The Lure of the Colonial Modern:
Tropes of Nostalgia in Recent Korean Films on Colonial Period

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Although this essay focuses on representation of colonial space in South Korean films, I start it out with a sequence from recent fantasy Chŏnuchi, a.k.a., The Taoist Wizard (Choi Dong-hoon, 2009) which raises interesting questions on the topic. The film's main narrative centers around the struggle between two sorcerers from mythical dynastic era who wage their battle in contemporary Seoul. Toward the end the protagonist Chŏnuch'i conjures up a magic portal to evade the evil sorcerer's attack. The latter, however, trails Chŏnuch'i relentlessly, passing through the portal himself to enter what appears to be an empty outdoor movie set. His entrance to this built environment brings a brief pause of action, as two sorcerers face each other in an deserted boulevard. A duel invokes final showdown of Hollywood Western film and builds anticipation for the impending clash.[1]

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[1] The enclosed space of movie set renders palpable the fatalistic aura of their struggle. The movie set regulates and contains the scope of sorcerers' action, but it simultaneously expands the ground for the ensuing exchange of spells and might. The computer generated imagery and effects are also used to enhance and accentuate the otherworldly nature of wizardly action and counteraction. In particular, special effects of spatial inversion, more specifically the transposition of vertical and horizontal frames, vertiginously renders the gravity-defying action of the mythic characters. As such the film follows what the "aesthetics of verticality" rather faithfully: a distinctive feature of CG-dominated Hollywood blockbuster films where the individual's agency to overcome physical law of nature through vertical movement and action finds its most distinctive manifestation. The film's action climax hence testifies the global circulation of Hollywood blockbuster aesthetics and its imaginative appropriation by the non-Hollywood filmmaking machinery. Kristen Whissel, "Tales of upward mobility: the new verticality in special effects," *Film Quarterly 59*, vol. 4, (Summer 2006)

Yet, the sequence distinguishes itself with an explicit reference to the colonial urban space.[2] The entire span of spectacular action operates against the constructed environment intended to approximate the urban milieu of Seoul during the colonial period. The boulevard is populated with familiar tropes and icons of the 1930s: trolley car, Japanese billboard signs and neoclassical-style buildings, all of which mark the signs of urban modernity of colonial Korea. Furthermore, this ersatz space exists in the background of action in order to highlight its spectacular eclipse. Chŏnuchi's visual traits exudes the measured expenditure of destruction as the focal point of attraction. The movie-set sequence also illustrates a certain reflexive logic of Korean blockbuster film, according to which the colonial urban imagery is brought to the surface only to register its magnificent annihilation.

The circuitry summoning of the colonial space begs several questions on its meanings in contemporary South Korean culture. How to map out blockbuster film's treatment of the colonial space in the larger cinematic discourse of the colonial period? What does such cinematic representation inform us about contemporary South Korea's popular imaginary of the era? Has the spatial imagery of the colonial period undergone changes over the years? If so, how does recent films like Chŏnuchi reflect, thematize and historicize these changes? My goal is to bring attention to the spatial tropes of the colonial representation in South Korean cinema and their historical transformations. I think they inform interesting and often-overlooked avenues to the layered meanings of the colonial imaginary that persist in South Korean culture.

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[2] To be sure, this movie set is used for another filmmaking practice within the film. I discuss implications of this self-reflexive aspect, i.e., movie-within-movie, in the conclusion.

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The early South Korean films that depict the colonial past tend to follow the precepts of renewed anti-colonial, anti-Japanese nationalism.[3] Two groups of films show this thematic tendency most clearly: the so-called "liberation-period films" capture the social euphoria of the nation's independence through valorization of the people's resistance against the colonial domination. Ch'oe In'gyu, arguably the most talented film director during the late colonial period, made three apologist films that best represent the political filmmaking trend of the period: Hurrah! For Freedom (1946), The Night before Independence Day (1948), An Innocent Criminal (1948) The nationalist fervor in filmmaking continued throughout the 1950s, engendering the rise of a new genre, i.e., biographical film, that focused on the heroic actions of the past patriots. In particular, the late 1950s witnessed the maturity of the genre with the release of several formidable works. Young Syngman Rhee and Independence Club (Sin Sangok, 1959), Nameless Stars (Kim Kangyun, 1959), and Yu Kwansun (Yun Pongch'un, 1959) expanded the thematic compass and formal complexity of cinematic nationalism, producing significant impact on the ways in which subsequent Korean films rendered the colonial occupation as the period of the nation's subjugation and resistance.

Overall, these films of nationalist orientation dramatize the colonial period as that of unlawful and violent occupation. The nationalist action emerges against the backdrop of total domination and subjugation of Korea. This characterization may entail the impression that the cinematic works are nothing but cultural manifestations of the established political agenda. The films that stress the anti-colonial struggle, according this this view, are mere conveyers of the rising anti-colonial nationalism of the era. Such appraisal could potentially close off more rigorous discussion on the specifics of the colonial representation, but it nevertheless raises a new kind of questions. Is this aura of languor or austerity an textual effect of thematic repetition and regurgitation? Or, does the drab ambiance in films have to do with the way in which Korea's colonial subjugation is depicted visually?

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[3] To avoid confusion, I use the term early South Korean cinema in this paper to refer to the films from 1945 to roughly 2000. As I argue later in the essay, the release of *YMCA Baseball Team* (Kim Hyŏnsŏk, 2002) marks a significant shift in configuration of colonial space in South Korean cinema.

By posing the latter question, I would like to shift the center of debate from the political content to the spatial trope. More specifically, I approach the subject of space, more specifically urban space, as a key component of colonial representation in South Korean cinema. Although the disfavored appraisal may appear to be a response to the films' treatment of the political content, i.e., incessant valorization of nationalist struggle, I think that key issue is not the manifest politics in content but spatial representation in form. How the nationalist discourse is grounded and located in spatial terms deserves attention. It is after all the workings of the formal properties of cinema that made the anti-colonial struggle visible, comprehensible and convincing to viewers in the first place.

The emphasis on spatial tropes of nationalism invites us to reflect the subject of colonialism as a representational problem of a particular kind. The colonial period in general marks a kind of rupture or conundrum in nationalist historiography. How to make it an exception to the history of nation requires various rhetorical and narrative strategies which at the end make the nation's permanence and continuity intact and essential. South Korean films from the early period appear to perform a similar role.

But, I would like to note that specifying the site of resistance against the colonial power was an hard act to follow for Korean filmmakers. Unlike history in written discourse, film shows the event and action of the colonial period in plausible spatial setting. Whereas the written discourse of history may abstract and generalize the colonial occupation, cinematic discourse specifies and concretize such domination on screen. Korean filmmakers had to map out the existence of resistant Korean nation against the scopic regime of the Japanese colonial power. That is, they had to carve out the porous and marginal sites within the regime of total domination so that the nationalist resistance can be located, imaged and imagined. The discourse of the nationalist struggle could be made legible and comprehensible through conjuring of alternative spatiality.

One of the most conspicuous features concerning the colonial representation is the systematic exclusion of Japanese linguistic references from the colonial urban street and place. Since the liberation, Japanese linguistic properties either in spoken form or in literal signs disappeared from Korean film screen almost completely until recent years.[4] Although such sign of Japanese culture may appear to be elemental, it actually registers far significant challenge to the nationalist representation of the colonial space. The visibility of Japanese signs do not simply signify the limited indication of Japanese culture in presence. They embody the lager visual matrix or network of the colonial modernity at large in Korea. As such, the censorship measures on the Japanese literal signs represent the greater endeavor to overcome block and hide the already penetrated and expanded network of the colonial domination in Korea.

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[4] It is not too difficult to imagine the cultural logic behind such draconic measure of suppression. The Japanese policy to assimilate Koreans into Japanese during the height of militarism created intense resistance and enmity among Koreans, which then found the channels of expression in the form of cinematic censorship after the liberation. The blockage of Japanese linguistic and literary references subsequently led to an stereotype of Japanese in post-colonial Korean cinema. The actors who play Japanese characters had to speak their dialogues in Korean but with slight linguistic traits that allude to Japanese otherness, including intonation or accent variations. A particular headgear, i.e., flat cap, has often been used to register the wearer's Japanese ethnicity.

Concurrently, the films that depict the colonial urban space show some willful disinterest towards the traffic and network of modernity brought on by the colonial power. Missing in its rendition of colonial Seoul is the curious gaze on the modern technological means and mechanism which were central to lure of the urban experience. Even when the films feature modern traffic sites like train station, it often lacks the aura of novelty or uniqueness often associated with modern technologies.[5] Transportation, communication and information which signal the compression of time and space hardly occupy the center of attention in cinematic rendition of the urban experience. They fail to attract the desired or fascinated gaze of Korean subject.

South Korean films therefore are out of joint with the conventional optics of urban modernity. Early modern cinema, to borrow Kristin Whissel's term, was a part of "a broader network of multiple forms of traffic," as it reflect and contributed to "networks and grids that linked individual technologies into expanding systems."[6] The South Korean films until 2000s do not reflect upon this sort of modern development in the past: that of traffic and network which necessarily implicate the expanding domination of the colonial power.[7] Instead, they seem careened off from the perceptual mode of modernity: the thesis was integral to cinema studies inquiries onto the early cinema. In short, the system of traffic, network and new technologies do not receive any meaningful treatment or focus in South Korea's filmic rendition of the colonial period.

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[5] A comparison of two Sin Sangok's films would be helpful us understand this contrasting characteristics. Both *Houseguest and My Mother* (1961) and *The Remembered Shadow of the Yi Dynasty* (1967) feature the parting of lovers in and around train station platform. The first film, which is set vaguely in post-colonial Korea, registers resignation and sorrow of the male protagonist through the domineering presence of train, the latter film set in the colonial period shows no such emotive investment towards the train. The station platform is devoid of charged emotional substance or ambiance here; it is as alienating as any place in urban Seoul under surveillance of the colonial power.

[6] Kristen Whissel, *Picturing American Modernity; Traffic, Technology and the Silent Cinema* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2008), 9

[7] That said, the post-colonial South Korean cinema shows the most contrasting characteristic from the colonial cinema in its rendition of the colonial urban space. The colonial films demonstrate all the

The negative space of austerity filled the gap in the representation of colonial urban space, instead. By negative space, I am referring to dark passages, back alleys, underground meeting places and abandoned houses which appear predominantly in the cinematic imagery of the colonial urban setting. Presented in the manner that always underscores the dark and empty milieu, these favored sites can be characterized as the de-centered and centrifugal space where the illicit and subversive actions of Koreans can be imagined and imaged. In contradistinction to the traffic-ridden boulevard space, these hidden and desert areas therefore visually mark the areas beyond the presupposed surveillance and control of the colonial power. They also illustrate how nationalism can be comprehended as a distinctive mode of spatial representation and its practice. The liberation films like Hurrah! For Freedom and The Night Before Independence are earliest instances of this representational pattern where nearly all important actions take place in dark, drab and dilapidated places.

I must note, however, that the spatial practice in biographic films differ substantially from the precepts of negative space. The distinction derives from the fact that many of these works are set against the time of annexation, i.e., transition from the dynastic era to the colonial occupation, and they therefore resort to the spatialization of the social relations under lingering dynastic regime. In biographic films, the open public space like

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hallmarks of urban modernity with its favored attention to novelty, movement, fascination and spectacle of urban experience, as manifest in *Sweet Dream* (Yang Chunam, 1936). In contrast, the postcolonial cinema hardly conveys signs of interest towards the perceptual mode of modernity under the colonial regime. The austerity thoroughly dominates the latter.

market place and plaza occupy special significance because the nationalist consciousness emerges out of intense social interaction between the leader and people. But, the trend eclipsed as biographic films were replaced in the 1960s by new genres like action and espionage films that refashioned the narrative trajectory of anti-colonial struggle. The tropes of negative space returned to South Korean cinema's spatial practice of nationalism in the 1960s and onwards.

The overall ambiance and characteristics of the negative space deserve close attention. These sites are embedded with odd sense of emptiness and shallowness. Most actions of the nationalist agents take place during night time around these places, but their presence in these places are essentially transitory, making the space deprived of any sense of full occupation. In fact, coldheartedness and treacherousness are often pervasive in dilapidated passages. Charged with the sense of centrifugal energy, these transitory passages engender the anxiety and alienation. Hence the negative spatial attributes do not simply refer to the contour of physical environment; they inform psychologized traits of the alternative space as well.

The neighborhood space is also characteristically deprived of the aura of proximity or interaction among neighbors. In fact, the back alley in traditional residential places like Chongno area hardly features local residents, passersby or on-lookers in the area. The austerity and stasis surrounding these places come into a sharp relief with the aura of nostalgia and sensory stimulation often found in literary works. For instance, Kajiyama Toshiyuki offers vivid and lively description of the shabby tavern in back alley of Chongno in one of his novellas, which shows the exotic fascination that Japanese subject develops for the locale site.[8] In contrast, South Korean films turn the spatial ambiance around to assign the air of languor and inertia to these places. While shady back alleys may convey the site of alterity through its remoteness from the networked site of boulevard space, the austere ambiance also reflects the certain charged danger and threat, drawn from the potential intrusion of the colonial gaze and surveillance from outside. The effort to curb this colonial gaze, it seems to me, has eventuated the configuration of the indigenous locales stifled with darkness, passivity, listlessness and void. Collective social interaction is hardly visualized in these places as a result.

This negation of the colonial modernity through spatial practice has left an protracted impact on the subsequent cultural productions. The penchant for the secluded and closeted space persisted for several decades. The spatial tropes of void functioned like parameter for narrative possibilities and development, circumscribing what could be permitted and prohibited in cinematic rendition of the colonial period. Despite generic and thematic variations, the convention of negative space dominated South Korean cinema quite rigidly, often framing and defining the terms of narrative development and thematic pattern.

Many South Korean films feature kisaeng as a cultural icon of the colonial imaginary. A figure of kisaeng often represents the stable site for Korean male subject to project his masculine power and virility. Yet, I submit that what makes kisaeng figure so culturally significant in cinematic representation is the abode where she dwells in: the place where entertainment service is carried out for her clients. Whereas many colonial photography showcases kisaeng figure against the favored tourist destinations like palace, filmic productions always show the same figure stuck in dead-end places. Kisaeng houses therefore parallel the aforementioned negative space in that they are oddly self-contained world, devoid of any sense of connection to the traffic-ridden modern world outside. The fatalistic ambiance surrounding kisaeng figure therefore owes much to the coordinates of the negative space to which her abode subscribes thematically.

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[8] The following passage conveys the intense sensory stimulation of Chongno back alley in the work; "Such a small shabby tavern would be one of the best places in which to enjoy typical fold food and drink. The environment in any alley was entirely different from that of the main street with its trams. The humid air in the dark, winding, narrow alley stank of filthy gutters and stale urine." Kajiyama Toshiyuki, *The Clan Records: Five Stories of Korea*, trans. Yoshiko Dykstra, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 117.

The 1968 horror film Public Cemetery Under the Moon articulates the conundrum of spatial confinement meticulously. Here, the female protagonist's tragic fate derives specifically from her inability to move beyond the confines of the residential place which looks strikingly similar to conventional kisaeng house. Furthermore, her kisaeng career in the past, which was intended to support her brother's nationalist campaign, is brought up as a dreadful stigma in the marriage, leading her to be abandoned by her husband. When she returns as a vengeful female ghost carrying out her resentment toward others, people in the house attempt to find solutions within the confines of the abode, never reaching traffic urban urban sector for solution. It is as if the outside world, i.e., boulevard space of traffic and network, remains inconceivable or unthinkable for Korean subject, even they they are subject to nightmarish terror and violence.

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An important shift in spatial configuration of the colonial space occurred in the past decade as South Korean films began to show its thematic preoccupation with the nation's history. The revisionist impulse to re-visit and re-write modern history is prevalent in recent films, and the subject of colonialism was no exception to the rule. In particular, the release of YMCA Baseball Team in 2003 brought forth new sensibility and imagination toward the colonial past. It would be premature, however, to claim that this new body of films diminished the gravity of anti-Japanese nationalism from the thematic equation. They do not question the assumed righteousness of anti-colonial struggle; rather, they adhere to this precept quite faithfully.

What is fundamentally different from the antecedent works is the outright fascination for that which signals new and modern in urban setting. This energy manifests in various topics that encompasse modern sports (YMCA Baseball Team, Yŏktosan/Rikidozan, My Way); aviation skills (Blue Swallow); broadcasting technology (Radio Days); nightclub culture (Modern Boy); medical science (Epitaph) and crime investigation (Once Upon a Time, Shadow Murder). Unlike the antecedent works, no protagonist is directly involved in the subversive activities of anti-colonial struggle from the outset. They are portrayed almost always as non-ideological figures at the beginning, showing no interest in the areas other than their personal penchant and individual development. It is only later in the narrative where their individualistic concerns do not find the room for autonomy, but instead affected by the politics of colonial domination, then these protagonists assume and participate in the cause of the anti-colonial struggle.

Spatially, these changes are rendered through a clear shift in focus from the sterile negative space like dark back alley and kisaeng house to brightly illuminated traffic space of urban center. This "boulevard" space is densely populated with urban strollers who are in constant movement. It is also the bustling public space where network of transportation and telecommunication is not only in place but gains momentum of expansion and concentration. Furthermore, these objects receive the fascinated gaze of the urban onlookers and characters. Often, the films' formal properties like editing and composition are in place to deepen the viewer's emotional identification with the protagonist and his/her fascination with new novelties.

Yet, the unassuming passion for the new could potentially lead to valorization of the colonial modernity and by extension Japanese domination. How do these films then deal with or circumvent the thorny question of colonial modernity in which the autonomous space for colonial subject is inherently limited, if not impossible? Once again, this colonial question can be productively reframed in terms of urban space. While introducing the gaze of fascination for the advent of urban modernity, these recent films also foreground and thematize this development by resorting to a particular spatial and representational strategy. This practice involves re-configuration of sports activity arena as pivotal public sphere for Koreans. YMCA Baseball Team, the film that spearheaded the new cinematic rendition of colonial space, is exemplary in its articulation of the collective sports activity. The film chronicles ordeals and trepidations concerning the formation of Korea's 1st baseball team at the beginning of the 20th century. The team's continuous success, however, quickly comes to a halt as the Japanese authority closes down the practice field for military training. Although the loss of practice field alludes to the nationalist theme of sovereign territory, the film ultimately frames the conflict in terms of sports competition in which Korean team defeats the Japanese counterpart.

The film underscores the game field as the absolute space of rules and regulations. Sports competition brings pertinence and significance to Korean spectators in the arena, for it presupposes the system of impartiality, fairness and objectivity. In this world of rigid regulation, Japanese counterpart no longer claims the upper hand of domination; instead, they subscribes to the established rules and regulations as well. The fairness of competition hence equalizes Japanese and Korean. Concurrently, it carves out the imaginary social space, for Korean subject can claim prowess and superiority outside the confines of colonial space. More importantly, the film emphasizes the advent of collective spectatorship as the central thematic feature of sports activity. Baseball games are situated specifically within the matrix of collective and concentrated gaze, around which the formal network of horizontal membership and participation comes into a shape.

The operation of attentive gaze appears to be an important structural factor of urban spatiality in subsequent films. A theme of sports competition reverberates in Blue Swallow, Yŏkdosan and My Way, although team match is largely replaced by individual competition. In this shifting coordinates of competition, a Japanese counterpart performs an important role to affirm both the fairness of the rule-governing system, and Korean character's unique place in it. For instance, the Japanese woman aviator in Blue Swallow brings forth affirmation on Korean aviator's superior skills and talent through her gaze of sympathy and respect. Her act of looking cements the validity and sustainment of the space of rule and fairness, which had been threatened by the ethnic discrimination against Korean protagonist.

Yet, the effort to secure ground for autonomous space could only go so far. The network and traffic of the colonial modernity remains in alienation for Korean subject despite the endeavor to galvanize gaze of attention, which in turn promulgates fraternity. This inherent dilemma manifests most clearly in Modern Boy, the film that features the ambivalent political conversion of a pro-Japanese government official. The film's protagonist is a dandy urbanite working at Government General of Korea. He utilizes his inside knowledge on urban development in Seoul to benefit handsomely. He is not an outsider of the colonial gaze; rather, he is within the colonial government's spatial control over urban sectors. His affinity with the colonial power, however, comes to a halt as he himself becomes implicated in subversive terrorist plot. Moreover, his courtship with the cabaret singer triggers an brutal counter-insurgence measure from his old Japanese prosecutor friend. The loss of control becomes acutely clear in the last sequence where his endeavor to carry out assassination of Japanese officials results in embarrassing failure. Acting out a gesture of protest immediately brings an incarceration and punishment. What the film chronicles is the slow undoing of the protagonist's confidence over the boulevard space in Seoul. The failure then forces him to walk into the familiar trope of negative space, this time the drab underground hideout for the terrorist group. This return signifies the fundamental limit and lacunae of the colonized subject in vast space of colonial Seoul.

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The survey of the colonial space in South Korean cinema is helpful to ponder the odd artificiality concerning the colonial imagery in Chŏnuchi. The shallow ambiance of the movie set does more than exposing the environment's constructed nature. Rather, the film extends the superficiality of the spatial imagery that had already been in place. There is some inherently empty aura of the colonial urban imagery that the film siphons off and organizes effectively to further accentuate the spectacle of destruction. What is at stake is the presupposed artificiality of the urban space that had existed in the first place as an central feature of cinematic representation of the colonial past.

But, this reading of movie set's semantic features takes us only so far. There is another dramatic component in the film's coda which complicates assessment of the colonial imagery. After destruction of the movie set, which constitutes the film's central attraction, Chŏnuchi returns to the site to showcase the making of a espionage-melodrama film. It features a cross-dressed Ing'yŏng, Chŏnuchi's love interest, and her assassination of a Japanese collaborator at boulevard. The ersatz colonial urban space is reconstructed for its proper use: to render the affirmation of the nationalist spirit in South Korea's cinema.

I claim that the assassination of the pro-Japanese collaborator is symbolically crucial to bring the closure to the narrative that jettison several temporalities. The pan-historical story of Korean wizardry and fantasy seems to arrive at plausible conclusion through the nationalist cause for action. At the same time, the self-reflexive sequence also entails its own undermining, for the manner in which this segment is rendered appears too conventional and excessive to register any sincere meanings. The coda that follows this dramatic enactment of nationalist passion is perhaps the most ambivalent moment in the film. It shows Chŏnuchi and In'gyoung in Southeast Asian resort beach, where both experience the strange sense of deja vu.

The film's coda can be interpreted as a desperate attempt to open up a new space, now extra-national one, to cement and masquerade the drab aura of nationalism. But, it also shows certain limit in South Korean cinema's historical imagination. It makes a mockery at the flat imagery of the colonial history, but in doing so, it ends up exposing the edifice of closure as well. Two protagonists' conundrum then articulates the problem of representation all too effectively; they are uncertain of their place and time. What is unique about the film is that by going all the trajectory of anti-colonial tropes and imagery, it then reaches the point of confusion and exhaustion. This is perhaps the unavoidable consequence of the colonial imaginary that has been defined in terms of negation and void for too long. How South Korean cinema will offer different terms and tropes of colonial space remains to be seen.