

# CINEMA AND CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY KOREA

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This paper examines a notion of nationhood held by the North and South Koreans from two inter-related perspectives, political and cultural, by analyzing two films dealing with the Korean War (1950-3). The films chosen for this study are a North Korean film *Wolmido/The Wolmi Island* (1982, Cho Kyeongsun) and a South Korean one *Nambugun/The Southern Guerrilla Forces* (1989, Chung Ji-Young). As I discuss more details throughout this paper, the two films reconstruct the war experiences differently. The differences reveal the conflicting ideas of contemporary Koreans regarding their self-identity as a divided nation. Despite the differences in interpreting the origin and consequences of the war, both of the films express the North and South Koreans' strong commitment of their belief to single nationhood, regardless of their current partition into the two states and the resultant political conflicts between them.

## I. Introduction

This paper examines the notion of nationhood held by North and South Koreans from two interrelated perspectives: political and cultural, by analyzing two films dealing with the Korean War (1950-3). The films chosen for this study are a North Korean film, *Wolmido/Wolmi Island*, and a South Korean film, *Nambugun/The Southern Guerrilla Forces*. *Wolmi Island*, made in 1982 by Cho Kyongsun, is considered by North Korean authorities to be the best war film made in recent years. This is largely due to its contribution to “raising artistic standards in depicting the patriotism and indomitable fighting spirit of the masses armed with their endless loyalty towards Kim Il Sung, who ruled North Korea for nearly a half century until his death in 1994.”<sup>1</sup> *The Southern Guerrilla Forces*, made by a representative South Korean director Chong Chiyong in 1989, attempts an objective investigation of so-called communist sympathizers by delimiting the power of anti-communism as a factor in characterizing the nationhood of modern Korea, both the North and the South. As I discuss in more detail below, the two films reconstruct the war experience differently. The differences reveal the conflicting ideas of contemporary Koreans regarding their self-identity as a divided nation.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, despite their differences in the interpretation of the origin and consequences of the war, both films express the strong commitment of both North and

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1 The Korean Film Export & Import Corporation, *Korean Film Art* (P'yongyang: Korean Film Export & Import Corporation, 1985). No page number is available.

2 In this paper, the term 'nation' is defined as 'a group of people who has some common ancestry, history, culture and language, which figure as a focus of loyalty and affection.' Andrew Vincent, *Modern Political Ideology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1995), p. 239. It is generally understood that 'nation' and 'nationalism' came to be acceptable terms in Europe from the late eighteenth century. Their definitions are, however, applicable to an earlier period in the case of Korea, because it shows general characteristics of a nation since the unification of Korean peninsula in the seventh century.

South Koreans to their common cultural traditions, regardless of the current partition into two states and the resultant political conflicts between them.

Historically, Korea maintained both political and cultural unity for over thirteen centuries, dating from when the peninsula was first unified in 668 by Shilla, one of the three ancient Korean kingdoms. This historical continuity contributed to consolidating a sense of oneness as a nation among Koreans. The firm belief of the people in their single nationhood was, however, devastated by the partition of the country at the end of the Second World War, through the agreement signed by the Allies. The 'recent' national division of 1945, therefore, resulted in considerable confusion and conflict among Koreans. What is noteworthy about this experience is that the majority of Koreans in both the South and the North perceive their conflict to be strictly a political problem. In other words, their fundamental cultural unity is not in question, even after the division.

The role of culture as a sustaining force of nationhood in the politically divided country is well elucidated by Andrew Heywood who defines a nation as essentially 'a cultural entity, a collection of people bound together by shared values and traditions, for example, a common language, religion and history, and usually occupying the same geographical area.'<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the term 'state' indicates a 'political association, which enjoys sovereignty, supreme or unrestricted

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3 Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), p. 141. Contrasted with Heywood, scholars such as Max Weber and Anthony Giddens put more weight on political factors in defining a nation. According to Weber, 'national' affiliation does not need to be based on a common language, a common religion or a common blood. Similarly, Giddens argues that 'a nation exists when a state has a unified administrative reach over the territory over which its sovereignty is claimed.' Max Weber, 'The Nation,' in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds.), *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 21-5; and Anthony Giddens, 'The Nation as Power-container,' in Hutchinson and Smith (eds.), *Nationalism*, p. 34.

power, within defined territorial borders.’<sup>4</sup> Heywood’s distinction between a nation and a state illuminates contemporary Korea, which has not lost its cultural homogeneity despite its political separation. The significance of this shared cultural identity accounts for the common aspirations of North and South Korea to restore their ‘nation-state.’ This desire is deep-rooted, even though they disagree on the specific methods of unification.

The post-war Korean cinema is a cultural text that vividly exposes the coexistence of political discontinuity and cultural continuity in the perception of their nationhood by contemporary Koreans. The conflicting self-identities between the communist North and the capitalist South are handled most poignantly in films that deal with the Japanese colonial period and the Korean War. Colonialism and war provide the extremities in which the idea of nationhood manifests itself. As Heywood points out, the creation of a nation-state is closely related to the liberation from foreign domination, achieving control over one’s own country.<sup>5</sup> The significance of war in establishing nationalism or nationhood is well illustrated by Michael Howard: ‘in nation-building as in revolution, force was the midwife of the historical process.’<sup>6</sup>

To examine nationhood in North and South Korea from a cultural perspective, this paper is organized into two sections. The first section examines the two films in relation to the conflicting ideological orientations of North and South Korea. In *Wolmi Island*, anti-imperialism constitutes the core of its definition of nationhood, as in all of North Korean war films. However, when we situate the film within its specific historically and socio-political contexts, two distinct characteristics can be observed in the way in which *Wolmi Island* treats its subjects in relation to anti-imperialism. First, the recurrent theme of anti-imperial-

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4 Heywood, *Political Ideologies*, p. 141.

5 Ibid., p. 148.

6 Michael Howard, ‘War and Nations,’ in Hutchinson and Smith (eds.), *Nationalism*, p. 255.

ism is closely tied to a nationalistic opposition to the colonizers or invaders of Korea. The Japanese rule, which lasted until 1945, and the American intervention in the ensuing years offer fertile narrative contexts in which to tackle issues of self-identity in contemporary Korea. Second, the anti-imperialist theme in the film parallels the effort to present Kim Il Sung as the ultimate embodiment of Korean nationhood. Made under the direct supervision of his son, the current North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, *Wolmi Island* is the culmination of the personification of national history in the name of Kim Il Sung.<sup>7</sup> Through this effort, the film attempts to justify the power succession of Kim Jong Il. Hence, the apotheosis of Kim demands a careful examination of the social and political implications of the colonial experience as represented in the film.

The film *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* is more complex. South Korean films that deal with the war experience commonly deal with the forced political division of the nation as being due to many problems that confront modern Korea. Nevertheless, there is a shared understanding among South Korean war films regarding the undeniable impact of the war on contemporary Korean life. The theme of nationhood has been approached from multiple angles throughout the history of South Korean cinema. During the 1960s and 1970s, war films tended to advocate anti-communism in accordance with Park Jong Hee's military government's film policy; they, therefore, occupy a

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7 Kim Jong Il has supervised every aspect of the film industry since he was appointed as the director of film art in 1968, which belongs to the Propaganda and Agitation Bureau within the Party. Under this direct supervision, the North Korean film industry launched a full-scale development plan in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Through his active involvement in cinema and other arts, Kim Jong Il finally received the Party's recognition of his leadership in inspiring the masses with its official guidelines. He also gained his father's confidence as a successor by making a series of films promoting loyalty toward his father. In 1974, he was named the sole successor of his father by the Party during the Party's Central People's Committee meeting.

significant place as a distinctive genre of South Korean cinema. Whereas, beginning in the mid-1980s, South Korean cinema has increasingly become skeptical about anti-communism as a basis for its nationhood. This came about as a response to the radical changes in South Korean politics that occurred during the ensuing decades. This change in attitude explains the way in which *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* treats anti-communism as its thematic crux. *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* dismantles the legitimacy of anti-communism as state ideology. Furthermore, it suggests that anti-communism is an irrelevant issue when discussing the nationhood of contemporary Koreans and the reality of the national division. The film focuses more on the humanistic aspect of the war, avoiding rigid political interpretations of historical incidents. In this sense, *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* shows how the renunciation of the antithesis of pro- and anti-communism reflects a changing perception of self-identity among the Korean people in the contemporary period, at least in the South.

The second section of this paper examines common cultural elements that exist in the two films. Although both films are constructed around the ideological tension between South and North, they invariably touch on the Confucian notion of family and connect it with their theory of an ideal nation. Their reliance on traditional family values seems to suggest enduring Confucian cultural roots. These can be perceived as possible alternatives to the current political ideologies. Therefore, common cultural roots form the basis for establishing an integrated nationhood.

## **II. Nationhood in *Wolmi Island* and *The Southern Guerrilla Forces***

North Korean war films concern themselves with anti-imperialistic sentiments, the class-consciousness and endless loyalty toward Kim as the most important elements in defining the national identity of both

North and South Korean people. Although to different degrees, all of these three components coalesce to form a distinct thematic pattern in the films. This pattern shifts focus in each film, according to the specific socio-political situations at the time of the film's production. In other words, each individual film reflects the pressing needs of the state in representing their history on the screen. These needs range from the necessity to establish a classless society to the need to consolidate the rule of the Kim's, as the father and the son successively sought legitimacy from the party-centered social structure.

Cho's *Wolmi Island* is a good example of the close link between the loyalty towards Kim Il Sung and the theme of nationhood in North Korean films. It enables us to infer the changes in North Korea's internal political situation, especially its increasing idolization of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il along with the promotion of the *Juche* ideology formulated by the elder Kim.<sup>8</sup> Set during the Korean War, the film depicts a three-day battle on the coast of Wolmi Island between the United Nations forces and the communist coastal company, which attempts to secure a safe route to allow a strategic retreat by the North Korean army. On the surface, the dominant theme of the film appears to be the patriotic self-sacrifice of the company, but underneath it, the film discloses its real message of endless loyalty to Kim. This underlying theme is communicated mostly through the words of the protagonist T'aehun, who is the company commander who repeatedly tells his followers as well as his superiors, that their 'fatherland' is General Kim. T'aehun describes Kim as the one who saved their lost country from the Japanese. The reason for the company to defend the island is to

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8 It is mainly through Kim Jong Il that the *Juche* theory of art has been applied to filmmaking in North Korea. It is believed that Kim Il Sung used this term in a speech in 1955. See, Kim Il Sung, 'On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing *Juche* in Ideological Work: Speech to Party Propaganda and Agitation Workers,' on 28 December 1955, in *Kim Il Sung Works 9: July 1954-December 1955* (P'yongyang: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1982), pp. 395-417.

prevent their enemies from advancing to Pyongyang where General Kim resides. The content of the film supports T'aehun's claim that the war with the Americans is to defend Kim as much as their country.

What distinguishes *Wolmi Island* from the North Korean war films made in previous years is its exclusive concentration on Kim's importance in the North Koreans' perception of their nationhood. The film starts with praise of Kim's eminent leadership and ends with the same. The company's devotion to Kim is equated with patriotism, which has a universal appeal. To generate a mythical resonance in the company's heroism, the film liberally uses dramatic elements, even though they contradict its claim that the story is based on a historical fact. A typical exaggeration is that the company, equipped with only four guns, defeated the 50,000 American soldiers led by General MacArthur, who attempted to land at Inchon. This unrealistic victory mentioned at the outset of the film, is followed by a line from Kim's *Juche* theory stating that, 'nothing is impossible for people with will-power.' This motto is amplified throughout the film, urging the viewer to pledge unconditional loyalty to the Leader.

The above *cliche* quoted from the *Juche* theory is also used to mobilize the North Korean people for economic development. North Korea began facing a serious economic crisis in the late 1970s. Films made during this period often cite Kim's fatherly encouragement of workers to raise their productivity. A sergeant says that General Kim once visited his mine before the war broke out and told those who complained about the lack of equipment that manpower 'precedes' equipment. Kim is also said to have added that if the spirit of the working class is elevated, there is nothing that cannot be accomplished. The theme of economic development is noted in T'aehun's speech to his soldiers: 'Our fatherland has already given us everything, and what is left to be done is to show our endless love for our nation. We should fight for our country and General Kim until we die so that we would not feel ashamed before our parents and brothers' (author's translation). As



T'aehun's lines illustrate, the film attempts to set an exemplary model for the audience with the heroic deaths of the young soldiers, who do not flinch even though they are faced with a hopeless situation on Wolmi Island. This effort is based on the so-called 'modeling theory,' one of the three principles of filmmaking in North Korea.<sup>9</sup>

Another noteworthy aspect of *Wolmi Island* is its characterization of the new class of military elite that has emerged in North Korea. T'aehun represents this group. As a graduate of the Naval Officer College, he is portrayed as being fully qualified to serve as commander of the company. His main function is to efficiently execute Kim's ideological instructions. The film categorizes several important attributes of this elite group. Above all, T'aehun demonstrates a profound understanding of the soldiers' psychology. He sympathizes with their difficulties, especially when their fighting spirit begins to flag. He is well aware of his responsibility to convince them that victory is possible so that they can successfully perform their tasks to the end - even though they run the risk of sacrificing their lives. As the film visually demonstrates, T'aehun's leadership and stern personality are impressive. In

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9 Kim Jong Il published a book in 1973, *Yonghwa Yesulron/The Theory of Cinematic Art*, outlining the official North Korean theory of film art. According to this theory, there is a specific set of principles in filmmaking in North Korea: the 'seed' theory, the 'modeling' theory and 'speed campaign.' The principle of 'modeling' theory is concerned with how to portray the struggles of the working class to achieve both class and national liberation. It requires filmmakers to present an idealized picture of North Korean society and its people. Whereas, the 'seed' theory means that every film should treat 'proper' materials and themes which feature the revolutionary thoughts of Kim Il Sung and the Party line like 'seed' to be planted in the audience's mind. The 'speed campaign' is to meet the demands of the Party to rapidly produce films of high ideological and artistic quality at the designated time. This principle rejects a 'passive' attitude in filmmaking. Films as an ideological weapon should be produced as quickly as possible in order to accelerate the revolutionary process. These filmmaking principles are imposed on all 'film workers.' The majority of the North Korean films which are made according to these principles are called 'collective works.' For detailed explanations, see Kim Jong Il, *Yonghwa Yesulron/The Theory of Cinematic Art* (P'yongyang: Korean Workers' Party Publishing House, 1973).

addition to T'aehun, the battalion commander Min'guk, T'aehun's lover, and a military doctor also belong to this elite class. They are all endowed with distinct class traits: a strong sense of commitment to their work, emotional strength and a fine sense of judgment. These elites also demonstrate classical military heroism. In the battle scenes, the camera marks their leadership by placing them in the forefront of the screen with their soldiers in the background.

The film, however, presents a vexing ideological question by singling out the small group of officers from the masses. To prevent such an ideological problem, *Wolmi Island* constantly draws the viewer's attention to their class background. T'aehun and Min'guk not only come from the working class but are also anti-Japanese fighters. The film stresses that this class homogeneity between the officers and soldiers cements their emotional ties as comrades. T'aehun and Min'guk's anti-Japanese resistance, in particular, reminds the soldiers of their common experiences in the exploitative class system and slavery under foreign rule. By referring to their shared history, the film carefully suggests that the relationship between the new elite group and its followers is based on mutual respect and understanding without any conflicting interests between the two different social classes.

The effort to suppress any hint of class distinction, however, does not seem to be entirely convincing. A perceptive viewer cannot mistake the irreconcilable gap between the military elite and the low-ranking soldiers. It is shown in their distinctly different appearances and behaviors, which are related to their different living standards. These external clues as to their class backgrounds, coupled with the different positioning of the commanders and the soldiers on the screen, cannot hide the suspicion that a certain hierarchy exists in North Korean society. This undeniable oddity in its internal logic ironically confirms the film's function as a truthful mirror of social reality. In actuality, the loyalty to Kim shown by this emerging class has played a pivotal role in bolstering his control of power in the early 1980s.

Anti-imperialism, class consciousness and Kim's leadership are the controlling themes in North Korean war films while anti-communism serves as the basis for exploring nationhood in South Korean war films. The film industry in the South has always been in a vulnerable position due to political pressures from the government. The severe censorship during successive military regimes (1961-93) was an especially tough obstacle for filmmakers interested in topical subjects.

Unlike in North Korean films, the state ideology is not always indiscriminately exalted in South Korean films. However, it should be mentioned that, to an extent, anti-communism has had a genuine emotional appeal to the audience who remember the tragedy of the civil war and suffer from being separated from their family members after the armistice. This is why the large majority of South Korean war films offer anti-communism as a means to recover nationhood.

Although it fundamentally accepts the forced division of the nation as the origin of the conflicts in contemporary Korean society, *The Southern Guerrilla Forces*, however, interprets the discontinuity in nationhood somewhat differently. *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* is a humanistic story about communist partisans fighting against the South Korean government in the 1950s. Tackling one of the forbidden subjects in South Korean cinema, this groundbreaking film marks a new phase in Korean film history. Through its serious and unbiased re-examination of the lives of communist guerrillas in the South, this film has raised the discussion of the ideological differences between the North and the South and their role in nationhood to an unprecedented level. In contrast to other anti-communist films, Chong's film stresses that blind antagonism towards communism itself cannot be a key definer of nationhood. Thus, for the first time in South Korean film history, *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* calls into question the legitimacy of anti-communism as state ideology. This message is conveyed through a careful depiction of the human side of the communist resistance forces caught up in the war zone.

To explain the significance of this film within the South Korean film industry, a brief review of the national security policies is in order. Beginning around 1988, unification emerged as a major issue in South Korean politics. This development was closely related to the 'Nordpolitik' policy of the Roh Tae Woo administration (1988-93), which, recognizing the need to reduce tensions between the North and the South, began to pursue better relations with other socialist countries. This policy was a response to the changing climate of international politics that was previously brought about by the end of the Cold War era and German reunification. Roh's government, as the last in a series of military regimes stretching back for over thirty years, broke the taboo on discussing unification issues in public discourse. Motivated by this change of policy, various sectors of Korean society began to redefine the North as part of one national community. With this shift in the public's view of North Korea, a clearer picture of North Korean society emerged and some historical events that had been suppressed by the South Korean government came to light.

The overall changes taking place in the film industry at that time were in keeping with these new government policies on North Korean matters. Since the mid-1980s, a series of films focusing on families that had been separated since the end of the war was produced. Works such as Pae Ch'angho's *Ku Hae Kyoul-un Ttattuthaenne/Warm it Was that Winter* (1984), Im Kwont'aek's *Kilsottum* (1985), and Yi Changho's *Nagunen-un Kil-esodo Shuiji Annunda/A Wayfarer Never Rests on the Road* (1987) signaled a drastically different approach to issues related to national division, reflecting the popular unification movement of the late 1980s. They tended to focus on psychological problems of separated families, rather than the 'evils' of communism. Their specific subjects are the memories of the family members in the 'other' territory and the rift between those who have successfully joined the middle class and those who have fallen to the bottom of the social ladder due to the forced separation from their families. *The Southern Guerrilla*

*Forces* belongs to a group of films that treats the national tragedy from the victims' point of view.

As mentioned above, the Southern communist guerrilla forces were a taboo subject for a long time. Their existence was erased in South Korea's official history. On screen, they were usually portrayed as villains who fell in with North Korean communists due to their naivety. *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* deviates from such a stereotypical treatment of the communist guerrilla warfare of the 1950s. First of all, the protagonist of the film is not an uninformed and uneducated believer in communism. *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* selects an intellectual as the hero of the story and interprets his or her acceptance of communism as a kind of fate in the turmoil of the war.

*The Southern Guerrilla Forces* was adapted from Yi T'ae's autobiographical essay of the same title. The film is based on the author's personal experience as a partisan during the war. T'ae, the protagonist and narrator of the film, is a reporter who once worked for the Hap-tong Press, the leading news agency in Seoul. After North Korea took over this agency at the beginning of the war, T'ae was sent to the South as a war correspondent for the Party. He joined the communist guerrillas hiding in the mountains due to the sudden retreat of the North Korean army under the massive, unexpected counter-attack by the U.N. forces.

As T'ae himself narrates, his involvement in partisan life was not something that he consciously planned in advance. Rather, the precarious war situation drove him into the mountains when no alternative was available, and there he found the guerrilla forces. His initiation into the group was more or less fortuitous. As the film shows, however, once people choose sides between the North and the South, they are put in an ideological strait jacket and are not allowed to change their position even though their political beliefs alter. This problem is seen when T'ae and his colleagues are branded as communists by the South Korean government simply because they escaped into the mountains.

Although T'ae was critical of the censorship imposed by the South Korean government while he was working for the Haptong Press, he never considered himself a communist sympathizer. His narration on the development of the war is too objective to be used as an index of his ideological stance.

An important point that the film raises concerning ideology and nationhood is the lack of hatred among ordinary Koreans no matter which side they happen to be on. It is inevitable that they kill each other for their own survival during war, yet deep in their psyche, they always view each other as their brothers who unfortunately ended up on the 'enemy' side. The film maintains that this is why the Korean War is such a tragic irony for the majority of Koreans. This irony is expressed by one of the partisans: 'What a contradictory situation we are confronted with! In order to live like humans in the future, we have to kill our own people in the present' (author's translation). This film does not present the guerrilla forces as inhuman machinery of the 'North Korean communist party' as portrayed in numerous anti-communist films. Their partisan activities are motivated by a sincere wish to put an end to national divisions as soon as possible. The film essentially portrays them as unfortunate victims of ideological conflicts; in the same way as everyone else who was caught in the tragic fratricidal war. The images of the fugitive guerrillas in this film drastically diverge from a one-dimensional, negative portrayal of communists as seen in propaganda films produced in the past. Various scenes from the guerrillas' past lives demonstrate that they are people whom the audience can relate to, not dehumanized ideologues who are out of touch with reality.

While the film adds a human touch to the partisans by interjecting their personal stories in the plot, it does not lose sight of their unity as a group. Their brotherly bond and patriotism are highlighted throughout the film. Their emotional ties to their outcast community and their nation keep them together. This solidarity and patriotism help convert

T'ae and many others who joined the forces. However, they initially joined with no real conviction as communists. Their respectable attitudes toward each other and the villagers also promise the possibility of restoring unified nationhood among the Korean people after the war.

In war films produced before the late 1980s, the Southern communist guerrillas appear as brutal bandits who massacre their innocent neighbors and then run away into the mountains. Unlike typical anti-communist films, Chong's film draws attention to their brotherly warmth and disciplined attitude toward people living at the foot of the mountains. When the guerrilla forces attack the South Korean army or when they retreat, their main concern is the safety of the villagers, who have to continue their everyday lives regardless of the changing war situation. Before launching an attack, the guerrilla forces ensure that all villagers have been moved to a safe place. To reduce the number of casualties among the villagers, the guerrillas sometimes choose a less advantageous course of action for themselves even though it may cause them fatalities. The film realistically attempts to capture the deep emotional bond that is not entirely lost among the Korean people, even during a devastating war. The film also stresses the guerrilla forces' strict moral standards. A battalion commander is ordered to kill himself by his superior for raping a village woman, who is the wife of a policeman and is suspected of informing the police of the guerrillas' activities in the village. Her information resulted in a large number of deaths. She deserves the punishment by the guerrilla forces, but the partisan leaders determine that the battalion commander's crime is inexcusable and that pardoning him would stain the reputation of the entire force.

The villagers' attitudes toward the guerrilla forces in this film are also very different from those seen in anti-communist films. They often help the partisans although they are well aware of the punishment for such activities by the South Korean government. They feed the

guerrillas and hide them from the South Korean army. The film emphasizes that their help is purely humane and is not politically motivated. The villagers cannot turn their backs on their fellow countrymen who are in danger of starvation and death. The film's emphasis on humanism that transcends ideology is evident in many scenes. Although a positive portrayal of the guerrilla forces occasionally takes on an unrealistic note, it is, on the whole, not excessive.<sup>10</sup> When it is so, its main purpose is to rectify the mistaken view held of the Southern guerrilla forces, which was fostered by anti-communist policies.

*The Southern Guerrilla Forces* occasioned a re-evaluation of the Southern communist guerrillas among the public in the South. They began to be seen as a group with its own vision for the nation's future, not as a handful of rebellious people manipulated by the North. In one scene, the guerrillas gather around an eminent historical figure, Yi Honsang, who earned respect for his anti-Japanese resistance activities. He is also known as a legendary communist and nationalist who fought against the American military regime and Syngman Rhee's regime (1948-61) from 1945 until his death during the war. Nambugun is the real name of the guerrilla forces led by this famous anti-Japanese and communist fighter.

Another aspect of the film is that its portrayal of the events differs radically from the official history. It implies that communist sentiments were far more widespread in South Korea during the 1950s than the government acknowledged. According to the official account, the Southern communist guerrillas were an isolated group of rebels who mounted a 'mutiny' in the area surrounding the T'aebaek mountain range. *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* challenges this explanation. The

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10 For example, when a little boy runs across the battlefield, chasing after his dog, both the guerrillas and the South Korean army stop firing. As soon as the boy gets out of danger, they shout at each other to elicit a surrender and later even sing together, instead of resuming their shooting.



members of the guerrilla forces, including the journalist-protagonist, are not local residents. The film thus carefully avoids the regional dialect of the T'aebaek Mountains. The partisans came from all over the country, and their motives in joining the group also differ from one member to another. Some wanted to escape from poverty, whereas others were driven by patriotism to fight for their country. Some were simply discontent with the South Korean government, whereas others actually embraced the idea of a classless society as promised by communism. Many other reasons exist besides these. Their diverse backgrounds successfully dismantle the long-held misperception that the guerrillas were reckless malcontents and traitors to their country.

In essence, *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* is an anti-war film. At the end of the film, the guerrilla base is totally destroyed by the South Korean army. The majority of the partisans are killed and those who survive leave the mountains by their own will. A few of the survivors are eventually arrested by the government. Despite this catastrophic end, none of the surviving members considers themselves defeated. They believe that they did what they viewed as being best for their country at that given moment of history, even though this will ostracize them permanently from society. Their ultimate heroism lies in this acceptance of the consequences of their actions. The ending drives home the point that they did not waste their youth or suffer in a meaningless war. Given this unconventional treatment of the Southern communist partisans, it is not surprising that the film caused a huge controversy when it was released in 1989. However, the success of *The Southern Guerrilla Forces*, despite direct and indirect interventions from various conservative groups such as the censorship committee, military, war-veterans' association, and North Korean refugee organizations, clearly reflects the changing perception of the general public.<sup>11</sup>

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11 The commercial failure of *T'aebaek Sanmaek/The T'aebaek Mountains*, Im Kwont'aek's 1993 film which deals with the same materials as *The Southern Guerrilla Forces*, testifies to the change in the public opinion. The failure is generally ascribed to the

The rejection of the hackneyed Cold War ideology testifies to the shifting sensibilities of the audience toward films dealing with the South-North political confrontation and their demands for a more mature discussion of nationhood in the 1990s.

An overview of South Korean war films helps reveal the changes in their interpretations concerning the impact of the national division on nationhood. One of the major shifts is an increasing skepticism about anti-communism as the ideological basis of national identity. Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, anti-communism has insinuated itself into every aspect of Koreans' lives in the South in the name of national security. At the same time, it has been appropriated as a rhetorical instrument by successive military regimes for their own political interests. Anti-communism is used to control the public by engendering fear of a possible recurrence of civil war and of a possible communist takeover of the South. This rhetoric appealed to the generation which experienced the tragic war. As socio-economic conditions improved over the years, the propaganda surrounding the communist threat has lost much of its appeal to younger generations in Korea. Consequently, the emotional power of anti-communism, which constituted the strong basis of Korean self-identity during the immediate post-war period, has been slowly eroded in recent years.

### **III. Traditional Familyhood as the Basis of Contemporary Korean Nationhood**

Both *Wolmi Island* and *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* follow different ideological frameworks to define nationhood. The North Korean film tends to approach the issue in exclusively political terms whereas the South Korean one avoids any ideological judgment in dealing with the

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anti-communist resonance that reverberates throughout the film.

war experiences of the people. Under these surface differences, however, both films employ surprisingly similar motifs of Confucian familyhood. They commonly see a traditional family structure as the unchanging, fundamental frame of Korean nationhood. One noticeable difference between the two films is that the North Korean work concentrates on patriarchal lineage whereas the South Korean one is interested in the implications of the husband-wife union.

In *Wolmi Island*, nationhood is defined in terms of the opposition between imperialism and the Korean people's resistance to it. This antithesis manifests itself in its use of the old Confucian rhetoric of family. According to the film's interpretation, the Korean nation is one large family. The relationships of the characters are defined in terms of a family tree. In this extended family, Kim Il Sung takes the position of the father, who looks after the rest of the members as his children.<sup>12</sup>

*Wolmi Island* employs three strategies to promote paternal authority: the replacement of the biological father with a symbolic one; the elevation of maternal virtues as an alternative to the failure or absence of the biological father; and the foreground of the eldest son as the legitimate heir to the family line. The symbolization of Kim Il Sung as a father figure is partly achieved by means of the contrast between true and false fatherhood. In *Wolmi Island*, the actual father is presented as a failed or false hero who is too weak to embrace the masses. Therefore, the search for a true father figure culminates in *Wolmi Island*. The protagonist T'aehun is an orphan, and characters around him also do not have any memories of their father. Odd as it is, this phenomenon clears the way for the implementation of Kim's symbolic fatherhood. As is shown in the film, Kim fills the characters' psychological void as the Patriarch of the nation.

Related to this symbolic substitution for an inadequate father figure, *Wolmi Island* tends to uplift the mother's role. However, it does not

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12 Bruce Comings, 'The Corporate State in North Korea,' in Hagen Koo (ed.), *State and Society in Contemporary Korea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 13-50.

contain an actual mother figure, per se. However, the old soldier who works as a cook in the company embodies all the attitudes that are associated with a mother figure. It can safely be said that his role is equivalent to the mother's role, as someone who draws her children's respect by her self-sacrificing dedication to them. His maternal qualities are fully demonstrated by the care he provides for the entire company behind the frontline of the battle.

At first glance, the positive maternal image may appear to undermine the promotion of Kim's stature as a benevolent father figure. But a close reading of the scenes centered on the mother figure clearly reveals that, while her virtues are glorified, she does not have authority or power over her children. The old soldier in *Wolmi Island* faithfully performs a maternal role as prescribed by Confucian ethics. Therefore, the close emotional ties between the mother and her children are not in conflict with the effort to consolidate Kim's 'boundless' love and absolute power as the ultimate Father. The mother is always in an inferior position to the father. Therefore, the elevation of her virtues cannot pose a threat to the patriarch. In Confucian family life, respect for the mother does not mean obedience to her. With the father, however, these two attitudes must go hand in hand. In other words, the mother cannot force her will on her children. Also, any suggestions she gives to her children can be valid only when they are approved by the father. Therefore, no matter how noble they are, the mother's virtues cannot affect, let alone damage, the father's absolute authority over the children. One of the important responsibilities of the mother figure in Confucian families is to ensure that her children faithfully serve their father through filial piety. In *The Wolmi Island*, the old cook believes that he can repay Kim's love by taking good care of the soldiers. He keeps telling the soldiers about Kim's great fatherhood, as a mother would do in a Confucian family.

The last feature of Confucian family values found in the film is the respect for the eldest son as the successor to the paternal lineage. The

film promotes the eldest son of the family in lieu of an inadequate father. He can represent the entire family if his father dies or cannot perform his due obligations. The film assigns a special role to the son: instilling his family with the revolutionary spirit.

Without doubt, the positive image of the eldest son in the film is directly relevant to the preparation for the power succession from Kim Il Sung to his son Kim Jong Il. This tendency becomes markedly noticeable in North Korean films made since the mid-1970s, when Kim the junior was designated the prospective successor to his father's position. In *The Wolmi Island*, T'aehun acts like a typical eldest son, taking care of the soldiers in the family-like company unit. Brotherhood is a universal metaphor used to describe military personnel in action. Therefore, T'aehun's fraternity with the other battalion members in this film does not seem to require further detailed explanations.

The South Korean counterpart, *The Southern Guerrilla Forces*, also represents society in terms of the unity and responsibilities of family members. The use of the family metaphor in the film is largely used in three ways. First of all, the burden of supporting the family is borne by the male characters. By extension, any disorder in society, be it political or cultural, is attributed to the inability of the male adults to perform their functions in their homes and society. Secondly, the film relies heavily on the problems of women as a metaphor for the troubled nation. Lastly, these films use the motif of marriage as a symbol of the possibility of national regeneration. The betrayal of marital vows, therefore, often accounts for the problems faced by the characters. It can be further read as the society's uncertainty, or even pessimistic views of its future.

The male protagonists in *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* carry on their roles of a father and/or elderly brothers, who are responsible for providing for their family and of establishing order in society. Therefore, their confusion and aimlessness symbolize the quandary into which the entire society has fallen. The guerrilla members provide

paternal care for teenagers who joined the forces but who are too young to be engaged in battle. Responsible and reliable in the isolated mountain community, the guerrillas embody the respectable attributes of male adults as expected by traditional family life.

Compared with these male characters, most of the female characters are depicted as defenseless victims of forces beyond their control. The chain of ordeals they undergo figuratively stands for the plight of the entire country. Aside from poverty and insanity, prostitution and rape serve as particularly acute metaphors for the country's traumatic experiences of humiliation and helplessness. A typical example is the policeman's wife who is assaulted by the battalion commander.

The miseries of the women characters are partly brought about by the failure of their men to fulfill their expected roles in society. In *The Southern Guerrilla Forces*, the stories of three women partisans also evince the influence of the old patriarchal values on women's lives. One of them joined the forces to revenge the villagers who killed her father and attacked her mother. The second woman became a partisan out of her compassion for the wounded soldiers who reminded her of her dead brother. The third character entered into partisan life, led by her love for the student-poet who joined the guerrilla forces.

The emphasis on a stable patriarchal order in *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* is more or less akin to the persistent reinforcement of the family rhetoric in *The Wolmi Island*. In the films, traditional family values are commonly treated as the most powerful cultural force that provides the Korean people with a sense of 'oneness' as a nation. An ability to extend familial affection and responsibility toward non-family members in society is stressed in both films, as an important quality for Koreans in maintaining their nationhood. These films even suggest the notion of the family as the moral foundation with which to restore a unified nation in the future. In this sense, the representation of nationhood in the two films can be seen as an extension or variation of familyhood. In other words, nationhood is simply a form of family-

hood amplified to a societal level.

In handling the familial aspect of nationhood, however, one distinct difference exists between the two films: while the former puts heavy emphasis on the father-son relationship, the latter employs the motif of marriage as an indispensable element of plot development. As marriage often signifies a successful restoration of the lost order of a community, the broken dreams of marriage indicate the difficulty of resolving the conflicts of society. The motif of marriage introduces a note of hope in *The Southern Guerrilla Forces*. In the film, the prospect of a happy marriage is part of the humanistic portrayal of the guerrilla members. The protagonist T'ae promises Pak Minja, a fellow partisan, to marry her when the war is over. Their idea of a happy union means domestic peace based on the traditional patriarchal order. Dreamlike as it is, their imagined new family life recapitulates the aspirations of the guerrilla forces and ultimately their future vision of their nation.

#### IV. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of these two films confirms the existence of differences between North and South Korea in their perceptions of nationhood. Given the wide range of ramifications of their ongoing confrontation in nearly every aspect of their societies, we can safely conclude that their conflicting self-identities are the result of the 'politics of division.' *Wolmi Island* lucidly illustrates this point. In North Korea, there are party guidelines for films. Filmmakers are mandated to strictly follow these guidelines, which control everything from the choice of subject matter to the distribution of their finished works. The late Kim Il Sung left explicit instructions that each film should be well balanced in incorporating the elements of the anti-imperialist struggle during the Japanese colonial period and those of the 1950-3 national liberation war. The proportion of these elements, Kim stresses, deter-

mines the attitude of the film towards nationhood. Faithfully following these instructions, not only *The Wolmi Island*, but also all North Korean films, interpret the current national division as the consequences of foreign interference in Korean politics since the late nineteenth century. In their view, the American troops stationed in Korea epitomize the continued intervention of the superpowers. For North Korean filmmakers, Korean nationhood has been molded through the Korean people's struggle against foreign imperialists. For this reason, South Korea cannot claim historical legitimacy and is not regarded as the counterpart to North Korea: their 'real' opponent is the USA. This view is translated into their film language: North Korean films scarcely portray South Koreans in depth because they do not represent a *separate* political entity that deserves meaningful attention.

The partition of North and South Korea is a product of the Cold War, and the Korean people perceive themselves as its victims. Until the early 1970s, both sides had denied the existence of two Koreas, and there had been no direct contact between the two governments. Since the end of the Korean War, their ideological confrontation merely intensified. However, signs of change, feeble as they were, began to be discerned beginning in the 1970s. They were largely owing to the changing mood in the international community, general trends toward *detente* in North East Asia and the Sino-American rapprochement, in particular. Encouraged by these developments in the international political environment, the North and South Korean governments began to negotiate the possibility of recognizing the existence of two Koreas. The initial phase of their discussions did not bring about any result other than a nominal recognition of the status quo. Toward the late 1980s, however, both sides began to make efforts to legislate actual policies that would realize the idea of two Koreas. *The Southern Guerrilla Forces* can be seen as a concrete reflection of this change. At least in the South, films began to express doubts more openly on the political approach to the question of national identity. On the one hand, they re-



assess the validity of the Cold War ideology as the basis of their nationhood. On the other hand, they admit that any sincere attempt to discuss nationhood cannot but to be overshadowed by the reality of the political confrontation. This dilemma is not irrelevant to the fact that the antagonistic rivalry between the North and the South has not abated much despite occasional peace talks. The two governments still hold on to their mutually contradictory versions of the causes of the national division and also, to their incompatible plans for future reunification. All of these differences stem from the legitimacy problems of the current regimes.

This ongoing tension does not mean that there is no vision for a wider and more integrated version of nationhood in Korean films. As has been already pointed out, the longstanding values of Confucian family relationships, which are present in both of the films selected for this study, can provide a model for restoring their cultural continuity and rebuilding their unified nationhood. Benedict Anderson maintains that a nation is an imagined political community and that nationalism invents nations where they do not exist.<sup>13</sup> He also argues that the central factor in the conception of nationalism is a cultural system rather than a self-consciously held political ideology.<sup>14</sup> Despite the obvious existence of two polities on the peninsula, the majority of Koreans do not recognize the idea of two Koreas in the cultural realm. Their conviction of their ethnic and cultural homogeneity is so strong that the unification of the country is viewed as historically inevitable. Having stayed a single nation for the better part of their history, the Korean people in both the South and the North interpret the last fifty years as an unwanted arrangement forced upon them by the superpowers and as such, a temporary phase they should and will overcome in due time. This aspiration to retrieve their unity and solidarity as one nation is manifested in the persistent theme of treating one's neighbors

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13 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 6.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

as her/his own family members. The fostering of familial ties among the community is commonly found in *Wolmi Island* and *The Southern Guerrilla Forces*. In both films, a true hero is defined as one who has the courage to take action against any social evils in one's neighborhood. The films commonly emphasize empathy and respect as necessary conditions for the Korean people to achieve a sense of community, which would operate like a family, transcending the current internal dissension. They find a model for this in their pre-war cultural tradition.