressive reforms. In particular, Rhee proves his leadership through editorial service for the newspaper *Tongnip Sinmun* and speeches at public gatherings. His campaign bears fruit as the king acknowledges and reflects upon the popular demand for political reform. However, Rhee soon faces political opposition from the new power group in the royal court and suffers a prolonged imprisonment. When he is finally pardoned, he offers the king his vision for Korea's future but soon leaves the country for education in the United States.

As the above plot summary shows, the film broadly traces Rhee's transformation into a modern subject holding progressive social and political ideals, first through his exposure to Western modes of education and second through his political advocacy for democracy. The first section of the film, however, presents two conflicting values, the Western knowledge of the Enlightenment and traditional Confucian mores, that condition and complicate the course of Rhee's education. Instruction at his new Western school provides Rhee with access to new knowledge but also compels him to establish terms of negotiation by which the Western knowledge he embraces will not overwhelm his Korean identity. The challenge occurs specifically around the idea of personal choice in religion. When he enrolls at Paejae School, the school curriculum includes the subject of religion, and students are expected to learn the history and values of Christianity. When the Caucasian instructor teaches the subject, however, Rhee leaves the classroom in protest. For Rhee, who is entrenched in traditional Confucian teaching, the lessons of Christianity mean more than moral teachings. He perceives them as an outright instance of indoctrination. When his friend remarks on the good virtues expressed in the Bible, Rhee cynically retorts, "Those good virtues are easily found in the teachings of Confucius. What is important for us is English language skills." Rhee's attitude here illustrates his pragmatic approach to the new knowledge and underscores his unchanging affinity with the traditional social and moral values of Korea. His refusal to allow Western learning into the domain of spiritual values indicates in contrarian fashion his affinity with past Confucian values.

The film's domestic sequences are crucial, for they offer Rhee's critical yet pragmatic view on the nature of Western knowledge. His conversation with his father and his father's friends at home offers a good example. When accused of being corrupted by Western influence, Rhee rationalizes his embrace of Western knowledge and civilization as necessary to transform the nation and prevent it from a collapse like that of the Qing Empire. The scene does not stress the collision of two values; rather, it underscores the way by which compromise and understanding can be achieved. Rhee's father and his old friends do not distinguish secular modern knowledge from Western religious doctrine, and Rhee does not attempt to explain the differences to them. Recognizing the legitimacy of their concerns, Rhee instead promises that he will learn only "the knowledge that we do not have

from the West, but never abandon the teachings of ancestors.” The film consistently stresses Rhee’s pragmatic approach as the solution to resolving the inherent conflict between two values. By combining two bifurcating tendencies—honoring “tradition” but also taking part in the universal wave of worldly progress—he exemplifies the very essence of the nationalist mode of history writing.<sup>49</sup>

The moment of compromise is duly noted by Rhee’s mother, who secretly observes the conversation. This adjunct imagery of the mother, whose gaze signifies her moral support for Rhee, is significant to the configuration of proper domesticity set against the political turmoil of the time. Rhee’s activism is cast against this dimension of passivity associated with the domestic sphere as well as his mother’s yearning for his return. Through this additional layer of recognition, the domestic space occupied by his mother appears to be receding from view even as she affirms her moral and spiritual support for the struggle he is about to wage. In other words, the home space remains essentially a site of passivity characterized by all-giving maternal love.<sup>50</sup> The desire of his mother is never fulfilled but functions as a fixed point for Rhee’s ever-expanding activism in the sociopolitical realm.<sup>51</sup> As a person who is never able to repay his mother’s love or end her yearning, Rhee turns into a larger-than-life figure who sublimates personal concerns to the larger political cause. Service to the nation in this configuration of emotional economy is then charged with moral character: the substance central also to the film’s nationalist imagination.

The film then shifts its focus to the international political competition that led to the crisis of Korea’s sovereignty and the ascendancy of Rhee as a populist leader. Japan’s triumph in the First Sino-Japanese War brings major changes to the royal court. With Chinese influence diminished, the king and queen gravitate toward Russian diplomats and associates in the hope of using their political clout to curb the influence of the new power: Japan. Political intrigue, espionage, and counterscheming all ensue in the subsequent sequences, shaping and foregrounding a narrative that highlights Rhee’s significance as a leader.

The calamity of the assassination of Queen Min by a Japanese terrorist group, followed by the king’s request for asylum in the Russian embassy, leads Rhee to initiate a public protest against Japanese aggression. Yet this episode turns out to be structurally misaligned with the subsequent course of events and political repercussions. Interestingly, the issue of Japan’s egregious aggression never enters the frame again, a feature that sets the film at odds with most of the nationalist-themed films set in the colonial period. The film instead changes gears completely to explore the *next* source of foreign interference in the Korean court: Russia. Rhee then becomes the principal activist waging a struggle against the influence of Russia over Korean politics.<sup>52</sup> The elision suggests that the film, though depicting Korean history in a rigidly black-and-white framework, locates culpability differently than later films, which tend to conventionalize an anticolonial nationalist model. As illustrated by the film’s favorable treatment of Kim Hongjip, who urged

Korea's adoption of modernizing reforms in Japan, the film portrays political affiliation with an external group as less of a problem than the self-interested benefit that Koreans might gain from such collusion.<sup>53</sup> Political opportunism and acquisitive greed are, the film stresses, the most deleterious problems in Korean politics, for they weaken the trust between the king and his officials. Rebuilding trust, consensus, and solidarity becomes an urgent matter, for such values are the source of the political capital necessary to defend the nation's sovereignty and independence. The film thus depicts Rhee's growth as that of a heroic leader who inspires the dynamic accumulation of new political resources.

The film's elaborate formal design primarily serves to convey the momentum and effectiveness of Rhee's campaign effort for political reform and by extension visualizes his acquisition of political capital. In particular, it portrays Rhee as a brilliant politician who makes unprecedented utilization of techniques of public speech and means of modern communication such as print media, thereby establishing a public sphere. Rhee plays a crucial role in acquiring from a Christian organization the equipment and journalistic know-how for the Independence Association's publicity campaign. Rhee also assumes the role of editor-in-chief of the weekly journal to galvanize and steer public opinion toward political reform. The ensuing montage sequences, accompanied by optimistic music, heighten the sense of hope and progress that springs from a rising awareness of the importance of national sovereignty and rights. It is through the overlapping of political discourse for national rights and the use of print media that Rhee's intellectual prowess and organizational skills are proved. The film underscores his speech in an open public arena as an important moment for his transformation into a national leader, for he changes a traditional marketplace from a site of mere commodity exchange into a dynamic public sphere where the communication of political ideas and ideals shapes consensus and collective action. He later gives additional speeches in the marketplace in the film, further accentuating his leadership in the growing populist reform movement.

From the moment of the first speech, the conflict is reframed as occurring between populist reformers, represented by Rhee, and the Russian camp, which includes pro-Russian court officials, both of whom compete for the king's attention and action. Yet a communication problem persists between the reformers and the king. In the meantime, public protest gains momentum to challenge business as usual in the royal court, and the pro-Russian group presses the king, who must rely on his advisers for information on the public mood, to take action to suppress Rhee's political activism. The growing tension between Rhee, outside formal politics, and the pro-Russian group in the court reaches its height in the opening ceremony of the Independence Gate.<sup>54</sup>

The segment is one of the most spectacular depictions of a historical event ever staged in 1950s films, with an elaborate *mise-en-scène* of high production values and a complex presentation. It visually underscores the large scale of the



FIGURE 3. Rhee delivers his speech to an audience in an open public space in *Independence Association*. Courtesy of the Korean Film Archive.

architecture of the Independence Gate, as well as the mobilization of the large crowd, both of which register the overall presentational grandeur of the ceremony. Against the backdrop of this special historic event, Rhee emerges as the focus of the *mise-en-scène* when he delivers his passionate speech in front of the gate. The use of a zoom lens distinguishes him as the principal figure of the public event, while the alternating long shots visually portray the historical significance and magnitude of the event and of the turmoil that erupts when thugs hired by the court's pro-Russian faction violently attack the crowd. The film's use of the zoom to valorize Rhee's leadership shows up in a later segment, along with the depiction of an open public space as the ground of new politics and leadership. When the public event ends with draconian suppression, Rhee advocates full-scale resistance, while others argue for a retreat from further suppression by the government.

Rhee orchestrates street protests by transforming public sites into collective spaces of politicization. During his speech at the marketplace, a zoom lens is again used to heighten the sense that his listeners are closely attending to him as their leader. Rhee's ascendancy reaches its apex when the king responds to the call of the people by coming out of the palace to meet the group of protesters in person. The king's acknowledgment frames the issues and elevates them to a higher level

of communicative politics. As the king properly promises reforms that the people demand, the film underscores his symbolic registration of the political struggle, which ends up reinforcing the monarch's own righteous authority. At this moment, the film resorts to another use of a zoom lens to show the king's appearance and communication with the people. It underscores the authority and leadership of the character in the frame, as it flattens spatial depth by creating a sense of proximity through its myopic focus. As a result, a significant parallel is drawn between Rhee and the king through the repeated use of the zoom lens.

The ensuing sequences show Rhee's active role in the reformist court, but also his entanglement in the oppositional politics that result in his incarceration.<sup>55</sup> His political downfall indicates the volatility of the court's politics, as the king's perception and judgment are easily subject to external influences. However, Rhee's misfortune also brings out an important feature of the reform campaign that has not come into view before: the importance of Rhee to the success of protest and reform. A letter Rhee receives from his friend conveys the vacuum in leadership that Rhee's absence produces within the progressive group and their yearning for his leadership. The pattern of longing for Rhee as the leader repeats from this moment onward. The film's mobilization of progressive politics culminates in the subtle shift of affect and desire from the king toward the new leader. The realignment of the affective trajectory enables the film to resolve the inherent dilemma associated with the leader who is unable to lead because of his arrest.

The depiction of the leader as the passive recipient of mass support reverberates in a later scene. At one point, Rhee escapes with the help of people both outside and inside the prison. When he reaches the marketplace, however, Rhee suddenly becomes disillusioned with his plan as he sees the emptiness of the site. "The reason we escaped prison," he tells his comrades, "is not just for our own safety, but to declare to the people our innocence." Pointing at the deserted public place, Rhee explains, "Look, Heaven has not given us an opportunity yet," and immediately turns himself in. The film has made clear that his populist activities owe their success to his ability to turn conventional places into public sites where he is able to inspire and mobilize people. The scene here renders visible the fundamental limit of such participatory politics. Without the presence of people, Rhee sees no possibility for resistance or mobilization.

After Rhee turns himself in, the film narrative loses its progressive drive. Though Rhee engages in the daily politics of prison, protesting torture and abuse, his rhetoric becomes increasingly abstract, devoid of concrete substance on political issues and concerns. Concurrently, he begins to declare his love for the nation in grand fashion while criticizing others for acting only out of self-interest. These changes coincide with the death penalty he receives for charges of treason.<sup>56</sup> But this absolute nadir also opens the door for a major transformation for Rhee: his conversion to Christianity. The director Shin stresses that this occurrence is an exceptional moment, the turning point for Rhee, through the use of light cast upon

Rhee by a prison window. The serene and ethereal ambiance suddenly dominates the scene where Rhee undergoes his born-again religious experience. Given that Rhee was previously portrayed with a rational understanding of the clear division between Christianity as a foreign religious value and Confucian order as innate to the Korean character, this instance of conversion signals a drastic change in his values and worldview. Religion and nation become conflated as two supreme values that complement each other here. Consequently, the concept of nation itself becomes more abstract, endowed with religious undertones in Rhee's new conceptualization of values.

The film then takes viewers into a national crisis. The outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War results in Japan's triumph and the latter's growing control of Korea. The film conveys political urgency by having the king voice an account of the situation. Court official Min advises the king to pardon and use the members of the Independence Association, including Rhee. As events unfold, Rhee reemerges as a central figure. Rhee is released from the prison to an elaborate ritual designed to showcase the aura of dignity attributed to him. He is escorted to a horse-drawn carriage brought by court official Min, who is fully dressed in diplomatic attire as if on a mission to meet a foreign dignitary. The visual splendor of the scene unmistakably emphasizes that Rhee is the anticipated leader of the nation. At the royal court, Rhee confirms the plan that the king and his advisers already have formulated: to appeal to the international community to support Korea's independence and sovereignty.

The film, however, ends with the introduction of a conundrum. The diplomatic strategies for international appeal will prove a failure: as the contemporaneous audience of the film in the late 1950s would know, Korea will become a colony of Japan. The film's last sequence then ironically showcases a gloomy prospect for Rhee's action on behalf of the nation. Rhee is offered an opportunity to study abroad, as opposed to staying in the turmoil of colonial subjugation and decline. The film thus projects a peculiar instance of leadership-making through the mismatch of two developments: the "ineffective" protagonist in ascendancy at the moment of the nation's precipitous decline and demise. Rhee's worth is certainly recognized by everyone, but his ineffectuality in the face of insurmountable hardship is equally evident and troubling. The film thus offers a distinctively pessimistic view of history, when future options appear all but foreclosed in a realistic sense, that nevertheless leads to belated recognition of the new leader's knowledge. The film's narrative moves toward the discovery of the future leader, not the solution for the current crisis. In other words, the film offers a new imagery of the leader, imbued with future possibility, bypassing the wretched phase of history called the colonial period. The agency that Rhee embodies and represents operates precisely against an assessment that the nation is the deeply doomed by the impending colonial subjugation. Rhee is an anticipated leader for the future nation, not the colonized entity, but its successor: postcolonial Korea.

Both *Hurrah!* and *Independence Association* are passionate endeavors to project the nationalist view of history onscreen. Whether they portray the anticipation of the prospective event of liberation in *Hurrah!* or the decline of the Korean polity in *Independence Association*, their sense of national history is pervasive and obvious. They also mark significant points in the development of South Korean cinema. *Hurrah!* is the first feature-length narrative film in the immediate postliberation period that places the political mandate for anticolonial struggle firmly on the screen, while *Independence Association* marks the largest scale of popular filmmaking in the 1950s and fully realizes the genre form of the biographical drama (the “biopic”). In terms of style, *Hurrah!* exemplifies the aesthetics of urgency in filmmaking through reemployment of narrative and formal properties drawn from late colonial films. *Independence Association* expands the scope of nationalist cinema by offering a distinct spectatorial engagement, pessimistic yet prophetic in turning toward the unrealized future of the nation. The former anticipates the collapse of colonial rule through the subversive operation of the Korean collective, while the latter examines the period leading up to the loss of sovereignty as a necessary precedent to a new chapter in Korea’s modern history.

While adhering to the mandate of nationalist historiography, these films also stress the establishment of political authority as the central issue of the new nationalist cinema. How to construct the proper national leader holds the key to the formation of the new national subject in the bipolar order of the Cold War. Both films are significant as they show how such a subjective position can be constructed against the backdrop of the negation of Korean sovereignty and integrity. The heroic leader receives special attention because he embodies the impetus that breaks the double deadlock of an external threat and an internal malaise. Both films instigate scenarios of resistance by offering unique renditions of the heroic leader as the icon of political and moral authority. Political capital also becomes legible and apparent in the visualization of such leadership, shared and recognized by other Koreans.<sup>57</sup>

These works introduce the recurring and entrenched motifs of nationalist imagination in postcolonial South Korean cinema, where political urgency and crisis register not simply pessimism, but also the possibilities of moral certitude and authority that inspire the continuous struggle of the colonized nation. That said, both works are essentially concerned with the question of the relationship between historical time and the nation. Specifically, these films conjure a new imagery of the national collective through a new conception of future time.<sup>58</sup> The supremacy of the nationalist struggle lies in its capacity to project an expanded scope of time beyond the immediate reality of colonial subjugation. These films do not venture into the colonial period, so they do not directly engage with the colonial regime or other attendant issues that raise questions about the Korean self and the Other. The next few chapters will shed light on this dynamic, for the 1965 normalization treaty between Japan and Korea did raise such questions and decidedly shaped colonial representation in subsequent South Korean films.