The Ambivalence of the Nationalist Struggle in Deterritorialized Space: The Case of South Korea’s Manchurian Action Film

Jinsoo An

Abstract
This article introduces a body of South Korean films from the 1960s, known collectively under the subgenre of Manchurian action film, and examines its ambivalent representation of anticolonial nationalism. Set in Manchuria during the colonial period (1910–1945), these films conventionally portray Korean nationalists’ armed struggle against the Japanese imperial forces. This article attempts to contextualize Manchurian action films first by relating the genre to Korea’s modern historical discourse of Manchuria and social memory of the Korean diaspora experience. The advent of the genre is a cultural by-product of the expanding domestic film industry in the 1960s. It also corresponds to the growing concerns over the encroachment of Japanese cultural works by affirming aggressive anti-Japanese sentiment as a viable solution to the cultural crisis. The film The Continent on Fire adheres to this political scenario on the surface. However, its melodramatic excesses offer moments of reflection, raising questions of the dire cost of sacrifice and the efficacy of the continuing warfare. As

Jinsoo AN is assistant professor at the School of Design and Media of Hongik University in Korea. He has written on the topics related to South Korean cinema of the 1960s including representation of Christianity, historical drama, courtroom drama, as well as cult film reception. His current project focuses on representation of colonialism as historical past in South Korean cinema.
This article examines ambivalent discourses of nationalism that surround South Korea’s Manchurian action films. The Manchurian action film cycle emerged in the mid-1960s, revisiting and refashioning Korea’s colonial history. The cycle of films began with the arrival of Im Kwontaek’s *Farewell to Tumen River* (Tuman’gang’ chal ikkōra) in 1962, reached a brief apex from 1963 to 1965, and entered an eclipse in the early 1970s. Sin Sangok’s *The Wanderer* (Musukcha, 1968) and Yi Manhū’s *Break the Iron Chain* (Soesasūl kkunōra, 1971) demonstrate significant generic and thematic shifts from their predecessors. Kim Ji-woon’s 2008 film *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* (Choūnnom nappunnom isanghannom) is a contemporary successor of the late Manchurian action films where the generic influence of American Western was unmistakably prevalent. Along with the 1970s action films that frequently feature Hong Kong as the romantic backdrop of masculine romance and action, Manchurian action films occupy a unique place in the constellation of South Korean cinema, as they highlight the physical actions of masculine heroes as the principal means by which to figuratively render the colonial past and manage the era’s unique social and historical dilemma.

These films present the stories of Korean resistance guerillas and their heroic struggle against the powerful Japanese military force in Manchuria during the colonial period. Forced into exile, the nationalist warriors engage in fierce guerilla warfare and eventually succeed in defeating the insurmountable Japanese army through espionage operations, uncommon valor, and exceptional battle skills. The films uniformly project and highlight the militant struggle of anticolonialism in the multiethnic space of Manchuria and convey the continuing relevance and affirmation of a combative anti-Japanese nationalism in the shifting sociocultural landscape of South Korea in the 1960s. They consistently codified and expanded the cinematic vocabulary of nationalism by romanticizing the militant nationalist struggle against the Japanese.

Yet due to its melodramatic features, the film cycle also entails a certain degree of ambiguity and indeterminacy in figuring the dark times