

Article

Paternal Masculinity in Korean Films

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Abstract

The study examines how the historical traumas South Korea has experienced have affected representations of violent and sacrificial fathers in Korean films. Taking the 1997 Korean International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis as the starting point, it can be seen that father characters in Korean films rely heavily on the concept of masculinity in a crisis. Moreover, the focus of Korean films on the father as a prominent part of the national identity, presented in the context of topics such as the disorganization of the family or paternal love in relation to historical events, has strengthened the solidarity of the state with the fathers. The aim of this study is threefold: First, it examines how the discourse of the crisis of masculinity manifests in the representation of fathers in Korean films. Second, it explores the image of paternal violence originating in war trauma. Third, it explores how the relationship between sacrificing fathers and the nation has been constructed in recent Korean films. Many scholars have discussed the cinematic portrayal of the roles of Korean fathers. This study reaffirms the solidity of the fathers' role in Korean cinema and how the cinematic variation holds it up by observing paternal masculinity in recent Korean films. However, this study pursues the same goals as the growing research on gender in recent Korean films, which do not escape the concerns of the male-dominant society. I do not attempt a full account of the history of Korean masculinity, the origins of Korean paternalism, or modern Korean film history. Instead, this paper provides a comprehensive account of how the presence of the father in recent Korean films is understood and perceived.

1. Filmic Representations of the Crisis of Masculinity and Korean Fathers

I open the door to the ding dong of the doorbell.
My Papa, who I missed so much, was standing at the door.
I was very happy to see my Papa, so I called out to him with a smile.
But somehow Papa looks so blue today.

What is the matter? Do you have any worries?
Did something go wrong today?
Papa, cheer up, we are always with you. Papa, cheer up, we are always with you.
Cheer up, Papa!

This song¹ was released in 2004 by BC Card, the largest South Korean (hereafter referred to as Korea) payment processor. It was adapted from a children's song written in 1997 to console Korean fathers, who were mired in an economic crisis. According to Elfving-Hwang (2017), "Cracks in the prevailing discourse of hegemonic masculinity linked to white collar employment first began appearing in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, which brought the Korean economy nearly to collapse and led to mass redundancies. As the Korean patriarch's position of power had been built on his ability to provide for the family in cultural and state-led discourses, loss of employment meant not only the loss of income but of symbolic status as well" (p. 57). Media campaigns sought to redress the domestic problems arising in many families, encouraging housewives "to preserve male privilege within the family by 'boosting' their husband's spirit" (Kim and Finch, 2002, p. 48). This approach to domestic and gender-related concerns undermined Korean men further, suggesting that the national crisis was, in fact, a male crisis.

As this also implied, conversely, that the male crisis was perceived as a national crisis, Korean women were, or remained, marginalized, treated as unimportant. After the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis, Korean cinema began to pursue the reconstruction of masculinity, to help energize Korean men, and fathers in particular. The Korean film industry created a fantasy in which the crisis of masculinity was imagined through the figure of a downcast man (often a father), demoralized by the economic shock. That is, against the backdrop of economic turmoil, Korean cinema began to explore the innermost anxiety, depression, and hope in the masculine mind to try in earnest to transform the character of Korean men and fathers and console them. In addition, historical narratives in Korean films have constantly proven their necessity by mobilizing the paternal role, for instance, in the form of paternal love, the father's experience of family issues, and the paternal-national relationship. These paternally oriented films have been a great pillar of the box office for two decades. In her dissertation, An (2017) wrote that "the IMF crisis becomes an essential social landscape for the changing face of the cinematic father [in Korea]. Since the crisis was a particularly critical event in the changing social identity of the Korean father figure in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the body of cinematic works is divided between those produced during and after the crisis years" (p. 16). Themes relating to the father or paternal love extend beyond the boundaries of genre, being found in all the most common genres of Korean film, namely, thriller, crime, melo-

drama, comedy, and noir.

Fathers have taken the forms of the “poor father” in *Cracked Eggs and Noodles* (Oh Sang-hoon, 2005); “homemaker father” in *Quiz King* (Yoo Seon-dong, 2005); “desperate father” seeking to save his daughter from a monster (representing the power of the state) in *The Host* (Bong Jun-ho, 2006); “gangster father” who is devoted to his family in *The Show Must Go On* (Han Je-rim, 2007); “salaryman fathers” who achieve their dreams in *Bravo My Life* (Park Young-hoon, 2007); brutal “murderer father” in *My Father* (Hwang Dong-hyuk, 2007); “criminal father” in *My Son* (Jang-Jin, 2007); intellectually disabled father with strong paternal love for his daughter in *Miracle in Cell No. 7* (Lee Hwan-kyung, 2013); father who sells blood for his son in *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (Ha Jung-woo, 2015); father who saves his daughter from zombies in *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016); *gireoggi appa* (literally, “wild goose father”²) in *A Single Rider* (Lee Joo-young, 2017); and father who sacrifices his life for peace between South and North Korea in *Ashfall* (Lee Hae-joon and Kim Byeong-seo, 2019).

In this way, Korean films exhibit a trend of strengthening the position of the father, thereby increasing male solidarity by representing the crisis of masculinity in terms of men who have lost their patriarchal authority, based on compassion for the men. Of course, recent trends in paternal narratives are by no means unfamiliar. Korean society has long upheld paternal authority, and Korean films compulsively show compassion for the father’s life and fate.

Abelmann’s (2003) observation of *Romance Papa* (Shin Sang-ok, 1960) and *Mr. Park* (Kang Dae-jin, 1960) indicated that there is a “creative tension between patriarchy, namely the excesses of male privilege and power, and the dislocation of men on account of radical social transformation.” (p 10). Jeong (2011) noted in this context that the main father character in *Romance Papa* is “a tragic, failed patriarch or bumbling father...and invokes nostalgia, forgiveness, and sympathy for his human frailties even when he fails or, rather, especially because he fails” (quoted in Chung and Diffrient, 2015, pp. 73-74). Taking the larger view, it does not appear novel that recent Korean films have resuscitated patriarchal masculinity by granting it symbolic power or taking advantage of changes in paternal roles stemming from the national crisis. Rather, it can be seen that the paternal love with which current Korean cinema is redolent has strong authority to reconstruct and maintain history and narratives from the Japanese colonial period, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the democratization movement, and the IMF crisis, by absorbing and integrating them. However, paternal love in Korean films of the past mainly highlighted fathers’ experiences in the colonial and war periods, whereas current films have expanded the narrative by focusing on the sons of such fathers, and they engaged in historical reconstruction to demand a new understanding of post-traumatic fathers. As a result, the

paternal image in narratives explores similar themes between the 1960s and the first two decades of the 21st century, but in different social and political circumstances.

The result is that the theoretical framework for the discussion of paternal masculinity relies on fixed concepts of the crisis of masculinity—or rather, of the patriarchal hegemony that operates as ubiquitous, or as an idea of ubiquity, in Korean cinematic analysis, stemming from national issues that have maintained a strong patriarchal society over a long period. The widely observed cinematic discourse on Korean masculinity underlies the following perspective:

The dawning of a new modern era is normally punctuated by hope and optimism, but the weight of intense history and its attendant violence loomed so excessively large that it ended up traumatizing, marginalizing, and denaturalizing men. Wrecked and disordered was the male subjectivity after the Korean war, the subsequent division, and the continuing legacy of colonialism through military dictatorship; the metaphor of the “symbolic lack” was astutely installed as one of the primary thematic impulses in the post-war cinemas... For a nation that underwent several historical traumas during the twentieth century, emasculation was a normal rather than aberrant condition. (Kim K. H, 2004, pp. 11-12, 15)

The film *Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-dong, 1999), which is considered a masterpiece of Korean cinema, is a perfect example of this view. It presents the story of a man who was a victim of state power in the 1980s Korea. However, to make room to present the miserable life of the protagonist, Young-ho (Seol Kyung-ku), the film objectified and relegated to the sidelines its female characters—a comatose patient (Moon So-ri), a barmaid (Seo-Jung), and an adulterous woman (Kim Yeo-jin). In this way, these and similar depictions of the crisis of masculinity in Korean films tend to indirectly protect male authority. Choe (2008) wrote, “Young-ho is shown consistently on the wrong side of contemporary South Korean history, and much too stubborn to give up his fiction of an idealized, albeit radically distorted, masculinity” (p. 6). Kim (2006) argued that the film depicts the crisis of the nation as a narrative of male experience, and, in this context, Young-ho’s eventual suicide is a politically symbolic act that enquires into the darkness of the nation’s history. Here, the “nation” is represented as a kind of original evil that takes from the Korean male his money, women, and positive spirit (pp. 48-50). This film presents the male protagonist as one of the victims of the chaos of the Korean history and nation-state.

At the same time, however, *Peppermint Candy* provides an accurate depiction of Korean women as marginalized people who have been stymied by Korean history. Moon

(2002) suggested a definition of hegemonic masculinity in Korea, the attributes of which include the ability to provide for the family, experience of military service, and distance from the daily work of social reproduction and caring labor (cited in An, 2017, pp. 117-118). In this characterization of Korean masculinity, it should be noted that military duty³ plays an additional role that focuses on being an agent of the nation. The nation in turn comes to represent intrinsic authority that grants symbolic power to justify everything that constitutes the Korean male. In relation to this close connection with the state, one of the most interesting trends in Korean film in recent years is the appearance of buddy films that demonstrate brotherhood between men from South Korea and North Korea⁴. The dramatization of such relationships creates a community that strengthens Korean nationalism while, at the same time, reinforcing masculinity by binding it together through fraternal and paternal love that can only exist within crises. Masculinity in Korean films, represented to some considerable extent as “standing guard for the nation,” is then imagined as the quality shared by sublime figures or paragons who are, however, also rendered as sympathetic and vulnerable subjects in their inner worlds. Similarly, fathers in this view of masculinity, who are also the nation’s agents, are in a position that equates them with the nation, allowing them to imagine themselves as heroes who protect the family from the trauma of national history and the nation’s enemies. This protection is a touchstone of the “fantasy of fathers” in Korean films.

2. Violent Fathers

Kim Y. N. (2010) contended the following:

The relationship between family and violence that has appeared in mainstream [Korean] films have achieved some traction since the IMF crisis in Korea. Family disorder in popular culture is portrayed through violence, which is typically deployed in such a way that it disturbs the patriarchal order. Violence usually carried out by a father figure or male breadwinner, against a mother/female who is the guardian of the family, has become the way of representing family collapse. The violence imposed by the father is based mainly on the fundamental doubts and distrust caused by being deceived by state powers or victimized by social injustice, rather than by factors inside the family.” (p. 7)

Joo Y. S. (2017) added the following:

Since the late 1990s, gender politics shown by Korean cinema have been covert and violent. The tragic memories of Korea in Korean cinema have caused the failure of masculine values that led to modernization, or caused the history of the

nation-state to be transposed into the conflict between father and son. Women are still being reduced to helpless or unrecognized figures, hidden behind male action relationships while remaining helpless victims. (pp. 88-89)

As the above passages claim, the violence of fathers mainly stems from the trauma of state power and the failure of masculine values, and it is directed toward the fathers' wives and children rather than the perpetrator of the trauma, the state, and its overwhelming power. It is observed that violence is represented in very short scenes, but in an intense, savage way so as to imply habitual assault. Many national-level issues appear to constitute a crisis for everyone, regardless of their gender or age; however, the weight of violence and its recurrent trauma in modern history have, in general, been harsher for both women and children. However, women are rarely represented or are given only supporting roles, such as objects of sexual desire who boost male morale during a crisis or as battered or murdered women.

In particular, it is necessary to pay attention to the trauma of Korean fathers in films who had to mobilize to the Vietnam War as part of economic development during the military dictatorship regime. Fathers who participated in the Vietnam War are presented as important mediums to understand the overall narrative of recent films. Here, the films appeal to the peculiarity of the Vietnam War as a foothold for the reconstruction of Korean society at that time, demanding that father's acts of domestic violence be taken into the context of the state.

For instance, the film *Breathless* (Yang Ik-june, 2008) is a story about the vicious circle of poverty and violence in Korean society. The father (Choi Yong-min) of the female protagonist, Yeon-hee (Kim Kkot-bi), acquires severe schizophrenia from his service in the Vietnam War⁵. As a result, he regularly commits domestic violence, even threatening to kill the protagonist. Yeon-hee's younger brother also constantly abuses her, both verbally and physically, recapitulating her relationship with her father and exercising his own patriarchal power over her; that is, the younger brother, Young-jae (Lee-Hwan) responds to his father's violence with his own violence, in a kind of inheritance. Although he cannot support his family materially, the father proudly displays the medal he won for bravery in battle and a photograph of himself wearing his military uniform from the Vietnam War, which constitutes a salient symbol connecting self-sacrificial patriotism and pride in the uniqueness of Korean masculinity. At the same time, these items are a symbol of patriarchal authority. This device indicates the specific nature of problematic Korean masculinity, where the memory of military experience grants the necessary qualifications for establishing identity. Furthermore, the reasons for the father's inability to support the family are not detailed; instead, by casting him as a victim of state power,

films demand an understanding of male violence by indicating, but not supporting, that men have no choice but to commit violence as a result of war trauma. Here, the attitude toward Korean fathers as perpetrators of domestic violence is that their capacity and economic power are not vital factors in relation to their authority in the family. Thus, the question of why the father is violent is posed such that the state is set as the main cause, implying a system of responsibilities. In *Breathless*, the father's mental illness, resulting from the harshness of his experiences, ultimately gives the viewer the chance to express compassion.

Another film of this type, *Seven Years of Night* (Choo Chang-min, 2018), presents a tangle of conventional domestic violence and the problematic paternal love of a man who has accidentally committed a murder. This film presents a transparent, realistic portrayal of the paradoxical circumstances in which victims become perpetrators. The two male protagonists, Hyun-soo (Ryu Seung-ryong) and Young-je (Jang Dong-gun), play out a learned self-contradiction through violence. Although both protagonists fit the suggested framework, the film does not present Young-je's narrative in enough detail for discussion.⁶ Thus, this section focuses on Hyun-soo, who, as the main protagonist, is represented on three axes: 1) He is a victim of his soldier father's domestic violence, who 2) expresses strong paternal love for his son and protects him from inheriting the domestic violence he himself received, but who 3) nevertheless commits acts of violence against his wife.

Hyun-soo describes his childhood of severe domestic violence to his colleague Seung-hwan (Song Sae-byeok), stating that his father (Choi Gwang-il) was a disabled serviceman who lost an arm in the Vietnam War and later was referred to as a "mad dog" in his village for his ruthlessness and domestic violence. As a result of his father's relentless violence, his mother committed suicide by poison. The father's military boots, placed at the front door of the house, represent little Hyun-soo's fear of his father. Little Hyun-soo recalls the legend that if a pair of shoes is dropped into a well, the owner of the shoes will die, and so he drops his father's boots into the village well. At this moment, the father's voice is heard calling out for rescue from the well, signifying a crossing of the boundary between auditory hallucination and reality and causing a collision between Hyun-soo's desire for his father to die and his feelings of guilt. His father is found dead in the well but is reborn as a phantom that constantly haunts Hyun-soo in his dreams and leads to continuous ambivalence about paternal love throughout the film. That is, the dead father is a symbolic medium who leaves Hyun-soo unable to escape feelings of resentment and bitter remorse. However, his experiences also motivate him to become a better father and to give his absolute paternal love and protection to his own son, Seo-won (Go Kyung-pyo). Hyun-soo's strong, resolute paternal love and his firm resolve not to repeat his father's violence with his son, however, must be contrasted with his use of violence on his

wife (Moon Jeong-hee). This conflict plays out, for instance, in the fact that Hyun-soo is an ordinary middle-aged man without a strong financial understanding. The conflict between Hyun-soo, who buys branded sneakers for his son, and his wife, who is frugal and saves enough money to buy an apartment, is wrapped up with Hyun-soo's violent treatment of her. Hyun-soo's financial incompetence, paternal love for his son, and trauma derived from his father are thus completed only by his perception of his wife as an unyielding, cold-blooded figure.

The medal for bravery in battle in *Breathless* and the military boots in *Seven Years of Night* are epitomized representations of Korean fathers of the 1970s. Kim (2004) wrote that "Just as Hollywood has used the Vietnam War as a springboard for what Susan Jeffords describes as the 'remasculinization of American culture', Korean cinema renegotiated its traumatic modern history in ways that reaffirm masculinity and the relations of dominance" (p. 9). Although the details of remasculinization might differ between Korea and the United States, this group of films utilizes war trauma to shore up the power of Korean masculinity. The narrative structure of these films also presents the roots of the fetters of violence within the family and indicates that patriarchal culture is an intrinsic problem.

Memoir of a Murderer (Won Shin-yun, 2017) also uses the motif of domestic violence to show the conventional paternal masculinity. The protagonist, Byung-soo (Seol Kyung-ku), was a serial killer for a long time but now has Alzheimer's disease and is experiencing confusion between his past and present; he experiences delusions which he projects onto Tae-Joo (Kim Nam-gil), a police officer whom he came to know by chance. Similar to *Seven Years of Night*, this film illustrates the "character's motivations or traits as determined by formative past experience" of domestic violence, committed by his own father (Turim, 1989, p. 22). This production sits in the genre of "mind-game films," confusing the audience by presenting what may be delusions or real memories through the eyes of the protagonist Byung-soo, who has Alzheimer's disease and is a "pathological or mentally unstable character" (Yoshimoto, 2016, p. 125). Tae-Joo, too, is "ambiguously presented" (Elsaesser, 2009, p. 14). This film begins with a monologue by Byung-soo and excerpts from his diary, such as a memory of the day his father (Jung In-kyum) returned home in 1971 during the military dictatorship regime of Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) that sent troops to support the United States in the Vietnam War⁷; thus, this harsh era of Korean society is recalled.

Fear and hatred of the father are also depicted here in a way similar to the film *Seven Years of Night*, where they are represented physically by the military boots placed at the door. In this film, as Byung-soo opens the door, he sees his father sleeping in his military uniform after having brutally assaulted his mother and sister. This *mise-en-scène*

supports the dramatic culmination of Byung-soo's anger against his father and climaxes with a close-up shot of his new white sneakers, destroyed by his father. Soon after his father wakes up, he mercilessly beats Byung-soo, but Byung-soo is out of patience with his father's violence, and he kills him with a pillow; then, he puts the boots back on his father's feet before burying him. After this, Byung-soo says that peace has come to his home, and then he begins his serial murders.

Decades later, as he gets to know Tae-joo, Byung-soo soon notices that Tae-joo is also a murderer. He tries to avoid Tae-joo, but Tae-joo begins to date Byung-soo's daughter, Eun-hee (Kim Seul-hyun), sparking the growth of Byung-soo's obsessive paternal love. The film casts Tae-joo as an evil presence, associating him with the black military boots of Byung-soo's father, while Eun-hee is presented as a pure being, symbolized by the white sneakers that Byung-soo longed for and his life before murdering his father. He tries to escape from his sin through paternal love for his daughter; at the end of the film, wearing white sneakers himself, Byung-soo seems to have escaped the evils of his past. Of course, given Byung-soo's Alzheimer's, there is no way of knowing whether the representations we see depict facts or delusions, and it is ultimately unclear whether Tae-Joo even exists outside Byung-soo's imagination—whether he is a real person or a personification of past evil.

The abovementioned films thus powerfully render the limited opportunities that a victim of domestic violence has to escape the private and psychological urgency of these victims. Likewise, in these films we find a cruel but detailed and systematic structure of fear created by the father, which the son inherits. In both *Seven Years of Night* and *Memoir of a Murder*, the primary victims⁸ must resort to violence to escape their circumstances.

These functions, among other things, to indicate the helplessness of the law. Korean scholars consider that this is because, "Despite the efforts of Korean society to recognize domestic violence as a social problem, domestic violence, in most cases, is still regarded as a 'personal' or 'family' matter" (Kim and Kahng, 2011, p. 193). That is, in the current state of Korean society, children and women have difficulty escaping domestic violence and can have little expectation of help from the authorities or public services, because violence within the family is considered to be a private issue. The "son" characters crystallize the attitude Korean films show toward paternal masculinity in Korea. "Sons can construct their masculine subjectivity through dis-identification with patriarchal fatherhood and through empathy with the experiences of their mothers" (Pease, 2000, p. 56). This is a critical expression opposed to the entirety of Korean patriarchal culture and the repression that fathers exercise over Korean society, showing that no one can control violence that occurs in the family. This adds a warlike aspect to family life—just as Korean males' engagement in military service, paradoxically, invites the state back in through

family violence and places responsibility back on it. Although it is incontrovertible that Korean fathers in films often have uncontrollable anger that stems from the exercise of state power and manage the impact of crises through assault, it must also be recognized that they are proud of their masculinity and the role it plays in protecting the nation; they also express relief when they are recognized by the nation for their masculinity. The next section discusses how Korean fathers' patriotism, rooted in state power, is linked to the expression of paternal love in films.

3. Sacrificial Fathers

Korean films tend to equate the nation with the father through mobilization of the idea of paternal love in Korean historical narratives, which helps glorify the image of the father.

However, this can also distort history, replace it with illusion, or dim the clear judgment of the past. Jean Baudrillard notes that in "the context of a general nostalgia in Western Europe, nostalgically imagines through the cinema a time where a country's history still meant individual victims, and decisions of life and death and the attraction of a return to history as story and image was the illusion it could give of a personal or national destiny" (cited in Elsaesser, 1996, pp. 153-155). Hayward (2005) found that, during the development of the idea of a national cinema alongside national myths from the nineteenth century,

Cinema was inscribed with the juxtapositional traces of ascendancy and decline, nationalism and narcissism associated with that time. Filmic narration calls upon the available discourses and myths of its own culture. It is evident that these cultural, nationalistic myths are not pure and simple reflections of history, but a transformation of history. (pp. 14-15)

Ode to My Father (Yoon Je-kyoon, 2014) depicts the life of a typical Korean father who is loyal to his nation and dedicated to his family. The film represents the life of Deok-soo (Hwang Jung-min⁹) from boyhood to fatherhood, along with the trajectories of contemporary Korean history. The representation moves from the Korean War and Korean industrial miracle to the present, always following Deok-soo. This film stimulates the ubiquitous Korean sense of the "tragedy of the nation" and provokes nostalgia and regret in the audience as the audience contemplates its history. An (2017) wrote that the film "is unashamedly sentimental in its intention to portray the struggles of the Korean father throughout Korea's recent history" (p. 144). Kim (2015) added that the film "demonstrate[s] how the nationalist discourse engulfs personal histories into the

linear-narrative of the nation and the people” (p. 160). That is, there can be no doubt that it is a patriotic film. During the Korean War, Deok-soo and his family, who live in Heung Nam (now in North Korea), struggle to evacuate to South Korea, but his father (Jeong Jin-young) and his youngest sister, Mak-soon (Shin Lin-a), fail to escape. Before they part, his father asks Deok-soo to take good care of the family. The remainder of the family safely settles in Busan, the largest South Korean port city, after evacuation by UN forces via the ship *Meredith Victory*.¹⁰ Deok-soo’s father passes on the responsibility of the family to Deok-soo, who must, being the eldest son, become the breadwinner.

The film highlights the efforts of the family’s eldest son, Deok-soo, and excludes the presence of the mother (Jang Young-nam), even though she is an adult and is the actual breadwinner. The mother is mobilized to help maintain patriarchal order, coming to rely on Deok-soo to be the breadwinner. Deok-soo applies to work as a miner in Germany and is chosen due to his strong patriotism, not any relevant physical condition or experience in the army engineer corps. He stands up for the flag, sings the national anthem, and shouts out “Long live South Korea!” in front of the interviewers. While working in Germany, he meets Young-ja (Kim Yun-jin), a nurse, and they return to Busan to marry. However, Deok-soo injures a leg while working as a technician during the Vietnam War.

When Deok-soo reaches middle age as a father, he appears on the TV program *Finding Dispersed Families*¹¹ in the hope of finding Mak-soon (Choe Stella) and his father. Although Deok-soo and Mak-soon, who was adopted and then went to live in Los Angeles, do reunite, he does not find his father, causing him to become deeply sad.

According to Kim (2006), “history is constructed by technology. [...] The construction of the technology of films goes through the process of paradoxically mourning of the ethnic’s failed past through technology” (p. 59). The ethnic history, or the trauma of failure¹² during the Korean War, is summoned up in the collective memory through the modern technological medium of television, and they integrate and confirm the universal sentiments of the Korean people. It is noteworthy here that Mak-soon does not remember how to speak Korean properly, although she has kept the traditional Korean clothes (*hanbok*)¹³ that she had when she was separated from her family. Speaking Korean does not symbolize the nation—Mak-soon speaks English, like a native American. Thus, the *hanbok* was chosen to be the significant symbol that connects the home with the nation. The stigma of the Korean history, as symbolized by war orphans and international adoptions, is cleverly presented as a common sorrow of the Korean people through such ethnic elements. In this film, the father functions as a subject of constant longing in the mother and Deok-soo, and his distant existence symbolizes his home in North Korea, which they cannot return to. Here, Deok-soo stands for the generation that worked hard to rebuild South Korea, which was devastated by war. Deok-soo himself plays the part of

an allegory of the history of the nation, as a father who fulfils his family responsibilities by surviving war, poverty, and industrialization. Deok-soo also forms the epitome of Korean traditional filial piety, an ethical imperative instituted through Confucian systems of thought and behavior that maintain the “patrilineal household structure” (Chung and Diffrient, 2015, p. 68). Deok-soo plays a unifying role as the father figure and authoritative breadwinner for his family by surviving his struggle with history. The film does not hesitate to represent the patriarchal ideology and paternal love for the family through which the economic development of Korean society was achieved by common and sincere Korean fathers.

Whereas *Ode to My Father* presents paternal love in the context of the Korean War, *The Battleship Island* (Ryu Seung-wan, 2017) relies on classic, common clichés to represent paternal love during the period of Japanese colonization of Korea. The story shows the conflict of Koreans forced to work on Hashima Island¹⁴ during the Japanese colonial era¹⁵. It integrates the male protagonist’s paternal love for his daughter and patriotic love for his nation by utilizing tragedy in the collective memory and the dishonored history of Koreans who experienced forced labor under Japanese colonial rule. Landsberg (2004) discussed the concept of prosthetic memory in cinematic analysis as follows:

Prosthetic memories are transportable and hence not susceptible to biological or ethnic claims of ownership and they derive from a person’s mass-mediated experience of a traumatic event of the past. Prosthetic memories are neither purely individual nor entirely collective but emerge at the interface of individual and collective experience and are blurring the boundary between individual and collective memory, they also complicate the distinction between memory and history. (pp. 15-20)

In recent Korean films, the Korean War works as a positive prosthetic memory that emphasizes the sorrow of both Korean peoples, while, arguably, the Japanese colonial period is often converted into a more obsessively powerful memory. *The Battleship Island* reaffirms the hostility toward Japan with scenes of Koreans killing Japanese officials and using a knife to tear a flag showing the rising sun; it also recalls recent political turmoil in Korean society through scenes of candlelight vigils by forced laborers and water cannons being directed at Koreans by Japanese officials. The film plays a role in integrating the more recent collective memory of the use of water cannons to suppress protests against the conservative government with prosthetic memory of the Japanese occupation period. The film was made under the chaotic Park Geun-hye government in 2016 but was released after Moon Jae-in came to power in 2017. These scenes represent the public

response to oppression experienced under decades of conservative regimes¹⁶, and they should also be considered to express the expectation that the new Moon Jae-in regime with anti-Japanese ideology¹⁷ would suppress pro-Japanese Koreans. The film cleverly equates the earlier conservative governments of Korea with the Japanese regime by using expressions of nationalism, and it also provides cinematic catharsis by showing the deaths of the Japanese and escapes of the Koreans.

Moreover, the film represents a battle between the pro-Japanese and anti-Japanese Koreans, in the image of the pro-Japanese Koreans on Hashima Island¹⁸. It depicts the conflict between laborers Chil-Sung (So Ji-sub), Mal-Nyeon (Lee Jung-hyun), and others who are resisting the Japanese, and a pro-Japanese Korean, the national betrayer, Seok-Chul (Lee Kyung-young), who pretends to be an independent activist, along with other pro-Japanese Koreans. Because the narrative is bent toward the service of the director's conception of history and cinematic imagination, this film represents the brutality of the pro-Japanese Koreans instead of the plight of the Koreans kept on Hashima Island. The film represents an inevitable collision between different prosthetic memories about forced labor on Hashima Island, memories entrenched in Koreans, who would instinctively react obsessively and reflexively to the Japanese colonial period. The detailed depiction of the presence of the pro-Japanese Koreans, however, weakens the criticism of Japan. Interestingly, the masculinity of Moo-young (Song Joong-ki), an agent of the Office of Strategic Services (later the CIA), is presented as that of a superhero who saves Koreans and kills Seok-Chul, who is pro-Japanese. Scenes that express Japanese anger due to their defeat by the United States and the explosion of the atomic bomb in Nagasaki accentuate the role of Moo-young. These scenes appear to exclude Japan by including the United States in the nationalistic narrative.

Here, the approach to paternal love is to reinforce nationalism by centering paternal love as a major element of the narrative in an equivocal form, such that the main character, Kang-Ok (Hwang Jung-min), acts only for the good of his daughter, So-hee (Kim Soo-ahn), who is neither an independence activist nor a pro-Japanese Korean. Kang-Ok, a hotel bandleader, is deceived by a pro-Japanese Korean, Sugiyama (Jung Man-sik), and is taken with his daughter for forced labor on Hashima developed by the Mitsubishi Corporation. Kang-Ok pretends to be loyal to the Japanese to protect his daughter, and his efforts to escape from the island are presented as being not for his own benefit but for that of his daughter. It is interesting that, before he dies, Kang-Ok entrusts his daughter to Moo-young, not to the other Koreans. It seems that the victim mentality of colonial masculinity is relived here through a projection onto Moo-young. Kang-Ok's line, "I'm sorry I didn't provide anything for you," is a typical representation of narcissistic paternal love. There are two points implied by this line: first, in saying this, he emphasizes the

sacrifice he has made for his daughter; second, it may cause the daughter to feel guilty. Another particularly interesting scene is the singing of the “Hope Song”¹⁹ by Kang-Ok and So-hee, which recalls the days before they were taken to Hashima Island. Kang-Ok, who requests this song as a last wish, expresses nostalgia for his nation. This song is deployed for nationalist pathos in a range of scenes involving Kang-Ok and So-hee.

The representation of Kang-Ok’s paternal love is securely protected from resistance and nationalism between the prosthetic memory of Japanese colonial rule and historical facts. For instance, Kang-Ok is excluded from the struggle between the pro-Japanese Koreans and forced laborers, and his loyalty to the Japanese is a mask used to protect his paternal love for his daughter rather than a depiction of him being a pro-Japanese Korean. Coincidentally, his fantasy of supremacy provides him with the chance to escape colonial conceptions of masculinity. As a father with a daughter, the superiority complex that Kang-Ok has toward imperialist masculinity is highlighted in the scene where Shimazaki Daisuke (Kim In-woo), the director of the Mitsubishi mining station on Hashima, recommends that Kang-Ok’s daughter be adopted by Chiba Toshio (Jeong Tae-ya), the head of the mining station, who has lost a daughter. In the film, the existence of a daughter as such presents a comparatively satisfied (reducible) colonized Korean male, who experiences anxiety and humiliation due to his ethnic status under imperialist masculinity. These films, unconsciously or consciously, grant rights and privileges to Korean fathers, and it is clear that historical intervention is inevitable for emphasizing their paternal love.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined two types of fathers presented in Korean films. Violent fathers in the films considered here appear as selfish and tyrannical presences that fail to provide material and emotional support, averting criticism by wrapping themselves in their patriarchal status. Such filmed masculinity demands to be understood in the context of, or is even paradoxically encouraged by, war trauma. Here, national power plays a significant role in granting masculinity, although it also gives these fathers the justification they seek for immoral activities, such as domestic violence. Fathers appear as victims of their mobilization by the nation and patriarchy, and violence resulting from national trauma is transferred to their sons and is eventually consolidated into a prevailing masculine narrative. Likewise, fathers’ masculinity and the nation itself are complementary and mutually guaranteeing. In *Ode to My Father* and *The Battleship Island*, paternal love is depicted as having strong power, constructing symbiotic relationships with the nation and the fathers’ own masculinity. This is a portrayal of the Korean nation’s tragic history. *The*

Battleship Island presents the victim mentality within Korean masculinity, and its desire for imperialism over Japanese masculinity as sutured together in a stronger nationalism using the elements of collective psychology, such as anti-Japanese sentiment. These films presume that the crisis of Korean masculinity stems from a crisis beginning in the globalization of capitalism and the inferior feelings of men who have suffered a defeat due to imperialism. However, enjoying the position of victimhood, Korean fathers may refuse to dismantle their fantasy of being masculine hegemons. Consequentially, it appears that the complex trauma and the political and economic conditions of Korean history are simply being utilized and transformed into a plausible excuse to support the claim that Korean fathers are undergoing a crisis of their masculinity.

However, this trend is changing as North Korean fathers' paternal love begins to appear more often as intervening in the narratives of South Korean fathers in films. In such cases, the relationship between the two fathers has been depicted as developing a particularly male form of intimacy. *Steel Rain* (Yang Woo-seok, 2017) presents a narrative of friendship between South Korean (Kwak Do-won) and North Korean (Jung Woo-sung) male protagonists, underlain by a paternal love that emphasizes the sorrow of the divided country. *Ashfall* (Lee Hae-joon and Kim Byeong-seo, 2019) explores the sense of duty and friendship of a South Korean male protagonist (Ha Jung-woo) who adopts the daughter of the North Korean male protagonist (Lee Byeong-hun). These masculine stories of affection between the two Koreas utilize the political imagination to converge on the idea of one nation, placing the United States as the origin of the division of the Korean peninsula. Because male-centered narratives and nationalist storytelling remain common and popular in Korean cinema, variations of the father and the nation in the collective imagination of film may yet continue to play a highly dominant role in Korean cinema.

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Endnotes

- 1 “Cheer up Papa, we are always with you.” Lyrics by Kwon Yeon-soon, composed by Han Soo-sung.
- 2 The phrase *gireoggi appa* refers to Korean fathers who work and live away from their families and send their wives and children abroad to support their children’s education. Beginning in the 1990s, the number of *gireoggi appa* has increased exponentially due to the large perceived benefits of early study of English and other advantages of living abroad. Most of these families travelled to Anglo countries such as the United States, Australia, and Canada. There are strong perceptions of serious social problems, such as divorce, suicide, and depression, related to this phenomenon.
- 3 All Korean males with Korean citizenship must complete military service. As stated in the Military Service Law of the Republic of Korea, Article 3:1, “Male nationals of the Republic of Korea, according to the Constitution and this law, ought to perform the duty of military service with sincerity, and females can volunteer for military service” (cited in Moon, 2005, p. 64).
- 4 A representative sample of this type of film would include *Secret Reunion* (Jang-Hoon, 2010), *The Front Line* (Jang-Hoon, 2011), *Confidential Assignment* (Kim Seong-hoon, 2017), *Steel Rain* (Yang Woo-seok, 2017), *The Spy Gone North* (Yoon Jeong-bin, 2018), *Take Point* (Kim Byoung-woo, 2018), and *Ashfall* (Lee Hae-joon and Kim Byeong-seo, 2019).
- 5 “The Vietnam War, or *Wol-nam-jon* to Koreans, was a major episode in Korean history during the 1960s and 1970s. All told, about 220,000 Korean soldiers served in the Vietnam War when the rotation of personnel is taken into account. Korean soldiers fought in Vietnam for economic rewards as well as for the material and financial support guaranteed to Korean government by the United States” (Park, 1998, pp. 217-224).
- 6 The film is based on the popular Korean novel *Nights in Seven Years* (Jeong Yu-jeong, 2011); however, the narrative and structure of the film are far from the original. It is a crime thriller about domestic violence and a distorted form of paternal love between the two male protagonists, Young-je and Hyun-soo. Young-je depicts a cold-blooded, insidiously rich dentist, a sociopath who uses diabolical violence against his wife and daughter. There is no reason given for this, leaving the audience to conclude that it is a simple obsession. In the novel, however, Young-je’s wife Ha-young plays an important role in the narrative, providing many clues that allow the reader to understand or conjecture about Young-je’s character. In the film, on the other hand, she is largely relegated to appearing in silhouettes and voices, and she also dies by suicide in the middle of the film, as reported to the audience only by a single detective, with no appearance of the actual event of death. The film depicts Young-je’s character as a sociopath who commits brutal violence and abuses others for no reason. Thus, when his daughter, Se-ryoung (played by Lee-Re), who fled from Young-je after being assaulted by him, is killed in an unexpected accident by Hyun-soo, the desire for revenge for his daughter is less than convincing. Thus, this character is not suitable for the discussion of this study.
- 7 It should be noted that Korean males were mobilized for the Vietnam War at the request of the United States, and the relationship between the Park dictatorship regime and the United States should be understood. For details on the Vietnam War and the involvement of Korean troops, refer to Long (1977), Kwak (2006), and Baek (2013).

- 8 Although few films end in punishment for the perpetrator, they do exist. For instance, *Miss Baek* (Lee Ji-won, 2018) and *My First Client* (Jang Kyu-sung, 2019) are based on true stories that took place in Korea. These films engage in social criticism and clearly point to the incompetence of the legal system and the apathy of a society where children are exposed to domestic violence. However, these films share problems: they justify criticism of a stepmother figure by deploying a full-scale representation of abuse and excessively emphasizing the mother's maternal nature. In addition, paternal love in these films is shrewdly protected: the father is shown as either involved in or neglectful of the abuse and is placed behind the violent stepmother; in other words, the films use the stepmother figure as a proxy to avoid problematizing paternal love.
- 9 Coincidentally, all of the father characters discussed in this section are played by Hwang Jung-min.
- 10 The *Meredith Victoria* carried 14,000 refugees to Busan and Geoje Island during the Korean War.
- 11 *Finding Dispersed Families* was a well-known TV program, broadcast in Korea in 1983. This show sought to bring together families that had been dispersed by the Korean War.
- 12 I borrowed this concept from Kim's discussion.
- 13 The *hanbok* is commonly called *Chima Jeogori* in many places, but that phrase refers only to the jacket of the *hanbok*.
- 14 In this paper, the name "Hashima Island" is used for the location instead of "Battleship Island" to avoid confusion with the film's title.
- 15 See the manner in which the following recent Korean films portray Japan: *Assassination* (Choi Dong-hun, 2015), *The Age of Shadows* (Kim Jee-woon, 2016), *Warriors of the Dawn*, (Jung Yoon-chul, 2017), *Anarchist from Colony*, (Lee Jun-ik, 2017) *MAL·MO·E: The Secret Mission* (Eom Yu-na, 2019), and *The Battle: Roar to Victory* (Won Shin-yun, 2019).
- 16 Police used tear gas and water cannon against demonstrators demanding the resignation of conservative President Park Geun-hye (BBC, 2015). Moreover, Borowiec (2017, pp. 31-32), states the following: "Protests are an almost daily occurrence in Seoul and are a key part of South Korea's political discourse...[T]he national debate over protests reached its emotional peak in September 2016 after the death of farmer Baek Nam-gi. Baek had been in a coma for 10 months after being knocked over by the stream from a police water cannon during an anti-government protest in Seoul. South Korea's liberal opposition seized on Baek's case as emblematic of what it called the heavy-handed handling of dissent by the Park Geun-hye government. Photos of a soaked Baek lying unconscious on his back in the middle of a road were widely shared on South Korean social media and came to symbolise what some called the regression of democracy in the country"
- 17 The Moon Jae-in government has made the following statements: "We will never lose again to Japan" (Emergency Cabinet Meeting, August 2019; The Office of President Moon Jae-in, 2019). "Wiping out the vestiges of pro-Japanese collaborators is a long-overdue undertaking. Acts of pro-Japanese collaborators are what should be repented, and the independence movement is what should be honoured and respected" (100th March 1st Independence Movement day; South Korea, Cheong Wa Dae, 2019a). "A nation that cannot be shaken" (74th Liberation day, August 2019; South Korea, Cheong Wa Dae, 2019b). Moreover, the Democratic Think Tank

Institute, run by the current ruling party, has produced a report indicating that conflict between Korea and Japan will play a positive role in the general election, and the followers of President Moon have also argued that the general election on April 2020 will center around the battle with Japan (Hankookilbo, 2019).

- 18 Korean audiences had high expectations of *The Battleship Island*, as the facts of the Hashima case had rarely been dealt with before. The film cost around 21 million dollars to produce, and a typical Korean blockbuster film in 2017 was expected to gain about ten million viewers. After the release, however, serious disputes arose about the depiction of the pro-Japanese and anti-Japanese, and the ensuing criticism gained traction in Korean society. As a result, the film did poorly: viewership reached only 6.5 million (Korean Film Council, 2020).
- 19 The “Hope Song” (希望歌) is also known under the title “This World of Woe and Tumult” in Korea. It is occasionally sung to express a particularly Korean sadness. According to Lee (1993, p. 372), it comes from a Japanese song called “At the Foot of White Fuji Mountain” (眞白き富士の根) and was released in South Korea in 1925. However, Ju (2020) held that the original of the song was the hymn “The Lord into His Garden Comes,” published in the United States in 1830.