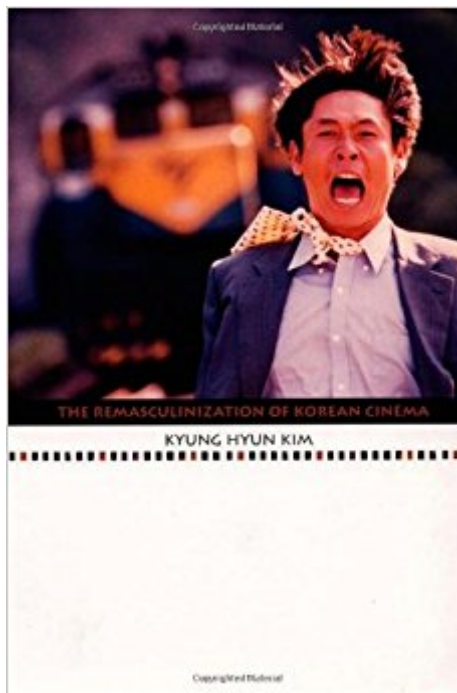




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The Remasculinization Of Korean Cinema (Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, And Society)



Synopsis

In one of the first English-language studies of Korean cinema to date, Kyung Hyun Kim shows how the New Korean Cinema of the past quarter century has used the trope of masculinity to mirror the profound sociopolitical changes in the country. Since 1980, South Korea has transformed from an insular, authoritarian culture into a democratic and cosmopolitan society. The transition has fueled anxiety about male identity, and amid this tension, empowerment has been imagined as remasculinization. Kim argues that the brutality and violence ubiquitous in many Korean films is symptomatic of Korea's on-going quest for modernity and a post-authoritarian identity. Kim offers in-depth examinations of more than a dozen of the most representative films produced in Korea since 1980. In the process, he draws on the theories of Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, Gilles Deleuze, Rey Chow, and Kaja Silverman to follow the historical trajectory of screen representations of Korean men from self-loathing beings who desire to be controlled to subjects who are not only self-sufficient but also capable of destroying others. He discusses a range of movies from art-house films including *To the Starry Island* (1993) and *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (1996) to higher-grossing, popular films like *Whale Hunting* (1984) and *Shiri* (1999). He considers the work of several Korean auteurs—Park Kwang-su, Jang Sun-woo, and Hong Sang-su. Kim argues that Korean cinema must begin to imagine gender relations that defy the contradictions of sexual repression in order to move beyond such binary struggles as those between the traditional and the modern, or the traumatic and the post-traumatic.

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Customer Reviews

“Kyung Hyun Kim’s book is a roller coaster ride through modern South Korean masculinity in the cinema. At once unflinching and sympathetic, Kim’s groundbreaking study traces Korean permutations on the gendered imagery of castration and rape and the impossible condition of postcolonial masculinity, caught between incommensurable values and demands.” —Chris Berry, coeditor of *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia* “This is an important book. There is a long tradition of scholarship investigating the representation of women in Asian cinema. This has included some consideration of Korean film, which more often than not finds the representations of Korean women wanting in one way or another. It took Kyung Hyun Kim’s writing to turn my attention to the rich complexity of the men. His focus on masculinity—coinciding with the turn to the issue by major feminist film theorists—simply makes perfect sense. His is a particularly compelling contribution to the study of Asian cinema, but is simultaneously in dialogue with all manner of gender studies.” —Abe Mark Nornes, University of Michigan

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The thesis of this book is quite simple. Korea in the 1980s and the 1990s was a post-traumatic society. The figure of the father had been shattered by its authoritarian leaders, who ended in a grotesque finale (see *The President’s Last Bang*, 2005, about the assassination of Park Chung-hee) or, in the case of Chun Doo-hwan, lacked hair (*The President’s Barber*, 2004). The double trauma of colonization by Japan and fratricide murder during the Korean War had deprived the Korean people of its identity. The sins of the fathers were visited upon the sons, and the *Memories of Murder* (2003) still lingered. The ritual murder of the father could not unite the community of brothers as they stood divided between North and South (*Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War*, 2004), between sons of patriots and sons of collaborationists (Thomas Ahn Jung-geun, 2004). The films quoted above, all produced in the 2000s, could resolve the tensions and dilemma

of overcoming trauma by representing them on screen. By contrast, films produced in the 1980s and 1990s could only repress the representation of the primal scene, generating frustration and anger. In psychoanalytic terms, this is the difference between "working through", the positive engagement with trauma that can lead to its ultimate resolution, and "acting out" or compulsively repeating the past. Failure to come to terms with the representation of trauma transformed men into hysteric subjects. Simply put, men were deprived of their manhood. They were constantly alienated and emasculated by the political and economic forces of the day. In order to recover their potency, they resorted to violence: hence the brutality and violent acts ubiquitous in many Korean films. Here the author of *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* sees a sharp distinction between films produced in the 1980s and in the following decade. If the 1980s was a period of male masochism for Korean cinema, by the 1990s men freed themselves from anxiety and trauma by resorting to sadism. The two forms of violence must be clearly distinguished. Both the masochist and the sadist find pleasure in pain—pain of the self, pain of the other. But the sadist aims at subverting the law; the masochist wants to emphasize its extreme severity. The common thread that unites them is their misogynistic tendency towards women: very often, the victim of men's effort to regain their manhood is the woman. The films from the period were solely centered on male characters. They were depicted as pathetic losers or as dumb brutes, and the movies acted out their masculinity crisis without any regard for the opposite sex. Women only functioned as passive objects oscillating between the twin images of the mother and the whore. What is absent in these movies from these two decades is a positive female character, let alone a feminist plot. The thesis of remasculinization as a way to recover from trauma is not new. It has been advanced by American cultural critics in the context of the post-Vietnam war. The trauma of defeat, changing gender roles, and economic uncertainties generated a masculinity crisis that led to alienation, retrenchment, and gynophobia. In America, the renegotiation of masculinity took the form of the lone warrior culture, illustrated in blockbuster films of the 1980s such as *Rambo*, *Die Hard*, or *Dirty Harry*. What is specific about South Korea's post trauma recovery is the political and economic context. It must be remembered that the end of authoritarian dictatorship and the inception of democracy in Korea occurred only in 1987. Before that date, films still had to deal with heavy censorship, and protest against the military government was disallowed. Unlike General Park Chung-hee however, General Chun Doo-hwan, his successor, recognized the importance of leisure and consumer spending as a way to assuage the masses and compensate the dispossession of their voting rights. He authorized the production of a wave of sleazy movies that found their way into theaters, while political expressions were strictly censored. The hope was that consumerism and pornography would make

people forget about democracy and postpone their hope for a more representative government. But economic development wasn't enough to ease the pain: in fact, it generated more ailments and frustrations. That Korea's compressed economic development was traumatic is often overlooked. The "miracle of the Han river" left aside many victims and outcasts. Korea bumped into modernity at full speed, and without security belts or social safety nets. Urban alienation and economic marginalization is the theme from many Korean films from the 1980s and 1990s. In *Chilsu and Mansu* (1988), two billboard painters living on day jobs climb to a high-rise building in downtown Seoul to privately demonstrate their pent-up frustration. The public from the street below mistakes their aimless private rant for a public demonstration, and the police intervenes to arrest them. In *Whale Hunting* (1984), the disheartened protagonist, rejected by his college girlfriend, wanders the streets where he befriends a beggar and hangs out with a mute prostitute looking for a home. His sexual anxiety is displayed through farcical situations as in the opening scene where he dreams he is standing naked before a laughing public, or when he hugs the bare breasts of a naked statue in a museum gallery. In all the movies covered in the book, the wanderings of the male character invoke the traumatic losses of pastoral communities (urban dramas), homes (road movies), faithful wives and asexual mothers (sex scenes), and memory and sanity (social problem films). Some artist moviemakers attempted to allude to the political by way of the sexual. One chapter is dedicated to Jang Sun-woo's movies (*The Age of Success*, *To You From Me*, *Bad Movie*) which have generated far more controversy than works of any other director of the New Korea Cinema. Jang Sun-woo's characters are self-loathing, pathetic men described as sexually frustrated, impotent, and castrated. Crude sex scenes are ubiquitous and are meant to disturb and to unsettle more than to titillate or sexually arouse. For Jang, these frail masculinities are reflective of the unresolved social crisis in South Korea that began with the elimination of the political dictatorship, when the longtime president was abruptly assassinated in 1979, and the ensuing period of political unrest. The sexual and the political are closely intertwined: in *To You, From Me*, Jang Sun-woo portrays an underground enterprise that releases pornographic books under the guise of subversive North Korean communist manifestos—both are banned materials and therefore fetishized. But his anarchist, nihilistic streak is perhaps best exemplified by *Bad Movie*, described as "one of the most daring and experimental feature films produced in Korea," shot without set direction, script, or production plan. The movie shows raw, crude images of sex and violence, loosely motivated by a chronicle of young runaway teenagers engaging in street motorcycle races, extortion, rape, and murder. As Kyung Hyun Kim comments, "it is as close to the real as it can get, disorienting and discomforting even the contemporary art-film

viewers who are familiar with violence aestheticized in cinemas of Wong Kar-wai, Quentin Tarantino, and Kitano Takeshi. Other directors were more overtly political. Films about the Korean War (Chang Kil-su's *Silver Stallion*, Yi Kwang-mo's *Spring is My Hometown*, and Im Kwon-Taek's *The Taebaek Mountains*) present a different way of remembering the war, one that doesn't rest on the diabolization of the North Korean enemy but rather insists on cracks within the South-Korean-American alliance: partisan guerrilla in the Cholla Province, yanggongju prostitutes serving US soldiers, internal conflicts within a community or a family, absent fathers and raped women. Here again attention focuses on men who have lost their virility and authority during the war, and who turn to violence and to sadism—especially against women—to reclaim their masculinity. Other episodes of Korea's postwar political history are also revisited. *A Single Spark* concerns the life and death of labor union martyr Chon Tae-il, while *A Petal* depicts the 1980 Kwangju uprising. These are sites that resist both remembrance and representation, components of a post-traumatic identity that can only act out what is still too painful to work through. It is also noticeable that these two movies targeted primarily foreign audiences at international film festivals. Their directors, Park Kwang-su and Jang Sun-woo, could take political and financial risks because they had already built international reputations. The years the two films were released, 1995 and 1996, also had democracy firmly entrenched since the transition of the end-1980s and the election of the first civilian president in 30 years in 1992. The reception of Korean movies was also conditioned by their conditions of production and distribution. Most movies covered in *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* are low-budget films directed by authors who aimed at a limited audience and assembled production teams based on personal acquaintances and on-the-job training. But they are also films that have stimulated local commercial interest in a country that valued cinephile club screening and intellectual consumption of movies that would have been commercially unviable in the West. It should also be noted that the renaissance of Korean cinema in the 1980s and 1990s occurred not because of, but rather in spite of the role of the government. Import quota restrictions diminished during the 1980s, and Korean filmmakers had to aim for the creation of art cinema without the aid of state subsidy. Not only were public funds denied for Korean films, but also were bank loans, forcing filmmakers to seek alternative financial resources and credit. No Korean filmmaker could therefore neglect the box office. For some of them, the international circuit of international film festivals and arthouse movie theaters provided a source of legitimacy and revenue. Despite adverse conditions, Korea is the only nation during recent history that has regained its domestic audience after losing them to Hollywood products. Art movies from the 1980s and 1990s paved the way to the Korean blockbusters of the end-1990s and 2000s that

attracted massive domestic audiences and conquered foreign markets. They also made it sure that a market space for independent movies continued to exist in Korea, as evidenced by the career of director Kim Ki-duk whose productions closely complement the movies reviewed in the book. Kyung Hyun Kim mobilizes the categories of national cinema as a genre and of the director as auteur to develop his film criticism. He focuses on a segment of Korea's filmic production in the 1980s and 1990s that was sometimes touted as the New Korean Cinema by film critics. This is in accordance with the conventions of cinema studies, which treats national cinemas as discrete entities and delineates periods or currents characterized by a particular style or narrative. The master narrative of the New Korean Cinema is the masculine recovery from trauma, a movement that Kyung Hyun Kim sees as problematic because it is based on the exclusion of women. As he argues, Korean cinema has yet to produce a movie with a female plot, let alone a feminist one. The representation of woman is still caught between the mother and the whore. Another characteristic of the New Korean Cinema is that it had to strictly play within the commercial rules of an open marketplace, which meant competing with Hollywood films distributed freely across the nation, and could not completely abandon the conventions of popular filmmaking. The author sees this commercial exposure both as a factor in the success of the New Korean Cinema and the reason of its demise: once aligned with Hollywood standards, Korean cinema lost its shine and became just a niche cultivating subgenres in a global marketplace.

After the testosterone-fueled rebirth of (South) Korean cinema in the '80s and '90s, only in the last few years have serious, critically rigorous books on the subject begun to appear in English in dribs and drabs. Kim Kyung-hyun's *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* is the most theoretically sophisticated to appear so far, and is must reading for all crit-theory heads wondering what the hell has been going on in South Korean society in the past few decades--especially on the big screen, which has been dominated by brooding, raging men for quite some time now. Kim's focus is on the works of directors of the New Korean Cinema such as Park Kwang-su, Jang Sun-woo, Hong Sang-soo, Lee Chang-dong and Im Kwon-taek. The book's central argument is that the "master narrative" of the New Korean Cinema as it evolved from the start of the 1980s to the new millennium has been to trace a shift from portrayals of ineffectual males defined by phallic lack and a penchant for masochism to "post-traumatic males" struggling to recuperate a resplendent, emerging subjectivity who are often violent and sadistic. In layman's terms, I guess this means that if you're a Kim Ki-dok protagonist, beating the crap out of your woman is a way of finding or own inner Iron John, or whatever. Overall, I liked this book and found it provocative. It is something of a cliché by

now to complain about the misogyny of Korean cinema; it's almost like complaining that the sky is blue. This book offers a close and quite sympathetic examination of WHY so many of these men are misogynistic in the first place, which is a productive, positive approach to a very unproductive, negative problem. Kim often deploys psychoanalytic theory and concepts in tackling these issues, which I have no problem with, except to say that I wonder if the Western concepts developed by Freud, Lacan et al are so universal, and so neatly applied to Eastern societies; this is not a question that Kim cares to ask, nor one that I can answer myself, either. My problem with Kim's approach is that the use of psychoanalytic terms and concepts is often rushed and cursory. Too many times, statements like "this is an example of fetishistic disavowal" or "this is an instance of a desire for a return to the preoedipal stage" are made, without saying more clearly WHY or HOW it is an example of fetishistic disavowal, etc. One wants more lucid clarification and application of the theory, lest the text begin to appear gratuitous in its use of jargon and complex terminology. Not everyone reading this book will have completed graduate seminars on Lacan, and even if they have there is no excuse for laziness here. I also have to question Kim's overly selective approach in presenting and analyzing the "master narrative" of the New Korean Cinema. It often seems that films were left out that might undermine the overarching thesis. According to Kim, there is no space in New Korean Cinema for female subjectivity to explore and represent itself outside of a subsidiary relation to males, but this is just not true. A film like *Girls' Night Out* (1999), for instance, explores the sexual subjectivity of three modern Korean women from their own perspectives. I also found a certain high-brow disdain for popular or overly commercial films in the book, which is also limiting. A film like *My Wife is a Gangster* (2001), while indeed "crassly commercial," offered a fresh, original way of presenting one modern, independent woman's struggle to balance life in the public world of work with the demands of the private world of home. Indeed, most of the films discussed in this book are art-house auterurist works; a more complex analysis of the state of Korean film in the '80s and '90s might have been less condescending towards and dismissive of such "low-brow" fare. Then there are the more curious omissions, like the films of Kim Ki-dok or Jang Sun-woo's *Lies*, which offer rich material for the subject at hand. On closer reflection, though, Jang's *Lies* perhaps undermines Kim's overall argument. After all, if the male protagonist in the film displays overt masochistic tendencies, is this a regression to the male masochism of the early '80s that supposedly had been overcome by the late '90s, or is Jang offering an alternate view: liberating the male protagonist from his own domineering male subjectivity entirely--at the hands of an 18-year-old woman, no less? The exclusion of the films of Kim Ki-dok and others is explained by the fact that they were made too recently to be included. How can crucial films made in 1999 or 2001 not be included in a book

published in 2004? Is academia really that slow? I might also note that a book that complains about the lack of female directors in South Korea has no right to do so when it ignores a film like Yim Soon-rye's *Three Friends* (1996), an early notable exception to the rule of male directors in the New Korean Cinema. But again, a closer look at *Three Friends* may have undermined the book's argument further, since the three male protagonists are also quite ineffectual and reminiscent of the "weak" male characters of the early '80s. Yet in *Three Friends*, this is viewed as positive and liberating, rather than a denial of full male subjectivity; indeed, one of the characters enters a gay relationship at the end, which offers a subversive contrast to the dominant (and male-dominated) heterosexuality of the extremely patriarchal New Korean Cinema. In others words, this is a heady book that falls just short by complaining of a lack of sexual and gendered diversity in Korean cinema, yet is guilty of suppressing such diversity somewhat itself. Even now, Korean cinema is undergoing profound, radical changes in its representations of gender and sexuality. I look forward to a sequel to *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* that examines all these current diverse changes as provocatively and intensely as it has done here.

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