

Coda

After 2000

The 2009 fantasy film *Chönuchi*, also known as *The Taoist Wizard* (*Choi Dong-hoon*), presents a feast of the special effects and spectacle common in contemporary Korean blockbuster films. It showcases a plot about a wizardry competition that has been passed down from ancient to modern times. Toward the end, the film provides an interesting view of the way in which contemporary South Korean film reflects the signs and markers of the colonial era. The film's narrative chronicles the struggle between Chönuchi and Hwadam, two sorcerers from the dynastic era. Earthly harmony shatters when the evil wizard Hwadam kills Chönuchi's sorcery master in order to possess a magic flute from heaven. The enraged apprentice attempts to exact vengeance but fails and becomes imprisoned on the surface of a brush painting. Time then shifts to the present, and Chönuchi and Hwadam resume their duel against the backdrop of metropolitan Seoul.

At one point, a sorcery duel takes place near the renovated park along Chönggyechön creek in the heart of Seoul. Hwadam gains the upper hand in the bout, but Chönuchi adroitly conjures up a magic portal and escapes the attack. The attacker quickly gives chase, passing through the portal to arrive at an odd and unexpected site: an empty outdoor movie set. Hwadam's entrance into this built environment brings a brief pause to the relentless action as the two archenemies face each other on a deserted boulevard.¹ It also instigates a shift in the style of the action. The spatial enclosure brings a sense of fatalism to the scene, as the two opponents now take measured steps to realign their course of attack. In the subsequent action, both men demonstrate their magical powers, with each bearing the brunt of his opponent's massive attacks through superhuman fortitude.



FIGURE 11. Showdown of wizards and the artificial movie set in *The Taoist Wizard*.

The surrounding movie set's buildings and properties break and falter under the prolonged and incessant assault.

This sequence distinguishes itself from other segments of the film as it makes an explicit reference to the colonial urban space—but with an interesting twist. The entire span of spectacular action operates against a constructed environment that is intended to approximate the urban milieu of Seoul in the colonial period. The boulevard is populated with familiar icons of the 1930s: trolley cars, Japanese billboard signs, and neoclassical-style buildings signify the urban modernity of colonial Korea. As noted, this ersatz site and its buildings suffer spectacular destruction, gradually revealing the flat and drab location on which the movie set has been constructed. The configuration of the colonial urban space as mere display raises questions about the meaning of colonial imagery in this and other contemporary South Korean films and how this imagery compares with depictions in earlier postcolonial films.

In previous chapters, I showed how attending to various spatial sites, tropes, and preoccupations allows one to problematize the aporias and tensions in the colonial imaginary of postcolonial film narratives. Popular film genres of the 1960s like Manchurian action, *kisaeng*, and gangster films not only showcase a privileged location from which to deliver new narratives of the colonial past, but also feature attitudes and viewpoints strongly influenced by the pressure of the Cold War bipolar order. Concurrently, certain signs in these films allude to disavowals of a colonial legacy that continued to cast a long shadow on South Korea's postcolonial visual culture.

The Taoist Wizard's frivolous treatment of the colonial past as surface image suggests a changed attitude toward colonial popular culture in general. Using the colonial storefront as an expendable movie prop, the film shows a departure from the austere but realistic aura of urban space that was prevalent in films of earlier

decades. Although this book has been concerned mainly with the cultural imaginary of the colonial past during the formative postcolonial decades of the 1960s and onward, I conclude here by reflecting on the new ways of seeing and imagining the colonial that recent South Korean cinema demonstrates. My adumbration here is rudimentary and schematic, as the phenomenon is constantly unfolding and evolving. How to explain these changes is beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, I would like to offer my observations on some developments that bring into sharp relief the key features of films from earlier decades: that is, the body of works whose historical, political, and cultural meanings I have aimed to illuminate.

An important shift occurred in the 2000s in the area of colonial representation in South Korean films. Along with a growing suspicion of the “meta-narratives of nation,” a revisionist impulse became pervasive in the postdemocratic South Korea of the 1990s.² The era witnessed a growing revisionist movement within various cultural fields to revisit and rewrite the modern history of the nation. This development is most conspicuous in the films of the Korean New Wave directors of the 1990s, although the tendency continued in the genre-driven filmmaking of the 2000s. The rise of films on the colonial past, in addition, coincided with a discourse on colonial modernity that gained increasing critical and cultural currency from the 1990s onward.³

The relaxation of censorship in the popular culture of the time made it possible for films to employ archival visual images of and references to the colonial era that had long been kept out of circulation. Photos of colonial urban culture and settings also became more available thanks to the spread of digital media technology and high-speed Internet distribution. These coalescing factors sparked the interest of a young generation of filmmakers and cultural producers, who then experimented with stories set in the times of colonial modernity. In addition, colonial-era films that had long been thought lost were discovered in various film archives in the region and were “repatriated” to the Korean Film Archive for public exposure and screening. These repatriated works rekindled the interest of not only the film-going public but also scholars, who then produced a steady stream of impressive works on colonial cinema. In other words, several dynamic factors contributed to a cultural milieu that was ripe to engender a new interest and approach toward the subject of colonial modernity and culture onscreen.

The comedy sports film *YMCA Baseball Team* (*YMCA Yagudan*; Kim Hyönsök, 2002) is a particularly significant case in this regard. The film shows a clear departure in the way the colonial past is narrated and understood in cinematic terms. It spearheads major changes in perceptual orientation toward the colonial past that post-2000s films commonly illustrate. The film introduced a new vocabulary and sensibility in relation to colonial space by focusing on various developments in modern culture. In particular, its focus on the cultural impact of modern spectator

sports had a lasting effect on later films by rendering a kind of social space and communal interaction unavailable to Koreans in preceding decades.

What makes this and other colonial-themed films of the past decade so unique is the way in which the sociocultural activities of Koreans are drawn against the backdrop of exciting new developments and changes. The urban setting shows shifts in focus toward various modern novelties and their embrace by Koreans under colonial rule—a theme that received little attention, if any, in the films of earlier years. A fascination with the new and modern manifests in films that showcase modern sports, such as baseball in *YMCA Baseball Team*, martial arts and professional wrestling in *Yōktosan* (*Rikidozan: A Hero Extraordinary*; Song Haesōng, 2004), marathon running in *My Way* (Kang Jegyu, 2011), aviation skills in *Blue Swallow* (*Chōnggyōn*; Yun Chongch'an, 2005), broadcasting culture in *Radio Days* (Ha Kiho, 2008), nightclub entertainment in *Modern Boy* (Chōng Chiu, 2008), medical science in *Epitaph* (*Kidam*; Chōng Shik, Chōng Pōmshik, 2007), and crime investigation in *Once upon a Time* (Chōng Yonggi, 2008) and *Private Eye* (*Kūrimja Sarin*; Pak Taemin, 2009).⁴

In these recent films, unlike most of the earlier films that I examined, no protagonists show a clear allegiance to the subversive activities of anticolonial struggle from the outset. Instead, they are initially portrayed as apolitical, with no interest beyond the individual pursuit of happiness, which involves the enjoyment of modern cultural events and phenomena. South Korea's move from the political era of the previous decade is evident in this orientation. However, as these characters are thwarted in their individualistic pursuits, they become increasingly affected by the colonial politics of domination and resistance. Most of these films, by the end, turn to the overarching theme of anticolonial struggle and its moral justification. Hence, the motif of conversion frequently appears, even in the most recent films, highlighting anticolonialism as, ultimately, the fundamental lens through which to view the colonial past.

Yet I stress that these recent films offer a different interpretive possibility with respect to the configuration of colonial space and the meaning of popular culture. They show a clear shift in focus from the sterile negative space of the dark back alley and the secluded *kisaeng* house to the brightly illuminated traffic space of the urban center. This “boulevard” space is densely populated with urban walkers who are in constant movement and flux. The bustling public space signals a network of transportation and communications in operation. Furthermore, many of these films highlight the moment when the novelty of modern networks or infrastructure reaches and captures the scopic attention of Korean residents. This Korean colonial viewing subject, needless to say, is considerably different from the subject featured in late colonial cinema, where the expansion of a modern colonial realm is depicted to allot space for Koreans as the faithful subjects of empire. These recent films strategically bypass the question of colonial development and

modernization altogether by showing Koreans' fascination with modernity predominantly in the frame of nascent interactions with its Western forms.

Technological marvels and activities entice the fascinated gaze of Korean urban onlookers, and the boulevard site or marketplace often turn into the modern public sphere of daily interaction and quotidian activities among urban Koreans. The marketplace may typically signify traditional commerce, but its depiction entails more complex social dynamics and characteristics. In the biographical films of the 1950s, for example, the marketplace was significant as a site to forge the modern subject of enlightenment, political consciousness, and authority. Recent films stress it as the site of horizontal social interactions among those drawn by the attractions of the new or modern technology. In *YMCA Baseball Team*, characters from a variety of social backgrounds show a keen interest in the public announcement that a new baseball team is forming and recruiting members. The pervasive impulse to transcend social barriers—a hallmark of modern consciousness and subjecthood—manifests through the people's collective response to new, modern forms of culture and leisure, all of which serve as a stimulus for individual enjoyment and social bonding. Similarly, attentive and disciplined listening to radio programs happens in the marketplace, bringing simultaneous fascination to the listeners in *Radio Days*. Listenership is not a personal habit, but a collective social activity in the film. Overall, the marketplace shows how ordinary Koreans become immediately drawn into new forms of popular culture through leisure and communications media. Often a film's formal properties, like editing and mise-en-scène composition, are utilized to deepen the viewer's emotive identification with the protagonist and his or her fascination with the latest novelties.

These films, however, have to navigate the thorny question of a colonial modernity in which autonomous space for the colonial subject is inherently limited and marginalized. I argue that recent films attempt to resolve the dilemma by resorting to a particular spatial and representational strategy: the reconfiguration of the sports arena as a pivotal public sphere for Koreans. *YMCA Baseball Team* is a pioneering and influential text that exemplifies the new depiction of a public sphere where the lopsided relations between the colonizer and the colonized are staged and challenged. Set in 1905, the year Korea became Japan's protectorate, *YMCA Baseball Team* dramatizes how baseball is introduced, spread, and popularized to urban Koreans as a new form of Western sport. Its portrayal of baseball as a novel form of sport conveys more than the spread of team sports: it provides a series of instances by which the new terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and power are mobilized, regulated, modulated, and normalized. Baseball immediately captures the attention of Korean urban dwellers, whose passion for it transforms them into the most formidable players in the nation. It also brings together players of different social backgrounds and strata, effectively forging a community of horizontal membership. Class enmity and gender discrimination dissipate as cooperation and



FIGURE 12. The advent of spectator sport in *YMCA Baseball Team*.

team play become increasingly serious and important for those who play baseball at the public site. Baseball creates room for the advent of the new modern national subject and for something akin to the powerful horizontal social membership that Benedict Anderson describes for an imagined community.

In *YMCA Baseball Team*, sports competition is significant not only to Korean athletes but also to spectators in the arena for its *presupposition* of a system of impartiality, fairness, and objectivity. In this world of rigid regulations, the Japanese counterparts no longer have the upper hand of domination; instead, they subscribe to the same established rules and regulations. Concurrently, sports competition conjures up an imaginary social space in which the Korean subject can claim prowess and superiority outside the confines of colonial space. More importantly, the film emphasizes the advent of collective spectatorship as the central thematic feature of sports activity. Baseball games are situated specifically within the matrix of the collective and concentrated gaze, around which the formal network of horizontal membership and participation takes shape.

The theme of sports competition also reverberates in such films as *Blue Swallow*, *Yōktosan*, and *My Way*, although in each of these the team match is largely replaced by individual competition. In each, a Japanese counterpart performs an important role in affirming both the fairness of the rule-governing system and the Korean character's unique place in it. For instance, the Japanese woman aviator in *Blue Swallow*, played by Yu Min, affirms the Korean aviator's superior skills and talent through her gaze of sympathy and respect. Her act of looking, which registers her empathy for the Korean protagonist, cements the validity of the space of rules and fairness that had been threatened by ethnic discrimination against the Korean protagonist in the outside world.

Yet in these films the effort to secure ground for Korean autonomy can go only so far. The Korean subject remains alienated from the network and traffic of colonial modernity despite winning the gaze and recognition of his Japanese counterpart.

This inherent dilemma manifests most clearly in *Modern Boy*, a film that features the ambivalent political conversion of a Korean, pro-Japanese government official. The film's protagonist is an urban playboy who works at the Government General of Korea. He uses his inside knowledge of urban development in Seoul for his material benefit. He is not outside the colonial gaze; rather, he is within the apparatus of the colonial government's control over Korea's urban sectors. His affinity with the colonial power, however, is disrupted when he becomes mistakenly implicated in a subversive terrorist plot. Moreover, his courtship of a cabaret singer triggers a brutal counterinsurgency action by his old friend who is a Japanese prosecutor. The protagonist's loss of control over his relationship with the Japanese friend and the cabaret singer becomes acutely clear in a sequence where his endeavor to carry out an assassination of Japanese officials results in embarrassing failure. What the film chronicles is the slow undoing of the protagonist's confident sense of being at home in the boulevard spaces of Seoul. The failure forces him to walk into the kind of negative space familiar from so many anticolonial nationalist film – here, the drab underground hideout of the terrorist group. This return signifies the limit of the colonized subject's range in the vast space of colonial Seoul.

A survey of colonial space in recent South Korean cinema is helpful for pondering the odd artificiality of colonial imagery in *The Taoist Wizard*. The shallow ambiance of the movie set does more than expose the environment's constructed nature. The film extends the presupposed artificiality of the urban space that was a central feature of cinematic representations of the colonial past. It effectively draws on some inherently empty aura of colonial urban imagery to further accentuate the spectacle of destruction.

But this reading of the movie set's semantic features takes us only so far. There is another dramatic component in the film's coda that complicates an assessment of the colonial imagery. After the destruction of the movie set, Chōnuchi returns to the site to showcase the making of an espionage-melodrama film in which Ing'yōng, now a promising movie actress, stars in a drama set in the colonial era. A brief enacted sequence features a cross-dressed Ing'yōng, Chōnuchi's love interest, and her assassination of a Japanese collaborator lover on the boulevard. The ersatz colonial urban space is reconstructed for its proper use here: that is, to render the affirmation of the nationalist spirit in South Korea's cinema.

The assassination of the pro-Japanese collaborator is symbolically crucial in bringing closure to a narrative that occupies several temporalities. The pan-historical story of Korean wizardry seems to arrive at a plausible conclusion that stresses a nationalist cause for action. Curiously, the self-reflexive sequence also entails an undermining of such assurance, for the manner in which this segment is rendered appears too conventional, excessive, and even parodic to register sincere concentric meanings. The coda that follows this dramatic enactment of the nationalist dictate further complicates the film's reflection of the bygone colonial history.

It shows Chŏnuchi and Ing'yŏng on a Southeast Asian resort beach, which they reached through a magic portal in order to evade police questioning on the movie set. On the beach, both are in bewilderment, as they question whether they have been to this place before. The film makes it clear that they indeed visited the same site in the past, during premodern dynastic times. The sequence hence marks a moment of *déjà vu* for the couple.

The film's coda can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to open up a new space, now an extranational one. But it also alludes allegorically to a certain limit in South Korean cinema's historical imagination. It makes a mockery of the flat imagery of colonial history, but in doing so it ironically ends up exposing the very limit of closure as well. Though successful at transporting themselves to a safe place, the couple quickly become uncertain of place and time. Their spatial disorientation can be read in relation to, and as a premonition of, a historical amnesia of a particular kind. Chŏnuchi has been active and triumphant in his struggle against the archenemy at various faux sites in the colonial space. Yet it remains uncertain whether he is aware of the historical meanings of the colonial imagery and facades that he habitually obliterates. It would be safe to assume instead that his exuberant action is made possible precisely because he remains oblivious to the trauma of colonialism in modern Korean history.

Hence, *The Taoist Wizard* and other recent films seem to have reached a point of exhaustion as they too easily traverse the readily available colonial tropes and imagery. Perhaps this malaise is an unavoidable consequence of a postcolonial filmmaking tradition in which colonial imagery was used and constructed narrowly and selectively—and for too long—for the contrarian goals of negation and opposition. The amnesia that the male protagonist Chŏnuchi demonstrates toward the colonial past hence shows a unique symptom of history. His obliviousness captures the location of colonial imagery in South Korea's visual culture. It inherently alludes to the curtailed view and willful disavowal that for many years conditioned and restricted the imagining of the colonial past during the protracted Cold War.