

Reimagining History:
Melodrama, Nationalism, Trauma, and Catharsis
in Three South Korean Historical Films

A Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explores how three contemporary South Korean historical films, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *War of the Arrows*, and *The Fortress*, serve as vehicles for catharsis and reflection on collective trauma. Melodrama is not just a narrative style but a mode of analysis and will be used to unpack how these films construct nationalist narratives, evoke catharsis, and shape collective memory and national identity. Through analysis of key scenes and narrative structures, this thesis will demonstrate how these films engage modern audiences by presenting fictional or fictionalized historical stories with themes of resilience, sacrifice, and national identity. By examining the emotional dynamics and cinematic techniques employed in these films, this thesis explores how the three films evoke empathy and solidarity, ultimately offering viewers a cathartic experience that resonates with broader cultural and historical narratives.

These films focus on pivotal moments in Korean history such as the Imjin War and the Second Qing Invasion of Joseon. Through a detailed analysis, it will become apparent how these films create a cinematic representation of national identity, inviting audiences to connect with the trials and triumphs of the characters and historical figures on screen. Furthermore, this thesis delves into the concept of collective trauma and its portrayal in these films. By examining the intersection of collective memory, history, and melodrama, this thesis seeks to shed light on how these films create a collective memory of the past, offering a form of cathartic release for viewers grappling with colonial legacies and historical injustices. The main argument of this thesis is that these three historical films serve as a form of rewriting history, shaping memory and identity in South Korea by engaging with and creating a cinematic national identity that resonates with audiences.

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Introduction

Analyzing melodramatic South Korean historical films—or sageuk films—¹ offers a unique perspective on national identity, historical memory, and collective trauma. Films such as *최종병기 활* [War of the Arrows] (dir. Kim Han-min, 2011), *명량* [The Admiral: Roaring Currents] (dir. Kim Han-min, 2014), and *남한산성* [The Fortress] (dir. Hwang Dong-hyeok)² are narratives that intertwine melodrama, historical events, and nationalist themes to evoke narrative catharsis and shape collective memory. These films delve into two invasions in Korean history, stories of heroism, struggle, and avenues for reflecting on the past. As recreations of the past, these films create opportunities for reflection on more recent historical events, such as the colonization of Korea at the hands of Japan.

Collective trauma is particularly important because it explains the connection between these films about the Imjin War (1592-98) and the Second Qing Invasion of Joseon (1636-37) to more recent histories of invasion and colonization. For example, in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, collective trauma can be read through the trope of the underdog. To understand Korea's portrayal as an underdog, it is necessary to consider the intersection between collective memory and history. As a historical framework, collective memory depends less on factual information and more on how a group of people wants to see themselves.³ Representation of the past through films will be influenced by the collective memory of the time the film was created. *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* was written and produced in post-colonial South Korea. Delineating how it creates a collective memory and new history of the Imjin War explains how collective trauma in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* creates a parallel to the Japanese colonization of Korea. This parallel becomes an essential part of Korea's role as an underdog because it offers an opportunity for a symbolic revision of history and narrative catharsis.

South Korea's transition from poverty and colonial rule to economic growth and eventual democracy necessitated a reevaluation of collective memory, adopting narratives that

¹ Sageuk films are a genre of Korean historical dramas that typically depict the history of Korea's various historical periods, often focusing on the lives of royalty, nobility, or prominent historical figures. This thesis will use the term historical films throughout, though it is a more general term referring to films about past history.

² For the remainder of this thesis, all films will be referred to by their English titles.

³ Serge Schmemmann, "The Anniversary of World War II Is an Invitation to Continue Fighting," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2005, accessed February 24, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/22/opinion/the-anniversary-of-world-war-ii-is-an-invitation-to-continue.html>.

acknowledge past abuses.⁴ Tensions between Japan and South Korea in the early 2010s were exacerbated by Shinzo Abe's return as Japan's prime minister and his controversial visit to the Yasukuni Shrine.⁵ This visit underscored Abe's reputation as a historical revisionist, prompting the traumatic history of colonization to be at the collective forefront and creating a desire to receive acknowledgment of past injustices.⁶ The political context explains how films like *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *War of the Arrows*, and *The Fortress* can serve as a form of writing new versions of history. They were all released between 2010 and 2020, and all offer the potential for a sort of cathartic release within the world of the films to grapple with so-called "historical evils."⁷

These historical films reflect South Korea's 20th-century history of colonialism, war, and occupation through the lens of melodrama, amplifying the emotional impact of historical narratives. Melodrama in South Korean historical films serves to portray Korea as an underdog facing overwhelming challenges, evoking empathy and highlighting a concept of Korean national resilience. By shaping collective memory and reinforcing the narrative of Korea overcoming historical injustices, melodrama becomes a powerful tool in these films. This thesis employs melodrama as a conceptual framework to analyze the representation and symbolic repetition of historical events in *War of the Arrows*, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, and *The Fortress*. Melodrama is a genre that offers "moral legibility" in narratives where traditional notions of good and evil are blurred, often through the suffering of an innocent victim or the recognition of a villain.⁸ Melodramatic narratives engage with historical events, using tears as a tangible expression of deep emotion and moral conflict. This framework allows for an exploration of how these films navigate complex historical events and national traumas, using melodrama to highlight moral conflicts and shape a new type of collective nationalism.

Melodrama in South Korean historical films can amplify the emotional impact of historical narratives, portraying Korea as an underdog facing overwhelming challenges. By

⁴ Eun A Jo, "Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations," *International Organization* 76, no. 4 (2022), 770, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818322000194>.

⁵ Scott A. Snyder, "South Korea, Japan, and Wartime Shadows," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 11, 2015, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/south-korea-japan-and-wartime-shadows>.

⁶ Eun A Jo, "Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations," 770.

⁷ Norbert Wilely, "Emotion and Film Theory," in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2003), 182.

⁸ Linda Williams, "Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the 'Classical,'" *Modern Drama* 55, no. 4 (2012): 524, <https://doi.org/10.3138/md.2012-S83>.

highlighting the nation's resilience, melodrama shapes collective memory and reinforces the narrative of Korea overcoming historical injustices. *War of the Arrows*, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, and *The Fortress* explore moments in Korea's past, particularly during invasions, offering narratives of heroism, sacrifice, and national resilience. Through a melodramatic framework, this thesis will explore how these films create opportunities for narrative catharsis.

The historical films *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *War of the Arrows*, and *The Fortress* delve into different periods of Korean history, each portraying significant events through the lens of melodrama. *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* depicts Admiral Yi Sun-shin's legendary victory against the Japanese navy, highlighting his role as a national hero in resisting Japanese aggression. Meanwhile, *War of the Arrows* follows an archer's mission to save his sister from Qing dynasty invaders, showcasing themes of sacrifice and resilience. *The Fortress* presents King Injo's difficult decision to surrender to the Qing dynasty during the Second Qing Invasion, challenging conventional notions of heroism. These films resonate with audiences by connecting historical events from centuries ago to more recent histories of invasion and colonization, demonstrating cinema's ability to evoke empathy and shape collective memory.

This thesis will explore how these films employ melodrama to construct nationalist narratives and evoke catharsis, shaping a collective memory and national identity of historical films. By analyzing the films and their historical contexts, this study aims to examine how they transform historical events and figures into symbols of national identity, influencing how South Korean audiences understand and remember their history in the context of contemporary collective colonial trauma. The use of melodrama in these films raises questions about what history is and its implications for collective memory and national identity.⁹ By analyzing three South Korean historical films, this thesis explores how these films construct nationalist narratives, create catharsis, and shape collective memory. By examining the intersection of melodrama, historical events, and nationalist themes, this thesis considers how these films engage with Korea's past.

⁹ Kyoung-ryang Ki, "Joseon Exorcist and the 'Uncanny Valley' of Korean Historical Dramas: On the Problems of 'Distorted' Representations of History in Korean Popular Culture Products," *International Journal of Korean History* 26, no. 2 (2021): 201, <https://doi.org/10.22372/ijkh.2021.26.2.193>.

Melodrama in South Korean Historical Films

Historicizing Melodrama

In an analysis of melodrama, Linda Williams highlights its role in providing moral clarity within narratives where traditional notions of good and evil are blurred: "If traditional 'patterns of moral order' have become confused in a modern era in which good and evil are no longer clear, then it has long been the job of melodrama to reveal – through either the recognition of a villain with a tinge of the Gothic or the suffering of an innocent victim – a 'moral legibility' that can discern both."¹⁰ This concept of 'moral legibility' is evident in films like *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* and *War of the Arrows*, which use melodrama to humanize historical narratives and evoke national pride. By considering Williams' conceptions of melodrama and Jane M. Gaines' "historical time theory of melodrama,"¹¹ which focuses on how melodramatic narratives engage with historical events and periods. Gaines argues that in melodrama tears serve as a tangible expression of deep emotion and moral conflict. Tears in melodrama are not merely a display of emotion but also a form of resistance against tragedy; they can signify a "too late" that has been averted at the last minute.¹² It is important to note that melodramas "more than other genres, encourage the perceived helplessness and intense emotion required to make viewers cry. Film viewers are obviously helpless to affect the undesirable situations portrayed in melodramas."¹³ The tension built up by this inability to affect the outcome of a film allows for catharsis. Using Norbert Wiley's definition of catharsis, we can understand it as emerging from historical evils, "inequalities, miseries and oppressions that can come from dominating classes and oppressive political regimes."¹⁴ Through the audience's tears, characters in a film can symbolically avert tragedy, create the opportunity for a better tomorrow, and offer catharsis to viewers.

In Golden Age South Korean melodramatic films, an absence of strong male protagonists reflected a crisis of national identity and division, highlighting femininity and gender relations as

¹⁰ Linda Williams, "Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the 'Classical,'" 55.

¹¹ Jane M. Gaines, "Even More Tears: The Historical Time Theory of Melodrama," in *Melodrama Unbound*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (Columbia University Press, 2018), 329, <https://www.doi.org/10.7312/gled18066-022>.

¹² Gaines, 332.

¹³ Jonathan Frome, "Melodrama and the Psychology of Tears," *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 8, no. 1 (2014): 23-40, accessed May 5, 2024, <https://www.link.gale.com/apps/doc/A375184483/AONE?u=anon~be997dae&sid=googleScholar&xid=86eaa450>.

¹⁴ Norbert Wiley, "Emotion and Film Theory," 182.

central themes influenced by the postwar economic and social context.¹⁵ In that sense, women characters often served as allegories, embodying broader societal or national themes of problems. Their identities became a matter of sovereignty, reflecting the struggle for control over one's destiny and the nation's fate. While contemporary films like *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* and *War of the Arrows* differ from Golden Age melodramas in their focus on strong male protagonists, they echo earlier themes by using women as allegories for national identity.

The thematic resonances between the contemporary films being analyzed and Golden Age South Korean melodramatic films, despite differences in their portrayal of male protagonists, have persistent themes such as the use of women characters—when present—as allegories. Linda Williams' concept of the “space of innocence” is particularly relevant here. Often “located in a distant childhood, or even an imagined ‘back in the day,’” melodrama needs these spaces for innocence to believe that there is a moral good even possible.¹⁶ The women in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* and *War of the Arrows* in particular are films that end up representing this idealized innocence. This space of innocence provided by these films—while fictional—serves to connect viewers to a nostalgic portrayal of lost innocence and a simpler, more virtuous past. However, the line around this national innocence is ambiguous. Through the articulation of space, national sovereignty becomes gendered, with women characters embodying the nation's vulnerability and resilience. This evolution highlights how changing gender roles inform nationalist narratives, with contemporary melodrama recasting Korea's identity through outward-facing heroism in the face of dangerous enemies.¹⁷

By analyzing these films through the lens of Linda Williams' conception of melodrama as a narrative form that provides moral clarity in a complex world and Linda Gaines' discussion of how historical film engages melodrama, not just as a way of representing the past but also as a way of interpreting it through a contemporary lens, this section will explore how films use melodramatic elements to create emotional connections between the audience and the past, inviting viewers to reflect on how historical events continue to resonate in the present.

¹⁵ Kathleen A. McHugh, “South Korean Film Melodrama and the Question of National Cinema,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 18, no. 1 (2001): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200109361507>.

¹⁶ Linda Williams, “Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the ‘Classical,’” 525.

¹⁷ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], directed by Han-min Kim (CJ Entertainment, 2014), 01:46:49, accessed April 20, 2024, https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B01FFZRMRI/ref=atv_hm_vid_c_baeECJ_1_6.

Particularly by thinking through how historical narratives can play a role in shaping contemporary perspectives on the past, present, and future.

The use of melodrama in these South Korean historical films raises important questions about how history is reimagined and represented on screen. Rather than focusing on how audiences might react emotionally, it is more productive to explore how melodramatic narratives actively construct new historical imaginaries. By dramatizing historical events, these films do not simply retell history but reinterpret it through a nationalist lens, creating new a history.¹⁸ For example, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* reframes Admiral Yi's story as a tale of resilience and moral clarity, elevating his struggles into a symbolic triumph of national identity. Similarly, *War of the Arrows* positions Nam-yi's sacrifice as a metaphor for collective resistance, intertwining personal and national stakes to generate a cohesive vision of Korean resilience. In this way, melodrama serves as a tool for shaping collective memory, offering an idealized version of history that aligns with present-day narratives of sovereignty and identity. By critically examining these reinterpretations, we can better understand the dual function of melodrama: not only as a mode of storytelling but as a medium through which new histories are constructed and national identities are reinforced.

Narrative Construction and Catharsis

The relationship between characters and narrative in melodrama is multifaceted. Melodrama constructs emotional arcs that position characters as vessels for exploring historical and moral conflicts, offering a framework for examining struggles and transformations. Through Lacanian identification, melodrama enables audiences to engage with the "new" enterprising self, which incorporates the negation of prior identities: "identification with the 'new' enterprising self incorporates its obverse, the negation of its own identity. As an Imaginary construct, an identification is never sufficient or whole: it often falters, or may harbor contradictory elements."¹⁹ This dynamic highlights melodrama's ability to generate complex emotional landscapes, where protagonists' struggles with moral ambiguity and resilience resonate within broader historical and cultural frameworks. For instance, the "hero" figure in these narratives often embodies not just individual resolution but also collective aspirations,

¹⁸ Kyoung-ryang Ki, "Joseon Exorcist and the 'Uncanny Valley' of Korean Historical Dramas: On the Problems of 'Distorted' Representations of History in Korean Popular Culture Products," 201.

¹⁹ Casper Hoedemaekers, "'Not Even Semblance': Exploring the Interruption of Identification with Lacan," *Organization* 17, no. 3, (2010): 386, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508410363122>.

crafting a space to explore the interplay between personal transformation and larger societal shifts. This allows melodrama to move beyond its emotional appeal, creating a structured narrative through which themes of morality, resilience, and change are conveyed.

The concept of a ‘better tomorrow’ is central to melodrama's temporal orientation. While these narratives often reinterpret historical events, they do so with a forward-looking approach, framing the past as a site of resilience and moral clarity that can inform contemporary trajectories. Melodrama acts as “a mode of feeling that generates outrage against a fate that could and should be changed,”²⁰ recasting historical narratives to reflect modern values. Films like *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *The Fortress*, and *War of the Arrows* exemplify this, portraying historical conflicts such as the Imjin War²¹ and the Qing invasion²² through a melodramatic lens. These films highlight moral conflicts within characters and their circumstances, positioning their struggles as symbolic of national resilience and transformation. Rather than simply retelling historical events, these films reinterpret them, using melodrama as a mode to reimagine collective memory, suggesting futures shaped by endurance and moral conviction.

In this context, the portrayal of suffering and heroism in melodrama becomes a narrative device for navigating moral ambiguity. The stark contrast between passive suffering and heroic action creates tension that underpins melodrama's emotional resonance and moral legibility, usually presented as a spectacle.²³ For example, in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, Admiral Yi Sun-shin's²⁴ initial suffering—depicted through his unjust treatment at the hands of King Seonjo²⁵—juxtaposes his later heroism,²⁶ culminating in the high-stakes Battle of Myeongnyang. This progression from victimhood to transcendence elevates his character into a symbol of honor and resilience. Similarly, *The Fortress* and *War of the Arrows* explore themes of loyalty, betrayal, and the human cost of war, blending personal and collective struggles. These films construct

²⁰ Linda Williams, “When Is Melodrama ‘Good’? Mega-Melodrama and Victimhood,” in *Melodrama After the Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*, ed. Jörg Metelmann and Scott Loren (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 58.

²¹ Jonathan N. Lipman, Barbara Molony, and Michael Edson Robinson, *Modern East Asia: An Integrated History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2012), 54-55.

²² Jonathan N. Lipman, Barbara Molony, and Michael Edson Robinson, 80.

²³ Hermann Kappelhoff, “Melodrama and War in Hollywood Genre Cinema,” in *Melodrama After the Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*, ed. Jörg Metelmann and Scott Loren (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 81.

²⁴ I use the most common romanization of the Admiral's name throughout this thesis.

²⁵ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:01:15.

²⁶ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:56:08.

melodramatic tensions not just to elicit emotional responses but to create frameworks for understanding historical events as ongoing struggles for justice and survival. The interplay between suffering and heroism underscores melodrama's potential to reinterpret history, crafting narratives that prioritize moral clarity while addressing historical complexities.

Melodrama in these historical films operates as a tool for humanizing historical figures and events, rendering them accessible as points of reflection.²⁷ This is achieved through narrative techniques that imbue characters with deeply human emotions, moral dilemmas, and sacrifices, creating a means of reimagining historical resilience. The mise-en-scène in *The Fortress*, with its muted color palette and claustrophobic framing,²⁸ mirrors the tension and despair of King Injo's court during the Qing siege, emphasizing the visceral stakes of national survival. *War of the Arrows* leverages non-diegetic music to heighten the emotional gravity of Nam-yi's sacrifice,²⁹ transforming his death into a symbolic act of resistance against foreign aggression. These tools create a narrative space where the past is not merely observed but actively reinterpreted, offering insights into how history is remembered and can shape the present and future. As melodrama "becomes a text in crisis, a symptomatic and anxious text that converts tears (feeling) into an epistemological filter that, when read against the grain, begs reparation and justice,"³⁰ these films use historical narratives to interrogate unresolved tensions tied to colonial and imperial aggression.³¹ By presenting these struggles through melodramatic frameworks, the films propose an idealized vision of history—not in the sense of perfection or sanitization, but as a framework that provides moral clarity. By positioning historical struggles as opportunities for resilience and transformation, melodrama bridges the emotional and historical, creating narratives that prioritize moral clarity while addressing historical complexities. This emotional and moral

²⁷ Louisa Mitchell, "Premodern History and the Contemporary South Korean Period Blockbuster," in *Renegotiating Film Genres in East Asian Cinemas and Beyond*, ed. Lin Feng and James Aston (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2020), 125.

²⁸ *남한산성* [The Fortress], directed by Dong-hyuk Hwang (CJ Entertainment, 2017), 00:15:50, accessed April 20, 2024, https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/0TVN9PVROQ89QR74253COCOZ3U/ref=atv_plr_your_videolibrary_play.

²⁹ *최종병기 활* [War of the Arrows], directed by Han-min Kim (Lotte Entertainment, 2011), 01:55:39-01:57:20, accessed April 20, 2024, <https://www.peacocktv.com/watch-online/movies/action-and-adventure/war-of-the-arrows/9793cfde-8ce9-3b22-9bcd-c72e7383747a>.

³⁰ Jo Labanyi, Annabel Martin, and Vicente Rodriguez Ortega. "Melodrama and Historical Film." in *A Companion to Spanish Cinema*, ed. Jo Labanyi and Tatjana Pavlović (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013), 229.

³¹ Hiroaki Sato, "Japan's Colonial Rule of Korea was 'Moderate,'" *The Japan Times*, 2015, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/06/29/commentary/japan-commentary/japans-colonial-rule-of-korea-was-moderate/#.XopQw4hKg2w>.

framework lays the foundation for melodrama's nationalist function, where personal sacrifices and collective struggles become tools for reframing history and reinforcing national identity.

Nationalism in Melodrama

In historical films, melodramatic narratives serve as a tool for humanizing historical figures and events, making them more relatable by imbuing them with emotional depth and moral struggles. Through a melodramatic lens, filmmakers craft narratives that position characters as symbols of broader historical and cultural tensions, emphasizing their sacrifices and resilience. This emotional construction becomes central to conveying nationalist themes, as it frames these characters and events as embodiments of collective pride and identity. Melodrama “alerts the heart to the essentials, and to what cannot be seen with mere eyes,”³² a sentiment that underscores its narrative impact in South Korean historical films. By blending historical events with emotional storytelling, melodrama transcends visual representation. For example, sound design often marks moments of heightened emotional subjectivity, allowing music to “leak out” a character’s inner turmoil and convey the stakes of historical events in ways visuals alone cannot.³³ Melodrama, then, is not just a tool for engaging with history but also for illuminating its ongoing relevance. Through its reimagining of the past, historical melodrama becomes more than an account of what has been—it becomes a reflection of national struggle and a framework for envisioning resilience and identity in the present.

War of the Arrows, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, and *The Fortress* exemplify the use of melodrama to frame historical events within nationalist narratives. Despite their distinct plots and historical settings, these films share a common thread of melodramatic storytelling to convey resilience and sacrifice against foreign aggression. *War of the Arrows* and *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, both directed by Kim Han-min, use the structure of individual journeys to symbolize broader national identity. In *War of the Arrows*, Nam-yi’s mission to rescue his sister and reclaim honor³⁴ during the Second Qing invasion of Joseon becomes a symbolic act of reclaiming what has been stolen from the Korean people. Similarly, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* portrays

³² Jörg Metelmann, “‘Emotional Suffering’ as Universal Category? Victimhood and the Collective Imaginary,” in *Melodrama After the Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*, ed. Jörg Metelmann and Scott Loren, (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 185.

³³ Dan Wang, “Melodrama, Two Ways,” *19th-Century Music* 36, no. 2 (2012), 135, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncm.2012.36.2.122>.

³⁴ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows].

Admiral Yi Sun-shin as a national hero whose leadership and struggle during the Imjin War embody resilience and determination, reframing him as a figure of collective national pride. These films emphasize not only the heroism of individuals but also the contributions of ordinary people,³⁵ highlighting the shared responsibility of protecting national identity. Finally, *The Fortress* offers a different lens, focusing on the siege of Namhan Mountain Fortress during the Second Qing invasion,³⁶ where King Injo and his court embody resilience through sacrifice. Together, these films use melodrama to position historical struggles as not only moments of survival but also as opportunities to reframe Korea's identity as one of collective strength and moral integrity.

War of the Arrows Analysis

In *War of the Arrows*, Nam-yi's sacrifice is an illustration of how melodrama can be used to explore historical themes and evoke empathy from audiences. This scene³⁷—set against the backdrop of the Qing invasion of Joseon—encapsulates the broader narrative of Korean history and national identity. Nam-yi's choice to save his sister, Ja-in, and give up his own life highlights the complex moral and emotional challenges faced by individuals during times of conflict.³⁸ It symbolizes the struggle against foreign aggression and the personal sacrifices made in defense of the nation. Nam-yi's decision reflects a conflict between familial loyalty and national duty, a theme that resonates in the context of colonial traumas and recognized past abuses.³⁹ This scene demonstrates the human cost of violence and the impact it has on individuals and their relationships, connecting the audience to the larger historical and cultural forces at play. Although Nam-yi's choice deviates from his prescribed national duty, his final act of protecting and eventually saving his sister can be interpreted as a symbolic act of resistance against foreign aggression from the Qing soldiers and a reaffirmation of Korean identity. Nam-yi dies in his sister's arms,⁴⁰ and even in the face of her grief the non-diegetic music within this shot creates a sense of catharsis and solemnity, heightening the emotional impact of Nam-yi's death. The

³⁵ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:36:54.

³⁶ Bumjin Koo, "The Military Strength and Strategic Deployment of the Joseon and Qing Troops at the Time of the Fall of Ganghwa Island During the 1637 Qing Invasion of Joseon." *Journal of Asian Historical Studies* 141 (2017): 318, <https://doi.org/10.17856/jahs.2017.12.141.317>.

³⁷ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:55:39-01:57:20.

³⁸ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:57:11.

³⁹ Eun A Jo, "Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean-Japanese Relations," 770.

⁴⁰ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:56:59.

viewer is meant to relate to and feel all the pain that Ja-in feels. It reinforces the idea that Nam-yi's sacrifice is not just a personal tragedy but a moment of national significance. The music also conveys a sense of heroism and nobility, highlighting Nam-yi's bravery and selflessness in the face of overwhelming odds during his quest to save Ja-in. It emphasizes the idea that Nam-yi's sacrifice is not in vain but will be a crucial step in the larger struggle for Korean independence and identity. Overall, the melodramatic music elevates Nam-yi's sacrifice to a symbolic level, portraying it as a transformative moment, despite Ja-in's grief.

This scene exemplifies Linda Williams' concept of melodrama as a narrative form that provides moral clarity in a complex world. As established at the beginning of this section, melodrama reveals moral legibility in narratives where traditional notions of good and evil are blurred.⁴¹ Nam-yi's struggle to prioritize between personal feelings and the so-called 'greater good' exemplifies this moral clarity, as his decision to save his sister at any cost can be seen as the ultimate resistance to colonization. Furthermore, Gaines argues that tears in melodrama serve as a form of resistance against tragedy, signifying a "too late" that has been averted at the last minute.⁴² Nam-yi saving Ja-in despite the overwhelming odds against it can be interpreted as a hope for a better tomorrow, echoing Gaines' theory of melodrama as a mode of feeling that generates outrage against a fate that could and should be changed. This comes back to catharsis as emerging from historical evils such as colonialism.⁴³ By prioritizing the safety of his family, Nam-yi asserts his agency and humanity in the face of dehumanizing forces. In this case, he prevents symbolic colonization of the Korean people by protecting Ja-in from the Qing invaders. By prioritizing his sister's safety over his own life, Nam-yi not only preserves his family but also upholds the dignity and sovereignty of the Korean people and their nation. Ja-in serves as an embodiment of these larger conceptions of nation. Her ultimate survival hope for the future of Joseon.

The Admiral: Roaring Currents Analysis

The Admiral: Roaring Currents uses melodrama to portray historical figures and events, echoing some of the nationalist themes explored in *War of the Arrows*. For example, the confrontation between Admiral Yi and the antagonist—Admiral Kurushima⁴⁴—embodies a

⁴¹ Linda Williams, "Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the 'Classical,'" 524.

⁴² Jane M. Gaines, "Even More Tears: The Historical Time Theory of Melodrama," 332.

⁴³ Norbert Wiley, "Emotion and Film Theory," 182.

⁴⁴ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:45:14.

melodramatic hero facing a villain in a battle against moral depravity. Kurushima is portrayed as an epitome of brutality, and as the leader of part of the Japanese invading force, a representation of Japanese brutality. This is in direct contrast to Admiral Yi and his noble quest to defend his country and people, not just as a sovereign nation, but defending them from cruel invaders who would take advantage of the people. This dichotomy is accentuated in the pivotal scene where Kurushima faces Admiral Yi, only to be struck down by a volley of arrows.⁴⁵ Despite his grievous injuries—evidenced by five arrows embedded in his torso and blood dripping out of his mouth—Kurushima defiantly charges at Admiral Yi, screaming his enemy's name with his sword raised, ready to strike Admiral Yi down.⁴⁶ Even though Kurushima knows he cannot survive his injuries, he remains determined to kill Admiral Yi. This futile act demonstrates that a significant aspect of Japan's invasion in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* is not driven by moral reasons but rather by a desire to inflict harm for the sake of power. This moment, set against a non-diegetic soundtrack of triumphant music, underscores the melodramatic nature of the scene by heightening the emotional intensity and portraying Kurushima, and the Japanese Navy, as formidable but ultimately doomed antagonists.

The climactic showdown between Kurushima and Admiral Yi culminates in a swift and decisive victory for the Admiral, and therefore Joseon. He slices his sword through the air, causing a spray of blood as Kurushima's decapitated head falls onto the wooden planks of Admiral Yi's ship.⁴⁷ This dramatic resolution, while not the ultimate end of the battle, symbolizes the outcome. Japan will be defeated, and their unjust actions will not go unpunished as they face defeat at the hands of a small, ragtag defense force led by Admiral Yi. Kurushima was an antagonist who embodied the unjust behavior of the Japanese invaders, and his defeat informs the audience of what will come next. The satisfaction from Kurushima's defeat comes from the prospect of entering a slightly altered trajectory where a new interaction with the enemy takes place.⁴⁸ Kurushima's defeat marks a new phase in the Joseon-Japan conflict, where Admiral Yi's impending triumph signifies his moral integrity and, ultimately, reflects the resilience and virtue of the Korean people. This scene not only serves as a cathartic resolution for the audience but

⁴⁵ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:46:10.

⁴⁶ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:46:37.

⁴⁷ *Myeongryang* [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:46:49.

⁴⁸ Hyon Joo Yoo, "The Chronotope of Trauma in National Cinema," *Journal of Japanese & Korean Cinema* 7, no. 1, (2015): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17564905.2015.1035011>.

also reinforces *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*'s melodramatic narrative, providing moral clarity in a complex world and evoking nationalist sentiments through Admiral Yi's victory and moral high ground. By portraying Kurushima as a symbol of Japanese aggression and moral depravity, the film not only vilifies him as a narrative device. Admiral Yi's defeat of Kurushima becomes a heroic triumph for Joseon and reinforces the film's nationalist themes by underscoring the resilience of the film's Korean people in the face of adversity. This film's history not only creates a sense of moral clarity but also provides a narrative framework through which viewers can interpret the past and its significance to the present. Through its melodramatic framing, the film reimagines history as a narrative of collective strength and survival, transforming Admiral Yi into a symbol of Korea's enduring spirit. By connecting the emotional resonance of melodrama with historical events, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* actively shapes collective memory, offering a vision of the past that reinforces national identity and pride.

The Fortress Analysis

In *The Fortress*, the portrayal of King Injo and his courtiers enduring starvation and hardship during a siege is a depiction of the melodramatic essence often found in narratives of historical struggles. Like *War of the Arrows*, *The Fortress* is set during the Second Qing invasion of Joseon and is another example of a historical melodramatic narrative set against the backdrop of resisting foreign invasion and interference. Perhaps the most impactful scene that lends itself to a narrative of staunch resistance to invasion and offers a historical fictionalized alternative to the more recent history of colonization is when King Injo and his subjects are trapped inside Namhansanseong Fortress and forced to kill their horses to acquire food.⁴⁹ The setting of this scene is somber, with muted colors emphasizing the desperation of their situation. In particular, as the horses are being slaughtered, their red blood changes the grey-tinted shots, serving as a bold reminder of the cost of King Injo's resistance to the Qing invasion.⁵⁰ The stark contrast between the red blood and the white clothing of the courtiers underscores the harsh realities faced by those defending their homeland. Their horses revered as powerfully loyal and useful tools,⁵¹ are now sacrificed to sustain their survival, reflecting the depth of their commitment to

⁴⁹ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:51:39-00:54:05.

⁵⁰ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:52:02.

⁵¹ "Horse Culture of Korea," *KRA*, accessed March 26 2024, <https://www.kra.co.kr/globalEn/corp/05/corp05.jsp>.

retaining sovereignty. In this way, the scene conveys a sense of tragedy and sacrifice required when fulfilling duties to one's nation.

Another important shot in this scene is as the horse is cooked into a giant pot, and then used to serve everyone in the fortress.⁵² After the first bowl is served, the camera tilts up and then pans to the left through steam from the cooking.⁵³ When the steam dissipates, the camera is level with the height of a large crowd of men, all waiting for food.⁵⁴ The camera uses deep space and deep focus alongside the level to make it appear like the camera is another man in the crowd, trapped inside Namhansanseong Fortress and waiting for his turn to eat his once-loyal horse. This creates a sense of identification with the other men in the crowd, some injured, all dirty, and appearing exhausted. They are struggling, and have been now for longer than they expected, evidenced by the necessity of killing their horses. By placing the camera in the center of the crowd, the viewers are forced to recognize the struggle these men are facing, and also their resilience in continuing to stand against the Qing invaders.

This sequence aligns closely with Kappelhoff's concept of melodramatic excess, portraying the courtiers as figures grappling with insurmountable challenges.⁵⁵ According to Peter Brooks, melodrama is characterized by "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression."⁵⁶ Melodrama often exaggerates moral conflicts, creating a clear dichotomy between good and evil. In this case, melodrama's emotional intensity and moral polarization are both its strength and its ambivalence, simplifying complex moral issues while deepening the audience's emotional engagement. The decision to kill their horses becomes a powerful symbol of desperation and sacrifice, underscoring the courtiers' unwavering commitment to their nation. This act highlights the harsh realities of war and the extreme lengths to which individuals must go to endure.

The shot of the crowd waiting for food further underscores the collective suffering of the courtiers. It portrays them as a unified group rather than individual characters, amplifying the

⁵² 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:52:26.

⁵³ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:52:32.

⁵⁴ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:52:37

⁵⁵ Hermann Kappelhoff, "Melodrama and War in Hollywood Genre Cinema," 83.

⁵⁶ Peter Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imagination," in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1984), 12.

emotional impact of their shared hardship. The deep space and focus add complexity to the composition, creating a sense of immersion that enhances the dramatic effect. Filmed in a way that resembles observational documentary footage, the scene makes the camera feel invisible, allowing the raw emotion of the moment to come through unmediated. By positioning the camera at the level of the crowd, the film invites identification with their struggles, emphasizing their resilience and determination in the face of overwhelming adversity.⁵⁷ Ultimately, by pushing characters and situations to their emotional and physical extremes, the melodrama of this sequence heightens the drama, transforming it into a powerful reflection of the sacrifices required to defend sovereignty.

⁵⁷ Sebastian Solberg, "Documentary Storytelling: Narration Style," *Documentary Film Academy*, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://www.docfilmacademy.com/blog/narration-style>.

Creating History Through Film

The Role of Historical Film in Shaping Memory

One could argue that films about history are “myths, half-truths, unprovable claims and unsubstantiated theories” which might then become “history circulated among the general public as if they are scholarly consensuses.”⁵⁸ Although historical films rely on dramatic license to craft engaging and interpretive narratives, these creative liberties are not deviations from an imagined neutral history but are intrinsic to how histories are constructed. All history, at its core, is the mediated memory of events, shaped by the perspectives of those who record, tell, and retell it. This is where the concept of authenticity becomes central—not as an adherence to factuality, but as an acknowledgment of the interpretive nature of representing the past.⁵⁹ Authenticity accepts the gaps in historical knowledge as spaces where narrative decisions shape meaning. According to Hyunseon Lee, “South Korean blockbusters remember, rewrite, and archive historical events.”⁶⁰ In other words, they are not simply embellishing or distorting facts; they are participating in the active creation of historical memory. The notion of “rewriting” history is particularly significant here, as it emphasizes that histories are not static records but dynamic narratives continually reshaped by the contexts in which they are told.

Historical films are a major mode of representing history,⁶¹ and by engaging with specific events, they transform them into mediated histories that reflect contemporary anxieties, ideologies, and cultural identities. In South Korean cinema, historical blockbusters reconstruct past events in ways that are inseparable from the historical and cultural conditions of their production. These films navigate the layers of historical memory to engage with ongoing questions of identity, power, and resistance. By reinterpreting historical events, they create histories that resonate with present concerns while asserting claims about the past. These claims might be considered to be “myths, half-truths, unprovable claims and unsubstantiated theories”⁶²

⁵⁸ Kyu-hyun Kim, “A Whirlpool of History: Roaring Currents Between A Determined War Film and A Deifying Biopic,” *International Journal of Korean History* 19, no. 2 (2014): 274, <https://doi.org/10.22372/ijkh.2014.19.2.271>.

⁵⁹ Laura Saxton, “A True Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction,” *Rethinking History* 24, no. 2 (2020): 129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189>.

⁶⁰ Hyunseon Lee, “The South Korean Blockbuster and a Divided Nation,” *International Journal of Korean History* 21, no. 1 (2016): 260, <https://doi.org/10.22372/ijkh.2016.21.1.259>.

⁶¹ Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age,” in *Learning History in America* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 51.

⁶² Kyu-hyun Kim, “A Whirlpool of History: Roaring Currents Between A Determined War Film and A Deifying Biopic,” 274.

by some, but to others they are simply history as they were taught it. This process does not seek neutrality but acknowledges the contested nature of history itself as a series of constructed and competing narratives.

National Identity and Heroic Narratives: Admiral Yi and the Imjin War

The existing national narratives surrounding the Imjin War are deeply rooted in South Korea's historical consciousness. In South Korea, Admiral Yi is seen as a “symbol of patriotism, suggesting that this was the supreme value to which any political idea could be subjected, but also as a perfect leader.”⁶³ Also according to Cho and Hong, Admiral Yi is seen as a solitary hero, one who sacrificed himself to save his nation, despite the abuses he faced.⁶⁴ In other words, Admiral Yi is a near-mythical figure, a national hero who single-handedly thwarted the Japanese invasion with his strategic brilliance, even at the cost of his own life in a later battle. This is one major difference to note between the previously existing national narrative and how the common people become heroes in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*.⁶⁵

Visual Storytelling and Symbolism in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*

Despite occurring over four hundred and fifty years ago, the Imjin War⁶⁶ has surviving documentation. Some of this is Admiral Yi Sun-shin's diary⁶⁷ and his nearly daily reports to the government.⁶⁸ All this to say, creative liberties *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* employs are not impossible to identify, especially significant changes. For example, before the Battle of Myeongnyang, one of Admiral Yi's naval commanders, Bae Seol, destroys a symbol of hope when he sets fire to the last turtle ship.⁶⁹ This is an entirely fictional event in several ways. Firstly, while Bae Seol did abandon his post, it was not because he was a traitor to Admiral Yi as the film implied, but instead, it was because he disliked naval warfare and was prone to seasickness.⁷⁰ Another aspect of this plot point to consider is the turtle ship itself. Admiral Yi

⁶³ Seong-kwan Cho and Jae-beom Hong, “A Hero of the Two Koreas: Yi Sun-Shin Dramatized in North and South,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2019): 61, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X18000611>.

⁶⁴ Seong-kwan Cho and Jae-beom Hong, 60.

⁶⁵ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:36:16.

⁶⁶ Jonathan N. Lipman, Barbara Molony, and Michael Edson Robinson, *Modern East Asia: An Integrated History*, 54-55.

⁶⁷ Yi Sun-shin, *Nanjung Ilgi: War Diary of Admiral Yi Sun-Sin*, trans. Ha Tae-hung (1977).

⁶⁸ Yi Sun-shin, *Imjin Changch'o: Admiral Yi Sun-Sin's Memorials to Court*, trans. Ha Tae-hung (1979).

⁶⁹ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:36:15.

⁷⁰ Wong-bin Lim, interview by Hyun-mok Jung, “Separating Historical Facts From Fiction,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, August 17, 2014, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2014/08/17/etc/Separating-historical-films-facts-from-fiction/2993611.html>.

made heavy use of turtle ships, vessels reinforced with iron and ringed by spikes that made them resemble turtles,⁷¹ and they contributed significantly towards turning the outcome of the Imjin War (1592-98) in Korea's favor.⁷² The truth is that all of the turtle ships were destroyed at the Battle of Chilcheonnyang, so Admiral Yi would not have had one that could be burned.⁷³ However, the turtle ship serves as a symbol of the naval military might in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, and its burning highlights that Korea is meant to be the underdog.

The Admiral: Roaring Currents is about triumph in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. It is about an underdog country, here represented through Admiral Yi, emerging victorious against a greater and cruel power, the Japanese. This is achieved partially through the introduction of the two branches of the Japanese invading force: the more traditional force, composed of an army and navy, with invasion leader Tōdō Takatora at the head and the Murakami Clan Navy. Other important aspects are the filming techniques, particularly those from a shot sequence of the first appearance of the Murakami Clan Navy.⁷⁴ Mise-en-scene, shot length, camera angle, and sound all play a role in the way the film presents Korea as an underdog while also using these techniques to suggest that Korea has a moral high ground in comparison to Japan. At the same time, the film actively creates a rewritten history—one that is neither wholly true nor wholly false, but a version shaped by contemporary cultural and ideological contexts. The fundamental nature of history is as an event that, once past, can never be fully accessed or known. What remains are traces—records, memories, and artifacts—that must be interpreted, and those interpretations are always shaped by the frameworks and perspectives of those engaging with them.

Costuming plays an important role in the perception of the characters; for example, military uniforms show what to expect from a scene. The Japanese Army in this shot sequence wears matching uniforms, have matching hairstyles, and stand in a uniform order.⁷⁵ Admiral Wakizaka and his second-in-command are dressed in the finery associated with higher roles in

⁷¹ Kenneth M. Swope, "Crouching Tigers, Secret Weapons: Military Technology Employed During the Sino-Japanese-Korean War, 1592-1598," *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 1 (2005): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2005.0059>.

⁷² Kenneth M. Swope, 18.

⁷³ Wong-bin Lim, *Korea JoongAng Daily*.

⁷⁴ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:09:48-00:10:45:01.

⁷⁵ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:33.

the army,⁷⁶ and they alongside the men under their command are pristine. This serves to represent the success the Japanese are experiencing in the Imjin War up to this point. They can capture Korean soldiers and rebels with ease and still have time for personal care. It only furthers the narrative that Korea is in a disadvantaged position. Next, the Murakami Clan Navy is introduced through their sharpshooter, Haru, in the aftermath of his shooting of a Korean soldier.⁷⁷ By showing Haru's willingness to shoot a man who was already in battle with Admiral Wakizaka's second-in-command, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* is showing that the Murakami Clan Navy has no regard for honorable combat. As the enemies Admiral Yi will face, this introduction means they will be formidable foes. Haru also makes his appearance alongside a non-diegetic and deep soundtrack that evokes a feeling of danger through a powerful base. Several more shots show the Murakami Clan Navy footmen arriving, who appear unkempt, without full uniformity in clothing, hairstyle, or helmets.⁷⁸ Although they are on the side of the Japanese, they do not take the time to maintain their appearance. Unlike the Japanese Army, victory for them does not mean an opportunity for self-care, but a reason to continue pressing on in the war against Korea. Once again, this demonstrates that the Murakami Clan Navy is a serious threat. The most serious threat Admiral Yi will face is not the Japanese Military and their commander Tōdō Takatora, but instead it is Kurushima Michifusa, the leader of the Murakami Clan Navy.

This can be clarified by considering the costuming of the Korean soldiers and civilians in contrast to the Japanese Army and the Murakami Clan Navy. Unlike the two Japanese groups shown holding guns,⁷⁹ only one Korean soldier is armed, and he is immediately shot by Haru.⁸⁰ The Koreans are severely outmatched in terms of battle preparedness and prowess, demonstrating how the situation is nearly impossible to emerge victorious in. For example, like the Koreans, many members of the Japanese Army and the Murakami Clan Navy carry swords, but they also carry guns.⁸¹ The Korean soldiers having no such weapons further demonstrates the power imbalance between the two sides within *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*. The battle between guns and swords seems to have an obvious outcome, with gunpowder playing a

⁷⁶ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:09.

⁷⁷ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:02.

⁷⁸ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:38.

⁷⁹ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:09:59, 00:10:31.

⁸⁰ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:09:51.

⁸¹ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:09:48, 00:10:17.

significant role in determining the likely victor. Additionally, the Korean soldiers are introduced with the death of one of their own and the rest of the people—four other soldiers and a small number of civilians—on the ground.⁸² The Korean soldiers and civilians are portrayed as disempowered characters, having been stripped of their weapons and ability to protect the civilians they are with. In contrast, none of the people from either group of Japanese men die or lose their weapons. The Korean soldiers also have no music, instead, the sound remains diegetic, with the mild blowing of wind highlighting the lack of a soundtrack and contributing to the hopeless atmosphere.

The Japanese Army holds their guns as the non-diegetic orchestral music swells with the appearance of the Murakami Clan Navy's full arrival, creating a sense of apprehension.⁸³ While Kurushima has been sent to aid in the war, sound design and the portrayal of apprehension and frustration by the Japanese Army⁸⁴ demonstrate that there is no love lost between these two forces. Admiral Wakizaka and Kurushima mirror each other as leaders, both powerful, shown to be equally commanding as the ones riding horses, facing each other with a level camera, which serves to represent their metaphorical and literal equality.⁸⁵ Like Admiral Wakizaka, Kurushima wears elaborate clothing.⁸⁶ Elaborate war clothing in this case symbolizes power and advanced weaponry, suggesting that the Japanese Army and Murakami Clan Navy adorned in the attire is well-equipped and formidable. This represents two strong forces working together in the invasion. However, it also portrays the tension between these two forces.

This is not a war between two groups of equally prepared people. The arrival of the Murakami Clan Navy emphasizes this. First, flags flutter in the wind,⁸⁷ and then the camera tilts down to show a level view from the front of them marching. However, only after a few shots is the full scope of the Murakami Clan Navy and the Japanese Army clear as the camera films a high angle shot;⁸⁸ and this is still only a fraction of the number of people invading. By slowly revealing the size of the forces Admiral Yi will inevitably need to face, the film emphasizes how outnumbered he is and pushes the narrative that Korea is facing a major power difference. It is

⁸² 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:09:56.

⁸³ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:34.

⁸⁴ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:08, 00:10:31.

⁸⁵ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:39.

⁸⁶ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:33.

⁸⁷ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:11.

⁸⁸ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:26.

just another example of the power dynamic between Korea and Japan. This representation of the different parts of the Japanese invading forces emphasizes a power imbalance that frames Korea as an underdog facing seemingly impossible odds. The dichotomy between a dominant force and a weaker counterpart reflects a broader narrative structure often associated with struggles against oppressive powers. As Goldschmied, Ruiz, and Olagaray suggest, such narratives inherently align the weaker party with ideas of moral virtue and resilience, positioning their victory as symbolic of justice overcoming domination.⁸⁹

Constructing Korea's Moral Victory in The Admiral: Roaring Currents

The Admiral: Roaring Currents frames Korea's triumph as a symbolic victory of morality over oppression, using Admiral Yi as the embodiment of resilience and justice. This framing is achieved through a combination of narrative elements and filmmaking techniques that elevate Admiral Yi's heroism. While the Japanese Army appears more well-put-together and as shown in the shot sequence, does not approve of the Murakami Clan Navy's approach of shooting someone from behind, especially while already in "honorable" combat,⁹⁰ they are still allies. This characterization extends to the Japanese forces as a whole, which then become hostile and unethical invaders.⁹¹ Such depictions transform the Imjin War into a mythic struggle, where Korea's survival becomes not just a military victory but a moral imperative.

Admiral Yi himself is the focal point of this mythic narrative. The Japanese generals, played by Korean actors speaking "awkwardly Korean-accented Japanese,"⁹² are shown as singularly focused on defeating him,⁹³ reducing their motivations to caricatures of villainy. This persistent opposition emphasizes Admiral Yi's role as the sole hope for Korea, aligning with director Kim Han-min's description of him as "no ordinary hero."⁹⁴ Yet, despite this focus on his symbolic significance, the film offers little insight into the specifics of Admiral Yi's strategies. While his brilliance as a military leader is well-documented in historical sources such as the

⁸⁹ Nadav Goldschmied, Jessica Ruiz, Sydney Olagaray, "The Underdog Narrative in Movies: When Our Memories Fail Us," *Heroism Science* 2, no. 1 (2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.26736/hs.2017.01.02>.

⁹⁰ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:10:08.

⁹¹ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:09:59.

⁹² Kyu-hyun Kim, "A Whirlpool of History: Roaring Currents Between A Determined War Film and A Deifying Biopic," 275.

⁹³ Kyu-hyun Kim, 275.

⁹⁴ Han-min Kim, interview by Joan MacDonald, "Director Kim Han-Min Explains Why Lee Sun-Shin Is No Ordinary Hero," *Forbes*, November 16, 2022, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joanmacdonald/2022/11/16/director-kim-han-min-explains-why-lee-sun-shin-is-no-ordinary-ero/?sh=5e325c5b7a20>.

Imjin Changcho, the film treats him as a static figurehead of triumph rather than engaging at all with the tactical nuances that led to his success.⁹⁵ By not having any details of what in his plan contributed to his victory “it tends to reduce the principal characters to static stereotypes who exist only to serve [Admiral] Yi in his victory.”⁹⁶ Tōdō Takatora says as much: “Yi Sun-shin is not a foe to take lightly.”⁹⁷

By constructing a simplified and symbolic narrative, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* participates in the active rewriting of history. It transforms the Imjin War into a mediated memory, shaped by the cultural and ideological context of its production. The events of the war occurred over four centuries ago and are inherently unknowable in their entirety. The film offers not a definitive account of the past but one interpretation of history among many, blending myth with the past to assert a specific vision of Korea’s identity and resilience. This version of history, though neither wholly true nor false, presents a narrative of triumph and moral vindication rooted in contemporary understandings of the nation’s past.

Individual Heroism and National Salvation: *War of the Arrows*

War of the Arrows reframes the Second Qing Invasion of Joseon in 1637 through a narrative centered on personal sacrifice and familial loyalty. According to Rosenstone, films are “inaccurate. They distort the past. They fictionalize, trivialize, and romanticize people, events, and movements. They falsify history.”⁹⁸ Yet, rather than attempting to reconstruct the past with absolute and impossible fidelity, *War of the Arrows* uses the medium of film to interpret history. Through the lens of Nam-yi, a fictional character whose story represents the experiences of countless ordinary individuals, the film constructs a history that prioritizes personal and symbolic narratives. Nam-yi is not portrayed as a historical figure, but his character serves as a conduit for exploring the invasion. The centrality of Ja-in’s rescue in *War of the Arrows* highlights the film’s construction of history through personal and symbolic narratives. The larger Qing invasion serves primarily as a backdrop, a context that justifies the Qing soldiers’ presence and the inciting event of Ja-in’s capture. By narrowing its focus to Nam-yi’s quest to save his

⁹⁵ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:30:30.

⁹⁶ Seung-woo Ha, “Culture Critiques: The Return of Yi Sun-shin: Mediating the Present and the Past-The Admiral: Roaring Currents [평량], directed by Kim Han-Min. Big Stone Pictures, CJ Entertainment, 2014. Film,” *Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 237, accessed February 15, 2024, https://kiss.kstudy.com/search/detail_page.asp?key=3321463.

⁹⁷ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:24:36.

⁹⁸ Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age,” 50.

sister, the film reframes the invasion as a deeply personal struggle, transforming a historical event into a narrative of familial duty and moral obligation. This intimate framing allows the film to construct a symbolic history where the protection of Ja-in represents the preservation of a fragile and idealized innocence.⁹⁹ Nam-yi becomes the embodiment of broader ideals, creating narratives that contrast the vulnerability of individuals with the chaos of historical events. Ja-in, as an innocent caught in the turmoil of invasion, serves as a symbolic figure for the collateral damage of war. Her capture and eventual rescue are not merely personal stakes but become representative of national survival.

In this framework, Nam-yi's mission to save Ja-in transcends individual heroism, aligning with the symbolic imperative to protect the Joseon dynasty and its integrity. Failure to do so would signify not just a personal loss but a broader failure to defend the nation. This narrative reflects a constructed memory that draws parallels to more recent historical traumas, particularly Japan's colonization of Korea in the 20th century. Ja-in's vulnerability and Nam-yi's resolve evoke the anxieties of a people navigating cycles of invasion and resistance. The narrative draws on melodrama's inherent goal to restore a perceived original innocence, framing Ja-in's rescue as a symbolic reclamation of virtue and order amid chaos. In other words: "melodrama's clear goal [is to] recover and return to this initial moment of virtue and the locus of innocence at the end of its narrative."¹⁰⁰ In the film's symbolic history, the preservation of Ja-in's innocence is equated with the preservation of the nation itself. Her rescue signifies not just a familial victory but a broader assertion of resilience and survival.

Melodrama and Symbolism: Crafting Personal and National Redemption

A better way to think about these historical films is less as completely inaccurate but as simplified portrayals of historical events. Affect can provide a sense of realism in historical narratives, despite simplification, by creating a vivid and immersive experience for the audience or readers. As Bazin suggests, cinematic realism presents an objective scene's 'aesthetic quality,' which is inadvertently overlooked in reality or does not elicit the will of discovery.¹⁰¹ This implies that affective elements in historical narratives, such as those found in the film can draw

⁹⁹ Saena Dozier, "Coming Home: Finding Our Space of Innocence Through Saguk Films," *International Journal of Korean History* 22, no. 2 (2017): 189–90, <https://doi.org/10.22372/ijkh.2017.22.2.189>.

¹⁰⁰ Saena Dozier, "Coming Home: Finding Our Space of Innocence Through Saguk Films," 191.

¹⁰¹ André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema? Volume I*, ed. Hugh Gray (California: University of California Press, 2005), 14.

attention to details and nuances that may be simplified or overlooked in a purely factual account, thus enhancing the overall sense of realism and connection to the past.

As evidenced by the earlier discussion of melodrama, these alternative histories created by film use melodrama to reveal “through either the recognition of a villain” or “the suffering of an innocent victim—a 'moral legibility.'”¹⁰² An example of some of the minor deviations this film has from traditional concepts of history is Nam-yi and his sister. They stand in for an innumerable amount of unnamed people during the Second Qing Invasion, but they also evoke echoes of the colonial period. The dual past is brought forth by the portrayal of resistance against foreign invaders, particularly invaders who take women from their homes. One mode of thought is that during the colonial period, the Korean nation was not strong enough to protect women, so it became a national problem.¹⁰³ Here, there is a revision to the narrative which ends up strengthening the nation because, in the end, Ja-in is rescued.¹⁰⁴

An aspect of this film’s version of history that can be closely analyzed is Nam-yi’s final archery duel with the Qing general, Jyuushinta.¹⁰⁵ The duel adds a compelling personal and melodramatic dimension to the film as part of the story to save Ja-in, while also oversimplifying the complexities of the historical conflict of the Second Qing Invasion, reducing it to a conflict between two individuals and solving it through a relatively simple archery duel. Of course, Nam-yi wins because his reason is just and righteous, compared to the ‘evil’ General Jyuushinta. The melodrama of the moment demands it end in his sacrifice. The film ends with the sense that Nam-yi’s victory for his sister has also redeemed the nation, and guaranteed their inevitable victory. Although the Second Qing Invasion ended in the Qing victory,¹⁰⁶ the ethos of *War of the Arrows* subtly rewrites this history, even if not explicitly, through Nam-yi’s sacrifice.

The final duel is loaded with symbolism and dramatic tension. As the last surviving member of his family, Nam-yi's battle against the Qing general represents not just a personal vendetta but a broader struggle against foreign aggression. General Jyuushinta asks Nam-yi “All

¹⁰² Linda Williams, “Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the ‘Classical,’” 524.

¹⁰³ Pyong Gap Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class,” *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (2003): 945, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3594678>.

¹⁰⁴ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:58:20.

¹⁰⁵ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:51:47-01:55:35.

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan N. Lipman, Barbara Molony, and Michael Edson Robinson, *Modern East Asia: An Integrated History*, 80.

this trouble, to save her?”¹⁰⁷ Several close up eye-level shots of Nam-yi and General Jyuushinta are crosscut, with their eyes directly looking at the camera.¹⁰⁸ This intensifies the dramatic tension and personalizes the conflict. By focusing on their eyes, *War of the Arrows* highlights their determination, fear, and resolve. This technique creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy, making the final duel feel more personal and impactful. Their direct gaze at the camera breaks the fourth wall in a way, implicating the audience in the conflict and inviting them to empathize with the Nam-yi. These shots heighten the emotional and dramatic impact of the duel, including when Nam-yi chooses to pull the arrow in his body out later¹⁰⁹—ensuring his death from blood loss but also allowing him to defeat General Jyuushinta. The dramatic spurt of blood from Nam-yi’s body and mouth should be a sign of his weakness,¹¹⁰ and yet he paradoxically emerges victorious. This action reinforces the film’s narrative of righteousness triumphing over evil, with Nam-yi’s love for his sister and dedication to saving her, and therefore protecting the nation, giving him the strength to overcome the seemingly insurmountable odds of victory in this final duel. History, *War of the Arrows* seems to say, favors the just.

Political and Ethical Complexity of War: *The Fortress*

The final film being discussed is *The Fortress* (2017) directed by Hwang Dong-hyeok, which is also set during the Second Qing Invasion of Joseon in 1637. Through its narrative, the film presents a fictionalized version of King Injo and his court grappling with invasion and their precarious situation trapped inside Namhansanseong—the titular fortress. Some of the most important themes of the film are sacrifice, loyalty, and the human cost of war. All of these themes play a role in the historical reality created within *The Fortress*. The creative liberties *The Fortress* takes with these historical events craft a film narrative that reveals the anxieties and interests of the current world. While what one might consider historical misrepresentation can contribute to nationalism, it also allows us to “challenge the ‘realism’ of both written history and the standard dramatic or documentary historical film” which then expands “the vocabulary in which history can speak.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:51:54.

¹⁰⁸ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:51:55.

¹⁰⁹ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:53:36.

¹¹⁰ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:53:38.

¹¹¹ Robert A. Rosenstone, “Walker: The Dramatic Film As (Postmodern) History,” in *Revisioning History* (Princeton University Press 2020), 202.

Leadership and Sacrifice: King Injo's Dilemmas in The Fortress

In a film full of court drama, King Injo is forced to make impossible choices; should the last of the hay be used to feed the horses or as makeshift beds for soldiers on the front lines?¹¹² This is perhaps one of the high points of the film. While there cannot be an authenticity guarantee, the numerous conversations between King Injo and his court highlight a part of history that can often be forgotten, the complexities behind every single decision a ruler might make. One important scene to discuss is after a messenger has been found killed, and King Injo debates with his court about whether to send another out.¹¹³ Choi Myung-kil and Kim Sang-hun are the two main advisors to King Injo in the film, respectively representing a hope for peace with the Qing and a desire to fight to the last breath. Kim Sang-hun argues for another messenger, insisting that “they cannot cover every inch of ground.”¹¹⁴ The camera is level in a close up shot as he makes the argument, low key lighting adding a dramatic intensity, casting shadows that visually isolate Kim Sang-hun for his continued resistance, underscoring his staunch determination and emphasizing the gravity of his desire to protect his nation to the very end. The isolation is important, as King Injo sharply replies that even “our swift-footed officer failed.”¹¹⁵

Historical Cinema and the Art of Interpretation to Create New History

On a historical level, this scene reflects the challenges faced by King Injo and his advisors during the Second Qing Invasion of Joseon. The decision to send a messenger represents the court's last-ditch effort to seek help and demonstrates the desperate situation they find themselves in. The debate among the courtiers also highlights the complex political dynamics at play, as different factions within the court advocate for different courses of action based on their interests and beliefs. From a narrative perspective, this scene heightens tension and suspense in the film. The court's frequent deliberations create a sense of urgency and uncertainty, as the characters weigh the risks and potential outcomes of their decision. This scene also reveals key aspects of the characters' personalities and motivations, particularly King Injo's inner turmoil as he grapples with the responsibility of leadership and the welfare of his people. For example, while Kim Sang-hun argues for a new messenger to bring the letter, Choi

¹¹² 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:46:03.

¹¹³ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:49:44-00:50:54.

¹¹⁴ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:50:12.

¹¹⁵ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:50:14.

Myung-kil points out that if the Qing intercepts the letter, it “may well be used against us.”¹¹⁶ King Injo is faced with a choice to keep battling, and potentially spell his nation’s doom, or to try negotiation and have to handle the negative consequences were negotiations to fail.

The low key lighting also emphasizes King Injo’s inner turmoil, with further depictions of it apparent through subtle cues in his body language and facial expressions. His furrowed brow, tense posture, and hesitant gestures suggest a conflicted mindset as he weighs the options presented to him and prods his advisors for more information about their arguments.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the use of medium shots like the previous shot depicting King Injo's entire body shows the emotions flickering across his features, from uncertainty and doubt to resolve and determination, and also his tense body language. He leans forward slightly, with his hands on his lap and head tilted slightly to the side as he listens to his advisors. In combination with moments his moments of contemplative silence or hesitation during the scene, *The Fortress* offers glimpses into his internal deliberations and the emotional burden of leadership during an invasion.

Historical Film as a Space for Memory and Debate

These films function as interpretations of the past, constructed through the creative choices and perspectives of their creators. Rather than presenting definitive accounts of history, they actively engage in shaping historical memory by mediating between historical traces and contemporary contexts. While the use of creative liberties may simplify or reframe historical events, it also demonstrates the inherently interpretive nature of history itself. As Hyunseon Lee argues, historical films allow us to “remember, rewrite, and archive historical events,”¹¹⁸ emphasizing that history is not a fixed record but a dynamic process of storytelling and reinterpretation.

By reimagining events like the siege depicted in *The Fortress*, these films navigate the gaps and ambiguities in historical records. For example, we will never know the exact details of every conversation King Injo had with his court during the siege, and the film’s limited runtime condenses the complexities of those decisions. However, this condensation does not diminish the film’s role in constructing a version of history, since these films are interpretations rather than

¹¹⁶ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:50:47.

¹¹⁷ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:50:33.

¹¹⁸ Hyunseon Lee, “The South Korean Blockbuster and a Divided Nation,” 260.

definitive accounts.¹¹⁹ Instead, it underscores the ways historical films weave together narrative, symbolism, and interpretation to create meaning from incomplete records. In doing so, these films do not aim to recover a singular "true" past but to assert a perspective that reflects their cultural and ideological conditions of production.

Through this process, historical films challenge the notion of realism as a neutral benchmark, whether in written history or cinematic representation.¹²⁰ They remind us that all history is mediated and constructed, shaped by the frameworks through which it is viewed. By presenting their interpretations, these films invite critical engagement with history as a narrative process, encouraging viewers to reflect on the multiplicity and subjectivity of historical accounts. Ultimately, while historical films may simplify or reframe events, their narratives play a vital role in exploring the complexities of the past and how they continue to resonate in the present.

When comparing what are thought of as traditional historical records to *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *The Fortress*, and *War of the Arrows*, it is clear that each film takes liberties with historical events to varying extents. For example, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* embellishes Admiral Yi Sun-shin's triumph in the Battle of Myeongnyang with details such as the burning of the last turtle ship. In contrast, *The Fortress* simplifies the complexities of the negotiations and political dynamics during the Namhansanseong siege. Similarly, *War of the Arrows* focuses on individual heroism during the Second Qing Invasion, oversimplifying some of the geopolitical context of the conflict. Through this act of reinterpretation, the films contribute to a broader cultural memory that emphasizes themes of sacrifice, heroism, and collective endurance. Figures like Admiral Yi and King Injo are elevated as larger-than-life symbols, embodying virtues that resonate with national identity and historical continuity. By presenting Korea's historical struggles as a series of triumphs over external threats, these films create histories that assert the centrality of national survival and moral virtue. Kyung Moon Hwang notes that such narratives "signal the centrality of immediate salvation, with plentiful symbols of nationhood making appearances, essential qualities that bestow Korea's existential worthiness from the standpoint of heaven's will."¹²¹ These constructed histories do not aim to recover an

¹¹⁹ Robert A. Rosenstone, "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age," 51.

¹²⁰ Robert A. Rosenstone, "Walker: The Dramatic Film As (Postmodern) History," 202.

¹²¹ Kyung Moon Hwang, "Chapter Two. Forces of Nature on the Topographies of the Nation: Responses to the Calamitous Foreign Invasions, 1590s–1630s," *Fate and Freedom in Korean Historical Films* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2023), 30.

objective past but instead offer interpretations that intertwine historical traces with mythic storytelling, reflecting the values and anxieties of the present.

Nationalism and National Identity

Nationalism Through Mediated Historical Memory

Building on the exploration of writing new versions of history, this section considers how *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *The Fortress*, and *War of the Arrows* depict nationalism and construction conceptions of national identity. By focusing on the portrayal of the Korean heroes of the films, the invading villains, and the power dynamics represented between the defending Koreans versus the invading outsiders, this section will consider how these films can potentially actively shape perceptions of Korean history and identity. Furthermore, this section will explore how the narratives of resilience, sacrifice, and heroism prevalent in all three films contribute to a broader narrative of South Korean nationalism, emphasizing narratives of resilience and struggle deeply rooted in depictions of Korea's historical experiences.¹²² Critically evaluating the portrayal of nationalism and national identity at work in these films deepens the understanding of how films about historical events can rewrite the past and contribute to the film's version of national identity. In particular, highlighting the role of history as constructed in these narratives allows for examining the interplay between history, cinema, and nationalism.

One important way that nationalism is at work to create a national identity through *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* is through the portrayal of the Japanese characters. In the previous section, the aggression and violence of the Japanese Army and the Murakami Clan Navy was an important topic of analysis. In addition, the film uses Admiral Yi not just as a 16th-century symbol of resistance against Japan but also as a broader icon of defiance against Japanese aggression in Korea's history. This portrayal resonates with South Korea's narrative of resistant nationalism against Japanese imperialism, emphasizing Admiral Yi's status as a national hero embodying a spirit of Korean resistance against foreign invaders.¹²³ This type created history works to highlight nationalism because “resistant nationalism toward Japanese Imperialism”¹²⁴ is an important aspect of how nationalism currently functions in South Korea. Japan's invasion of the Joseon dynasty during the Imjin War was not the same as Japan's annexation and

¹²² In this case, ‘historical Korea’ refers to Korea pre-division.

¹²³ Seong-kwan Cho and Jae-beom Hong, “A Hero of the Two Koreas: Yi Sun-Shin Dramatized in North and South,” 61.

¹²⁴ Jaehyeong Ryu, “한국형 블록버스터 영화의 한국 민족주의적 특성 : <공동경비구역 JSA>와 <한반도>를 중심으로” [The Korean Nationalist Characteristics of the Korean Blockbuster Films: Focusing on *Joint Security Area* and *Hanbando*], *Korean Journal of Communication and Information Studies* 59, no. 3 (2012), 122, Author's Translation, accessed February 23, 2024 <https://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE01926819>.

colonization of Korea, but through the merit of being a film depicting Japan invading the Joseon dynasty and harming Korean people by taking land and killing them, Admiral Yi has the opportunity to become a symbol of resistance against Japan. Not just against Japan in the 16th century, but as a broader symbol of resistance against the invasion of Korea by Japan across time. In this way, he also symbolically can serve as a symbol of potential resistance to Japan during the colonial period in the early 20th century.

Two significant moments in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* build upon conceptions of nationalism. The first is when a scout reports about the actions of the Japanese Army during their invasion of a village filled with civilian Koreans. The scout recounts in a voice-over: “They cut off the nose of any who resist” while the camera shows an extreme close-up shot of a Korean man’s nose being removed with a sword.¹²⁵ The diegetic noise of the sword slicing through the Korean man’s flesh is noticeable, particularly since the non-diegetic soundtrack disappears for a moment, highlighting the violence of the action. This is a man who has done nothing more than defend his home. The invasion of civilian villages, places that offer no apparent organized opposition or danger to the Japanese Army’s invading force, is reminiscent of the Japanese colonization of Korea in the 20th century. Cutting this Korean man’s nose off symbolically shows how the “process of colonization has been the process of disempowering colonized nations and colonized people.”¹²⁶

The scout continues recounting in a voice-over: “and use children for target practice.” The voice-over allows for a quick sequence of shots that show Japanese soldiers shooting several children who are fleeing.¹²⁷ The horror of this sequence of shots is highlighted by a child who is shot in the back by a Japanese soldier and then falls to the ground with a final sharp gasp as red blood blooms on their white clothing, making it all the more noticeable and bright due to the contrast.¹²⁸ This works to evoke further memories of how during the colonial period many of Japan’s policies in Korea targeted civilians, in particular children. While it may not have been as physically damaging as shooting children, language policies in schools were implemented that

¹²⁵ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:12:14.

¹²⁶ Hee-Kang Kim, “Should Feminism Transcend Nationalism? A Defense of Feminist Nationalism in South Korea,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 32, no. 2 (2009): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2009.03.002>.

¹²⁷ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:12:17-00:12:22.

¹²⁸ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:12:19.

“emphasised Japanese language education and its primary objective of teaching Japanese ‘without any discrimination between the Japanese and Korean students’ for the ‘making of loyal Japanese.’”¹²⁹ One key point in South Korean films that reproduce and highlight aspects of nationalism is that they are often set during the Japanese colonial period of Korea, with the main conflict of these films often being “between the subjects of Joseon who suffered under Japanese rule and the Japanese rulers who exploited them.”¹³⁰ Although this film is not set in the colonial period, it does reproduce certain aspects of the colonial period—such as the suffering of children—so this can still apply. The reproduction and representation of nationalism is partially due to the invasion of Korea by Japan and the subsequent abuse of the Korean people, especially civilians like children.

Immediately after the child falls to the ground and dies, the Japanese soldiers laugh, a loud diegetic sound that rises above the other diegetic sounds of screaming children and gunshots.¹³¹ This entire sequence of shots is an important aspect of creating the mythos of the two sides in the upcoming battle and establishing a moral dichotomy between the opposing sides in the narrative. In war, violence is to be expected by both sides, and the film has no issues with showing this, but *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* only shows one side of the war harming civilians like women and children and taking joy in these violent actions. By further depicting violence against innocent Koreans to construct a narrative of historical grievance rooted in the relationship between the two nations. The sequence integrates historical grievances into its depiction of resistance, reflecting narratives tied to South Korea’s postcolonial collective memory. This is because “resentment and often pure enmity towards the Japanese is a palpable component of South Korea’s postcolonial collective memory and national identity.”¹³² Through this depiction, the film does not merely recount historical events but actively participates in the construction of a mediated historical narrative, where Admiral Yi’s resistance becomes a symbolic act shaped by the cultural, ideological, and cinematic frameworks of its creation.

¹²⁹ M. J. Rhee, “Language Planning in Korea under the Japanese Colonial Administration, 1910–1945,” *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 5, no. 2 (1992): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908319209525118>.

¹³⁰ Gang Seongryul, “지금 한국영화계는 민족주의 자장 안으로” [The Korean Film Industry is in a Lull of Nationalism], *History Opens Tomorrow* 65 (2016): 124, author’s Translation, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE07077846>.

¹³¹ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:12:21.

¹³² Jerry Won Lee, “Legacies of Japanese Colonialism in the Rhetorical Constitution of South Korean National Identity,” *National Identities* 16, no. 1 (2014): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2013.843516>.

The second scene in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* that builds upon national sentiment and shows certain aspects of South Korean national identity is the introduction of Lim Jung, the wife of Lim Jun-young, a scout for Admiral Yi. Her first appearance has her running into the ocean after her husband, who is sailing away on a small ship to complete his assignment for Admiral Yi.¹³³ Lim Jun-young continues on this mission after saying goodbye to his wife, despite her obvious distress at the reality of him leaving for a mission.¹³⁴ This demonstrates that national duty is more important than family responsibility, at least in times of war. Although this is not a film about the colonial period, it is important to know that films dealing with it are often “based on real events and mainly depict women as victims.”¹³⁵ The moment that Lim Jun-young must leave to fulfill his national duty demonstrates this. When Japan is involved, women are victimized, whether that be directly, or as in this case, indirectly. This is especially relevant for Lim Jung, who is revealed to use a type of sign language to communicate instead of speech.¹³⁶ While her husband understands her, it raises the question of how many people would. Without him, she is rendered powerless and voiceless. When Lim Jun-young tells Lim Jung to “Take care of yourself,”¹³⁷ he is not only speaking about her but can be seen as symbolically referencing the nation, since “women have been assigned a main responsibility in preserving and nurturing national culture.”¹³⁸ Because Japan is not only attacking Korean soldiers but also Korean civilians, it is even more important for women like Lim Jung to be protected. This embodies a major aspect of South Korean national identity, which is lineage. Lineage in this case means to be descended from Dangun, the legendary founder and god-king of the first Korean dynasty, Gojoseon, and the supposed ancestor to all Korean people.¹³⁹ Protecting the Korean lineage is important, and Korean women are necessary for this because they serve to be biological reproducers of a nation.¹⁴⁰ In other words, the symbolic role of Korean women in narratives of

¹³³ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:13:32.

¹³⁴ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:13:35.

¹³⁵ Gang Seongryul, “지금 한국영화계는 민족주의 자장 안으로” [The Korean Film Industry is in a Lull of Nationalism], 124, author’s Translation.

¹³⁶ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:13:44.

¹³⁷ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:14:06.

¹³⁸ Hee-Kang Kim, “Should Feminism Transcend Nationalism? A Defense of Feminist Nationalism in South Korea,” 110.

¹³⁹ John Gordon Melton, “2599-2100 BCE,” *Faiths Across Time: 5,000 Years of Religious History*, vol. 1 (ABC-CLIO, 2014), 31.

¹⁴⁰ Hee-Kang Kim, “Should Feminism Transcend Nationalism? A Defense of Feminist Nationalism in South Korea,” 111.

cultural and generational continuity is central to national identity in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*. Japan's invasion—any foreign invasion—poses a risk to women, the reproducers of a nation.

Overall, it is necessary to recognize that films often “reproduce pain, scars, and suffering as reminders of the past,” contributing to the reconstruction of historical memory and cultural identity.¹⁴¹ Although Korea's colonial period under Japanese rule began in 1910—centuries after the Imjin War (1592–98)—*The Admiral: Roaring Currents* reflects and reframes traumas linked to colonization and foreign invasion as part of a broader historical narrative. As discussions around colonialism and Korean identity continue to evolve, they inform the production of historical films.¹⁴² Many South Korean narratives engage with the memory of Japanese coloniality as a critical aspect of national identity; as Jerry Won Lee suggests, “the Japanese Other is ever-present in the South Korean national imaginary and instrumental to the maintenance of national identity.”¹⁴³ This film engages with constructions of South Korean national identity by focusing on a pivotal historical battle where Admiral Yi's leadership symbolizes resilience and resistance to foreign incursion. *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* provides a framework for a symbolic reinterpretation of history through the Battle of Myeongnyang, emphasizing the complexities of conflict and the cultural significance of asserting sovereignty. *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* provides a framework for a symbolic reinterpretation of history through the Battle of Myeongnyang, emphasizing the complexities of conflict and the cultural significance of asserting sovereignty. This mediated historical narrative underscores the centrality of resistance and resilience in shaping South Korean national identity.

Othering and Internal Struggles in National Identity

While *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* constructs its mediated history primarily through external resistance, *The Fortress* pivots to the internal struggles within Joseon society during the Second Qing Invasion. The portrayal of King Injo's moral dilemmas and the contrasting ideologies of his advisors—Choi Myung-kil and Kim Sang-hun—highlights the challenges of

¹⁴¹ Gil-Soo Han, “The Unsettled Legacies of the Colonial Period in Korea,” *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 32 (2019): 132, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-32/Han-An>.

¹⁴² Gil-Soo Han, 133.

¹⁴³ Jerry Won Lee, “Legacies of Japanese Colonialism in the Rhetorical Constitution of South Korean National Identity,” 11.

constructing a cohesive national identity amid crises. Within the narrative, King Injo is caught between duty to his nation in maintaining sovereignty and saving the people trapped in the fortress who are slowly starving and must resort to eating their horses.¹⁴⁴ King Injo's conflict is exemplified by his advisors, who become representations of the two sides, almost like an angel and devil whispering into King Injo's ears, both advocating for what they believe to be best for the nation. What makes this particularly interesting is that although the angel and devil allegory may work, neither Choi Myung-kil nor Kim Sang-hun are villains in *The Fortress*. They have conflicts regarding their approaches to the Manchurian's invasion, but both come from a place brimming with a desire to protect and serve their nation and king.

A major scene of conflict between the two differing ideologies occurs in the aftermath of a major loss, with three hundred Korean soldiers having fallen to the Qing invaders.¹⁴⁵ The Prime Minister informs King Injo of the incident, taking the blame but also advocating for the men who failed to send reinforcements or execute a retreat—Fortress Commander Lee and his lieutenant—to potentially face severe punishment.¹⁴⁶ In this shot of the Prime Minister, the camera is level and uses a close up shot, with low-key lighting emphasizing the serious situation and potential ramifications. The shot uses shallow focus, with the in focus and Prime Minister framed to the right of the shot. In another shot a few moments later, after King Injo asks who is to blame for the failure, the shot uses a racking focus, emphasizing the change of subject from the Prime Minister to Fortress Commander Lee Shi-baek, the man being blamed for the major failure.¹⁴⁷ Choi Myung-kil, a childhood friend of Lee Shi-baek, defends the choices he made, and Kim Sang-hun also emphasizes that killing Lee Shi-baek will only hurt the morale of the surviving soldiers.¹⁴⁸ King Injo responds by saying: “An officer who loses all of his soldiers cannot avoid responsibility.”¹⁴⁹

The shots of King Injo are often framed in a way that emphasizes his isolation and the weight of his decisions. Close-up shots of King Injo—especially during moments of deliberation or decision-making—highlight his inner turmoil and the immense pressure he faces as the leader

¹⁴⁴ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 00:51:39.

¹⁴⁵ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 01:10:55-01:14:00.

¹⁴⁶ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 01:11:53.

¹⁴⁷ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 01:12:00.

¹⁴⁸ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 01:13:10.

¹⁴⁹ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 01:13:20.

of his nation. The shots in the scene above use low-key lighting to create a sense of intensity and drama, underscoring the gravity of his role and the importance of his decisions. In contrast, the shots of the ministers and advisors, such as Choi Myung-kil, Kim Sang-hun, and the Prime Minister, while also often close up shots, are often framed to emphasize their interactions with each other and their collective deliberations. Even in a close up shot, the framing will emphasize the togetherness of the ministers and advisors, with others still visible in the background or the focus switching from one character to another.¹⁵⁰

In this scene, Choi Myung-kil and Kim Sang-hun come together to defend Fortress Commander Lee Shi-baek,¹⁵¹ demonstrating that despite their different approaches to the invasion, at the end of the day, they are advocating for the people of the Joseon dynasty. In *The Fortress*, the above scene underscores the potential complexities of nationalism and the construction of national identity, particularly in times of crisis. The conflict between King Injo and his advisors, Choi Myung-kil and Kim Sang-hun, reflects the internal struggle of a nation grappling with the challenges of defending its sovereignty. This scene highlights the difficult choices and moral dilemmas faced by leaders and individuals in defending their nation. The portrayal of Choi Myung-kil and Kim Sang-hun as advocates for different approaches to the defense of Joseon demonstrates the diverse perspectives within nationalist movements, but also the inherent goal, which is still to create the best situation for the nation. This complexity demonstrates how “cultural creators emphasized the importance of cultural identity that they must focus on to appeal to local audiences.”¹⁵² In this case, there is an importance placed on defending the nation from invasion. Like with *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* “pain, scars, and suffering are reproduced as reminders of the past.”¹⁵³ *The Fortress* reproduces the trauma and damage to the Korean people during times of invasion, and although this film does not use the Japanese Other,¹⁵⁴ it still creates an Other in the Qing invaders. Defending the nation from an

¹⁵⁰ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 01:12:00.

¹⁵¹ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 01:13:10.

¹⁵² Dal Yong Jin, “Cultural Production in Transnational Culture: An Analysis of Cultural Creators in the Korean Wave,” *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 1830, accessed February 24, 2024, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/16369/3414>

¹⁵³ Gil-Soo Han, “The Unsettled Legacies of the Colonial Period in Korea,” 132.

¹⁵⁴ Jerry Won Lee, “Legacies of Japanese Colonialism in the Rhetorical Constitution of South Korean National Identity,” 11.

Other of any sort is still essential to forming these two films' conception of Korean national identity.

Personal Heroism and Symbolic Resilience in *War of the Arrows*

War of the Arrows diverges from the grand political and military narratives of *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* and *The Fortress*, centering instead on the personal heroism of Nam-yi and his companions. This intimate focus on individual sacrifice and familial devotion serves as a microcosm of national resilience, transforming personal stakes into a symbolic act of defiance against external threats. One important scene for this is when Nam-yi, Seo-goon, and their companions demonstrate their commitment to their nation and its values as they plan to infiltrate the Qing encampment and rescue Ja-in.¹⁵⁵ From a hidden vantage point above the encampment, Nam-yi and his companions observe the enemy's movements, watching as Qing archers shoot bound Koreans with arrows, a merciless action seemingly done for sport.¹⁵⁶ This emphasizes the danger they face, but despite this, Nam-yi, Seo-goon, and the others remain steadfast in their mission to protect Ja-in, and symbolically reclaim a space of innocence for the nation through her rescue. Within the film's narrative, Ja-in is constructed as a symbol of innocence and purity, embodying a broader metaphor for the nation's threatened identity. By rescuing her from the Qing camp, Nam-yi, and his companions are not only saving her life but also symbolically restoring a sense of innocence and purity that has been threatened by the chaos and violence of war. Ja-in's rescue can be viewed as a symbolic victory over the forces of evil and oppression. The Qing invaders, represented by the cruel General Jyuushinta, are depicted as merciless, with no regard for human life or dignity. By successfully infiltrating the Qing camp and rescuing Ja-in, Nam-yi and his companions are not only saving her from harm but also striking a blow against the tyranny and cruelty of the enemy, reclaiming a symbolic space of innocence and righteousness for their nation.

Despite the risk of detection and capture, Nam-yi and his companions remain resolute in their mission to protect their people and their homeland. This scene highlights the characters' deep-seated nationalism and their willingness to sacrifice everything for the greater good of their nation. Nam-yi's leadership and strategic planning are characterized by a strong sense of pride, sacrifice, and devotion to the nation's well-being. The careful planning of their mission

¹⁵⁵ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:09:51-01:11:26.

¹⁵⁶ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:10:15.

underscores the theme of resistance against foreign invasion and occupation, emphasizing the importance of preserving Korean identity and sovereignty in the face of external threats.¹⁵⁷ The camera uses many close ups and medium close ups, which show the four men lying on the ground together and observing the Qing camp.¹⁵⁸ The shots of the four men lying on the ground together convey a sense of unity and shared purpose, highlighting their commitment to their mission. The shots in this scene also all use high-key lighting, removing dramatic shadows as they begin to plan their infiltration. This can be understood to symbolize a sense of clarity and purpose as they begin to plan their infiltration. The lighting suggests a sense of hope and optimism as they plan, contrasting with the harsh realities of the war-torn landscape they are navigating and some of the horrors they observe in the Qing camp. By depicting Nam-yi and his companions as symbols of defiance and resistance, *War of the Arrows* reinforces the idea that national identity is deeply intertwined with the collective memory and history of a nation. This scene captures the essence of nationalism through its portrayal of characters who are willing to risk everything for the sake of their country, centering themes of loyalty, sacrifice, and devotion as central to the character's actions.

South Korea's cultural and political context influences the mediated portrayal of historical events and national identity in these films. By framing narratives of heroism, resilience, and resistance, these films engage with historical traumas, political tensions, and evolving cultural values. The films construct versions of the past that contribute to a dynamic and evolving collective memory of history. These representations engage with both historical struggles and ongoing conversations about identity, offering frameworks for understanding national resilience and pride. In the next section, we will explore how these films depict and shape collective memory and trauma, emphasizing their role in mediating South Korea's historical and cultural consciousness.

¹⁵⁷ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:11:05.

¹⁵⁸ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:10:47.

Collective Trauma and Shaping Collective Memory

Collective Trauma and Mediated Memory in Historical Film

In exploring the themes of collective trauma and memory in Korean cinema, it is essential to consider the complex interplay between history, national identity, and the portrayal of power dynamics. Films such as *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *War of the Arrows*, and *The Fortress* offer narratives that explore Korea's historical struggles against external threats and invasions. These films, while set in different historical periods, share a common thread of depicting Korea as the underdog, facing overwhelming odds but ultimately prevailing in some way through resilience, sacrifice, and unwavering national spirit. These films reinterpret historical events through collective trauma and memory, offering insights into Korea's evolving national identity. By examining how these films engage with collective memory and trauma, we can gain insight into the enduring impact of Korea's past on its present-day national identity and the construction of historical narratives. It is important to note that the collective memory and trauma portrayed in these films do not need to be directly tied to recent lived experiences, but are mediated and reconstructed through the cinematic lens, blending historical events with contemporary cultural frameworks.

Revisiting Trauma Through the Imjin War: *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*

Collective trauma underscores the power dynamics between Korea and Japan in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*. To understand what collective trauma is and its relationship to Korea's portrayal as an underdog, it is necessary to consider the complicated intersection between history and collective memory. Collective memory is a framework of history that depends less on facts and more on how a group of people wants to see themselves at any given moment.¹⁵⁹ Any representation of the past - like *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* - will be influenced by the collective memory of the time it was created. Delineating how it plays into the collective memory of the Imjin War in South Korea will explain how collective trauma in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* creates a parallel to the Japanese colonization of Korea. Furthermore, this parallel becomes an essential part of creating the dynamic of Korea being an underdog because it offers an opportunity for a revision of history.

¹⁵⁹ Serge Schmemmann, "The Anniversary of World War II Is an Invitation to Continue Fighting," *The New York Times*.

South Korea's transition from poverty and colonial rule to economic growth and eventual democracy required a "reworking of collective memory: adopting post-historic narratives that recognize past abuses."¹⁶⁰ Tensions between Japan and South Korea in the early 2010s heightened this reworking of memory, particularly with the return of Shinzo Abe as Japan's prime minister in 2012. His visit to Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013—controversial because war criminals from the colonization of Korea and World War II are enshrined there¹⁶¹—underscored unresolved historical grievances.¹⁶² Context influences how films like *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* construct history, framing colonial abuses and national resilience through the lens of contemporary cultural narratives.¹⁶³ By revisiting historical trauma, the film symbolically reworks and resolves memory, providing a framework to grapple with unresolved pasts and articulate national identity.¹⁶⁴

Two early scenes in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* show the revision of history and parallels to Korea's colonization (1910-45) in tandem. The first scene¹⁶⁵ begins with a ship arriving in a Korean-controlled port; though an unobtrusive vessel, it has gathered a crowd. This first shot from the scene is brightly lit, and the diegetic sound is of wind blowing and ocean water lapping near shore. The camera is level and shows an extreme long shot, where it is easy to observe a crowd gathering at the arrived ship.¹⁶⁶ Two things reveal this ship's arrival is not a victorious return from battle. The lack of triumphant non-diegetic noise is enough to infer that this is not a ship full of soldiers returning home to their families. Although this is a type of return, it is not to be a happy one. The second thing the first shot, an extreme long shot, reveals is that although a crowd has gathered, they are not welcome. The distance of the camera from the action of the first shot makes it apparent that soldiers are present to keep people away from the newly arrived ship. From the beginning of the scene, expectations are set that this is not a scene meant to show anything happy.

¹⁶⁰ Eun A Jo, "Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean-Japanese Relations," 770.

¹⁶¹ Linda Sieg, "Explainer: Why Yasukuni Shrine Is a Controversial Symbol of Japan's War Legacy," *Reuters*, August 14, 2021, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/why-yasukuni-shrine-is-controversial-symbol-japans-war-legacy-2021-08-13/>.

¹⁶² Scott A. Snyder, "South Korea, Japan, and Wartime Shadows," *Council on Foreign Relations*.

¹⁶³ Eun A Jo, "Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean-Japanese Relations," 770.

¹⁶⁴ Kyu-hyun Kim, "A Whirlpool of History: Roaring Currents Between A Determined War Film and A Deifying Biopic," 272.

¹⁶⁵ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:22:24-00:23:20.

¹⁶⁶ 평량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:22:24.

The next shot is from a camera at a high angle with deep focus, showing how the crowd grows as people attempt to move past the soldiers keeping them away from the ship.¹⁶⁷ The sound remains diegetic in this shot, now mostly comprised of unclear but anxious voices, which serves as another way of foreshadowing what is on the ship without revealing it immediately to a viewer. This build-up of tension is essential to emphasize the trauma and anxiety that this war has everyone experiencing, from soldiers to everyday civilians. When the shot that reveals a severed head hanging off the top of the ship's mast begins, there is finally an answer about what has happened.¹⁶⁸ The camera tilts down, following the mast and slowly revealing a message from the Japanese invading force, which a Korean soldier reads in shock: “‘Stay Away to Avoid Beheading.’ That’s Captain Bae Hong-suk!”¹⁶⁹ The unnamed Korean soldier’s reaction is a mirror image of the audience of civilians surrounding the pier, who are also seeing the gruesome corpse and are now co-witnesses of the Japanese army’s cruelty. This is a war film, and it has already had several scenes dedicated to this by the twenty-minute mark. Violence is not unexpected in a war film, so it becomes necessary to emphasize how horrific the Japanese are in the context of *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* telling of this historical event. Delaying the revelation of the decapitation heightens the emotional impact and emphasizes Korean suffering. The brutal killing underscores Korea's struggle for survival against a powerful aggressor. This also ties back to melodrama in film, particularly when considering how melodrama provides moral clarity.¹⁷⁰

When non-diegetic music starts, comprised of gentle piano that evokes a foreboding but curious sense, a new shot shows the bottom of the ship covered in burlap-like fabric.¹⁷¹ The fabric is pulled aside to reveal mutilated heads lying on the bottom of the ships implied to be Captain Bae’s entire crew of men.¹⁷² All the dead men have had parts of their ears and noses removed. This adds to the composition of the shot and the fabula of the film since it informs how brutal the Japanese invading force is willing to act within *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*. When the fabric is pulled to the side to show the heads, the non-diegetic music incorporates a loud

¹⁶⁷ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:22:28.

¹⁶⁸ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:22:44.

¹⁶⁹ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:22:53.

¹⁷⁰ Linda Williams, “Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the ‘Classical,’” 524.

¹⁷¹ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:23:03.

¹⁷² 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:23:11.

drum noise that matches the diegetic gasps of the crowd. The heads at the bottom of the ship belong to the loved ones of people in the gathered crowd. Their fear and despair as more of them rush toward the ship to try and find out if they have lost someone permeates the rest of the scene due to this combined sound design.¹⁷³ The entire scene emphasizes something important for the film's need to have clear-cut villains and heroes: the horror and trauma that Koreans faced during the Imjin War. By filming such a brutal massacre, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* portrays the Japanese invading forces as completely evil, willing to defeat their enemies, but also emotionally harming innocent civilians for no obvious discernable reason other than vague villainy.

The severed heads dramatize the consequences of resistance, reinforcing Korea's struggle against external aggression. There is no line the Japanese will not cross in their quest for victory, so resistance is futile and only results in death. Outside of the scope of the characters, sending the severed heads emphasizes the harshness of the Japanese invading force during the Imjin War. However, it is important to note that Admiral Yi and his contemporaries embellished many of the battles leading up to the Battle of Myeongnyang (1597), making violence more prevalent,¹⁷⁴ when the reality was that the Japanese and Korean soldiers rarely made combat engagements, and no records exist of something so extreme as a ship full of heads from this time in the war.¹⁷⁵ The question then becomes why the film continues to be embellished with this violence.

The answer is quite simple; successful films in South Korea work with themes of brotherhood, which is important in South Korean culture and society since it appeals “to the emotions of Korean audiences.”¹⁷⁶ The death of a large number of Korean soldiers who were brothers-in-arms highlights important South Korean themes and justifies Admiral Yi's later determination to defeat the Japanese at the Battle of Myeongnyang (1597). The massacre emphasizes how collective trauma is mediated through film, using shared cultural narratives to evoke a constructed sense of collective horror and loss.¹⁷⁷ In this case, there is the individual trauma of the soldiers at the port who have discovered the severed heads of their comrades, but also the collective trauma that all Korean soldiers feel at the loss of their brothers-in-arms.

¹⁷³ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:23:16.

¹⁷⁴ Kyu-hyun Kim, “A Whirlpool of History: Roaring Currents Between A Determined War Film and A Deifying Biopic,” 274.

¹⁷⁵ Yi Sun-shin, *Imjin Changch'o: Admiral Yi Sun-Sin's Memorials to Court*, trans. Ha Tae-hung (1979).

¹⁷⁶ Hyunseon Lee, “The South Korean Blockbuster and a Divided Nation,” 262.

¹⁷⁷ Frederik Le Roy, Christel Stalpaert, and Sofie Verdoodt, “Performing Cultural Trauma in Theatre and Film Between Representation and Experience,” *Arcadia* 45, no. 2 (2011): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ARCA.2010.014>.

Mediating historical events through the lens of modern themes means there is always going to be a problem of “thoroughly representing historical facts.”¹⁷⁸ We know that there is a distinct difference between the written past and the past as it is now evoked.¹⁷⁹ The difference is important because of Korea’s role as an underdog in the Imjin War (1592-98). However, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* uses the lengths the Japanese are willing to go to, like attacking the innocent, to emphasize that Korea’s role as an underdog is not only because they are outnumbered, but also because the actions of Admiral Yi and the other Korean citizens are not depicted to be as villainous.

To draw a connection between historical representation and collective memory to collective trauma, one needs to look at Lim Jung, who appears at the end of the previous scene.¹⁸⁰ The wife of scout Lim Jun-young, Lim Jung is also the most important female character in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*. The next scene shows the Korean soldiers from the village preparing to bury all of the heads that arrived from the ship.¹⁸¹ The entire scene is permeated by the diegetic sound of women weeping over their dead husbands, sons, and brothers while the stoic Korean soldiers remain silent despite losing many of their brothers-in-arms.¹⁸² This scene serves as a loose parallel of the colonial period, when “Japan drafted Korean young men for military service through a voluntary system” and “it forcibly drafted many young Koreans,”¹⁸³ thereby taking husbands, sons, and brothers away. The Korean soldiers’ silence is a representation of just how accustomed they are to the loss of their brothers-in-arms at the hands of Japan, to the point that they do not have time to waste tears on it. Lim Jung arrives and collapses while presumably looking for the head of her husband, making it obvious that Lim Jung has no idea if Lim Jun-young has been caught and killed or is alive.¹⁸⁴ The only sounds are of the women around her weeping and a Korean soldier ordering them to “Get them out of here!”¹⁸⁵ It is of note that even as she collapses with a look of shock, she still does not make any noise, not even weeping.

¹⁷⁸Seung-woo Ha, “Culture Critiques: The Return of Yi Sun-shin: Mediating the Present and the Past-The Admiral: Roaring Currents [명량], directed by Kim Han-Min. Big Stone Pictures, CJ Entertainment, 2014. Film,” 236.

¹⁷⁹ Frederik Le Roy, Christel Stalpaert, and Sofie Verdoodt, “Performing Cultural Trauma in Theatre and Film Between Representation and Experience,” 256.

¹⁸⁰ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:23:16.

¹⁸¹ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:23:20-00:23:45.

¹⁸² 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:23:34.

¹⁸³ Pyong Gap Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women’: The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class,” 943-44.

¹⁸⁴ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:23:39.

¹⁸⁵ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:23:40.

Her muteness prevents her from joining in with the grief of the other women, only further emphasizing the helplessness that all of them will experience without the men in their lives. The women in this section being the only ones to mourn sends another explicit message; women's entire lives are tied to men. Lim Jung's identity, tied to her husband, is stripped away by Japan, mirroring the broader victimization of Korean women during colonization.¹⁸⁶ By highlighting the suffering women feel at the loss of these men, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* also situates Korea, once again, as occupying a position for a just cause. They do not take away life from the women of Japan because, in this film, the women of Japan do not exist to feel grief.

There is another aspect to what it means for Lim Jung to become a widow. She now represents what the invaders desire to take from Korea, and that is men. This is where it becomes apparent that there are parallels between the film and Korea's colonization. In the colonial period, Japan stripped Korean men of the ability to protect women. The Japanese commandeered 200,000 Korean and other Asian young women and teenagers to serve Japanese soldiers in military brothels.¹⁸⁷ Park Ok-Sun, a survivor of Japanese sexual slavery, said: "our country, colonized by Japan, was not strong enough to protect us. Therefore, this is not our individual problem, but our nation's problem."¹⁸⁸ *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* uses Lim Jung to evoke a fear of what might happen if Japan were to win the Imjin War. Her existence is as a woman who has been robbed of her life by Japan. She becomes a warning of what might happen, and a reason for the South Korean audience to further root for Admiral Yi's victory. A victory for Admiral Yi offers the opportunity for a revision of this history, a revision where instead of "failing to protect national property" (i.e., Korean women), which "was considered a national shame"¹⁸⁹ as occurred in Korea's colonization, there is an opportunity for a narrative that "has the therapeutic value of warding off the compulsive repetition of a trauma."¹⁹⁰ The film's portrayal of this victory serves as a cathartic narrative resolution, allowing the audience to confront and process the collective trauma of Korea's colonization through a symbolic triumph over potential historical outcomes.

¹⁸⁶ Pyong Gap Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class," 938.

¹⁸⁷ Pyong Gap Min, 938.

¹⁸⁸ Pyong Gap Min, 945.

¹⁸⁹ Hee-Kang Kim, "Should Feminism Transcend Nationalism? A Defense of Feminist Nationalism in South Korea," 111.

¹⁹⁰ Frederik Le Roy, Christel Stalpaert, and Sofie Verdoodt, "Performing Cultural Trauma in Theatre and Film Between Representation and Experience," 260.

So, what about collective memory that has been used to create collective trauma and represent Korea as an underdog? The performance of the Battle of Myeongnyang (1597) in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* is a recreation of cultural trauma from Japan. Performing collective trauma moves it from the level of the individual to a collective community of people.¹⁹¹ This collective trauma, however, is not a direct reliving of historical events but a mediated and dramatized construction, shaped by the film's cultural and political context. History has been reworked to become a collective trauma portrayed on screen. What does this do then? "The Battle of Myeongnyang led by Yi is one of the most important victories in Korean naval history,"¹⁹² and *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* shows us how outnumbered the Korean people were. By blending dramatized violence and evocative imagery, the film constructs a narrative of collective trauma that draws on broader historical anxieties rather than directly recreating lived experiences. Through the massacre of Captain Bae and his troops alongside the evocation of women as needing protection through the inclusion of Lim Jung, Korea is an underdog, and it is obvious that their cause is just, in contrast to Japan's cause. The collective trauma created then is Japan's invasion during the Imjin War, which parallels Japan's colonization of Korea. Colonization was a turning point in Korean history for many reasons, including but not limited to the division of the country.¹⁹³ It became a shattering point in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. The parallel between the Imjin War and Japan's colonization of Korea serves as a way for South Korean citizens "who experienced trauma repeatedly" to return to the shattering but also offers an alternative solution.¹⁹⁴ Yoo also said that trauma's repetition does not need to maintain the same outcome for a group.¹⁹⁵ *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* portrays fundamental fears, anxieties, and desires that arise as a result of collective trauma while offering an alternative outcome through Admiral Yi's later victory at the Battle of Myeongnyang.¹⁹⁶ Although the experience of trauma may be different between viewers, direct versus indirect, the film's engagement with anxieties surrounding invasion can bridge the gap between those with direct

¹⁹¹ Frederik Le Roy, Christel Stalpaert, and Sofie Verdoodt, 256.

¹⁹² Seung-woo Ha, "Culture Critiques: The Return of Yi Sun-shin: Mediating the Present and the Past-The Admiral: Roaring Currents [명량], directed by Kim Han-Min. Big Stone Pictures, CJ Entertainment, 2014. Film," 236.

¹⁹³ Jonathan N. Lipman, Barbara Molony, and Michael Edson Robinson, *Modern East Asia: An Integrated History*, 321.

¹⁹⁴ Hyon Joo Yoo, "The Chronotope of Trauma in National Cinema," 83.

¹⁹⁵ Hyon Joo Yoo, 83.

¹⁹⁶ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:56:08.

experiences and those with inherited cultural memories. Although some audience members may not have direct experience under colonial rule, some aspects of this period are still visible in contemporary life. One example of this was mentioned previously, Shinzo Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 and the seeming confirmation of his historical revisionism.¹⁹⁷

Ambiguities of Resistance and Surrender in *The Fortress*

While *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* centers on external resistance against a foreign invader, *The Fortress* explores the internal dilemmas of sovereignty and survival, expanding the scope of collective trauma. *The Fortress* shifts focus to the Second Qing Invasion (1636–37) and the siege of Namhansanseong. Both films explore the psychological and emotional toll of war on individuals and society, highlighting themes of resilience, sacrifice, and national identity. *The Fortress* is an example of how films often use the fabula to “represent or allude to Korea's history of colonization, war, and military dictatorship over the past century and the struggles of its people to deal with consequent traumatic memory, [and] post-traumatic stress.”¹⁹⁸ This argument by Sung-Ae Lee is in regards to a discussion of fairy-tale films in South Korea, but in the same way that South Korean cinema uses “well-known traditional folktales and a small number of Western fairy tales as a significant domain in which to comment on Korean social, political and economic life,”¹⁹⁹ South Korean cinema also uses historical film to comment and engage with social, political, and economic life, particularly through these “post-historic narratives,” which recognize past abuses and traumas, like the trauma of invasion.”²⁰⁰

The siege of Namhansanseong threatens not only those inside the fortress, including King Injo and his court but also Korea's sovereignty and cultural identity. The siege symbolizes the existential threat to Korean sovereignty. The Qing dynasty's desire to establish a tributary relationship with Korea was not merely a diplomatic maneuver but a strategic move to exert control over Korea and legitimize their rule over China.²⁰¹ This larger anxiety surrounding the invasion can be viewed through the lens of South Korea's more recent history of colonization by Japan. The annexation and subsequent colonization of Korea by Japan left a lasting impact on the

¹⁹⁷ Scott A. Snyder, “South Korea, Japan, and Wartime Shadows,” *Council on Foreign Relations*.

¹⁹⁸ Sung-Ae Lee, “Memory, Trauma and History: Fairy-tale film in Korea,” in *The Fairy Tale World*, ed. Andrew Teverson (London: Routledge, 2019), 356.

¹⁹⁹ Sung-Ae Lee, 366.

²⁰⁰ Eun A Jo, “Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations,” 770.

²⁰¹ Jonathan N. Lipman, Barbara Molony, and Michael Edson Robinson, *Modern East Asia: An Integrated History*, 80.

collective consciousness of the Korean people.²⁰² The surrender of King Injo and his court can symbolize the difficult decisions faced by leaders in preserving sovereignty during periods of external domination,²⁰³ reflecting broader themes of resilience and pragmatism in the face of overwhelming odds, where the options for safeguarding Korean sovereignty were limited.²⁰⁴

While King Injo's decision to surrender may not offer the same cathartic release as a triumphant resistance might, it can still serve as a reminder of the complexities and challenges of Korean history. Postcolonial cinema's treatment of the colonial period offers a perspective that goes beyond the obvious nationalist framework; acknowledging the dominant nationalist legacy that emphasizes collective resistance against colonizers and the subtle ambiguities in the debate of anticolonial nationalism.²⁰⁵ This approach resonates with the complexities depicted in *The Fortress*, where King Injo's decision to surrender to the Qing reflects the difficult situations and ambiguities faced by Koreans during the colonial period—like being drafted into the Japanese military.²⁰⁶ In particular, King Injo's choice highlights the pragmatic considerations accompanying resistance efforts. King Injo and his court faced the reality of a prolonged siege and the potential devastation it would bring to the people inside Namhansanseong and his nation if the Qing succeeded in their siege. By surrendering first, King Injo maintains some autonomy as a ruler. The film then creates a history that symbolically leaves space to acknowledge both resilience and the challenges of Korea's colonial past.

If collective memory's historical framework depends on how a group of people wants to see themselves at any given moment,²⁰⁷ then the self-image reflected in *The Fortress* can be seen as reflecting a desire to remember and commemorate the resilience and sacrifices of past members of a nation. The film's setting during the Second Qing Invasion of Joseon depicts King Injo and his court grappling with the decision to surrender to the Qing forces, highlighting the complexities and challenges of maintaining sovereignty in the face of external threats. This narrative aligns with a broader theme of resilience and survival in Korean historical films,

²⁰² Jonathan N. Lipman, Barbara Molony, and Michael Edson Robinson, 321.

²⁰³ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 02:08:26.

²⁰⁴ Aman Verma, "Discourse on Nationalism in Colonial Period of Korea," *International Journal of Applied Research and Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 227, <https://doi.org/10.22271/allresearch.2021.v7.i2d.8281>.

²⁰⁵ Ji-yoon An, "Parameters of Disavowal: Colonial Representation in South Korean Cinema," *Journal of Japanese & Korean Cinema* 10, no. 2 (2018): 185, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17564905.2018.1518300>.

²⁰⁶ Pyong Gap Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women': The Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class," 943-44.

²⁰⁷ Serge Schmemmann, "The Anniversary of World War II Is an Invitation to Continue Fighting," *The New York Times*.

particularly as “South Koreans are emotionally invested in the lingering impact of the Japanese colonial period.”²⁰⁸ This echoes a collective memory of past struggles and abuses,²⁰⁹ and emphasizes the importance of national identity and sovereignty. *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* and *The Fortress* grapple with collective trauma, but they approach it from distinct angles. While *The Admiral* emphasizes triumph and resilience through a dramatized victory, *The Fortress* delves into the complexities of survival and the pragmatic sacrifices required to preserve national identity under dire circumstances. They offer complementary perspectives on how historical memory is mediated and constructed through film.

²⁰⁸ Russell Edwards, “The Dictator’s Daughter and the Rising Sun: Scars of Colonialism in South Korean Cinema During the Park Geun-Hye Era,” in *The Two Koreas and Their Global Engagements*, ed. Andrew David Jackson (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2022), 36.

²⁰⁹ Eun A Jo, “Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations,” 770.

Opportunities for Catharsis

South Korean cinema has produced several historical epics that look into the nation's past, offering not just narratives of heroism and struggle, but also avenues for catharsis and reflection on collective trauma. *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *War of the Arrows*, and *The Fortress* each focus on a different aspect of Korea's history yet collectively contribute to a broader narrative of resilience, sacrifice, and national identity. These films provide accounts of historical events and serve as mirrors to contemporary issues. Through their immersive storytelling and vivid portrayals of characters grappling with impossible choices, these films highlight the power of historical narratives to inspire reflection on the past.

The Admiral: Roaring Currents and Constructing Catharsis

The Admiral: Roaring Currents exemplifies how South Korean cinema constructs historical narratives to explore nationalist themes and evoke catharsis. The film centers on Admiral Yi Sun-sin and his resistance against Japanese forces during the Imjin War. According to Ryu, “Korean nationalist films fall into three categories: ‘nationalist films based on Korean sentiment and culture,’ ‘ethnic nationalist films that pursue the homogeneity of the Korean people,’ and ‘nationalist films with a resistant character that reveal anti-Japanese or anti-American sentiments.’”²¹⁰ Within the narrative, Admiral Yi embodies the archetype of a resistant character, representing Korean resilience and moral fortitude. The portrayal of the Japanese forces as antagonistic and one-dimensional reinforces a clear dichotomy between good and evil, aligning with the film’s nationalist underpinnings.

Through its depiction of Admiral Yi’s steadfast leadership and moral righteousness, the film elevates him to a symbolic figure of Korean sovereignty and resistance.²¹¹ By drawing parallels between the Imjin War and Korea’s colonial experiences, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* intertwines historical trauma with nationalism to create a narrative imbued with emotional weight. This framing allows the film to channel collective anxieties into portraying triumph over adversity. The climactic naval victory, though dramatized, serves as an opportunity

²¹⁰ Jaehyeong Ryu, “한국형 블록버스터 영화의 한국 민족주의적 특성 : <공동경비구역 JSA>와 <한반도>를 중심으로” [The Korean Nationalist Characteristics of the Korean Blockbuster Films: Focusing on *Joint Security Area* and *Hanbando*], 121, Author’s Translation.

²¹¹ Seong-kwan Cho and Jae-beom Hong, “A Hero of the Two Koreas: Yi Sun-Shin Dramatized in North and South,” 60.

for catharsis within the film, resolving the narrative's tensions and affirming Korea's strength and resilience in the face of historical challenges.

Ordinary People as Heroes

One key point that highlights how everything comes together to create catharsis is when the civilians of Korea fleeing from a seaside village help Admiral Yi emerge victorious from the Battle of Myeongnyang. Scout Lim Jun-young was aboard a ship carrying gunpowder and on a collision course with Admiral Yi's ship.²¹² Gunpowder is an important difference between the weaponry of Japan and Korea and part of what establishes Korea as the underdog in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*. Having seen the damage guns and gunpowder do to Korean people at several points in the film,²¹³ this moment emphasizes the danger Admiral Yi and his men face and serves as a reminder of Japan's technical superiority. However, the expected outcome is changed through the actions of civilians, otherwise known as 'ordinary' people. Although Admiral Yi is aware of the gunpowder-filled ship he cannot communicate with Captain Ahn's vessel, which is the only one capable of saving Admiral Yi from impending doom.²¹⁴ It becomes up to Lim Jun-young to convey the danger. However, before he can do so, he must fight off a Japanese soldier who attempts to stop him. In the process, Lim Jun-young is fatally stabbed under the watchful eyes of his wife, Lim Jung, who is watching from a cliff nearby.²¹⁵ The shot sequence is made up of fourteen rapid shots, all with a steady cam that highlights the intensity of battle as it follows the action. The non-diegetic soundtrack begins lightly and sounds almost uplifting despite the intensity of the shots, up until the Japanese soldier who stabbed Lim Jun-young is killed,²¹⁶ upon which the music takes a darker turn with deep tones as the sequence ends with Lim Jung's horrified face in a close up shot. All of this shows how much Lim Jun-young is sacrificing by attempting to stop the ship of gunpowder he is trapped on. He had to choose between his wife and his nation, and his choice ended his life. His wife is seemingly powerless to do anything, and for just a moment, this reinforces the idea discussed in the previous section that losing a husband means that Lim Jung is losing her life as well.

²¹² 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:33:29.

²¹³ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:09:51; 00:12:19.

²¹⁴ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:33:13.

²¹⁵ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:34:14-01:34:31.

²¹⁶ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:34:28.

When Lim Jung's husband pleads with her in his last moments to help him stop the ship, ordering her to: "Wave something and make them fire at me."²¹⁷ At this point, because of Lim Jung's role as a warning and reminder of what happened to women in the colonial period, there is seemingly no doubt that this parallel will continue and she will remain powerless. However, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* rejects this and when Lim Jung waves the red fabric from her hanbok and screams,²¹⁸ it becomes a point of historical revision and catharsis. The rest of the civilians on the nearby cliffs see Lim Jung and join her in trying to get the attention of Captain Ahn.²¹⁹ Jerry Won Lee writes that "Constructive rhetorics which create, rather than address, a collective audience are instrumental to the construction of a collective national identity."²²⁰ The image of civilians waving bright clothing from the cliffsides serves as visual rhetoric that creates national identity through the common goal of stopping the Japanese Navy's gunpowder-filled ship. This becomes a moment in the film that creates a sense of solidarity between the civilians and the Korean soldiers. They are now brothers-in-arms with the Korean soldiers, all because Lim Jung found her voice. It is also important to note that in the *Nanjung Ilgi*, Admiral Yi makes no mention of a ship filled with gunpowder or a crowd of people on the shore being instrumental in putting a stop to said ship.²²¹

The actions of the 'ordinary' people in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* highlight their transformation from passive observers to active participants in their survival and resistance. Within the film's narrative, this shift underscores the power of collective action and loyalty, as ordinary citizens respond to Admiral Yi Sun-sin's unwavering dedication to them. This dynamic becomes especially significant when viewed in the context of the film's historical parallels to Korea's annexation by Japan in the 20th century. The film "reinterprets the power of the people who responded to Yi Sun-shin's loyalty to them with loyalty,"²²² culminating in the symbolic triumph of the Korean people through the defeat of the Japanese gunpowder ship.²²³ This

²¹⁷ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:35:09.

²¹⁸ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:35:43.

²¹⁹ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:36:16.

²²⁰ Jerry Won Lee, "Legacies of Japanese Colonialism in the Rhetorical Constitution of South Korean National Identity," 3.

²²¹ Yi Sun-shin, *Nanjung Ilgi: War Diary of Admiral Yi Sun-Sin*, trans. Ha Tae-hung, 312-15.

²²² Won-Seon Shin, "<명량>을 보는 세 가지 방식" [Three Ways to View *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*], *Contemporary Film Studies* 10, no. 3 (2014): 392, Author's Translation, <https://doi.org/10.15751/cofis.2014.10.3.381>.

²²³ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:38:11.

moment serves as a powerful revision of history, one in which ordinary individuals play an essential role in achieving a victory that transcends the immediate historical moment.

Defeating an Enemy

Admiral Yi eventually faces his most vicious enemy, Kurushima, near the end of the film. The showdown between the two is inevitable, with Admiral Yi as the hero standing for the just ideals of the Korean people and Kurushima as a violent and morally reprehensible representation of Japan, specifically seeming to reference Imperial Japan during the colonial period. Before he can reach Admiral Yi, Kurushima faces Junsu, the Japanese spy for the Joseon dynasty, and Admiral Yi. To the non-diegetic soundtrack of triumphant music, Kurushima is stopped in his tracks as the camera pans upwards from a blade stabbed in his side to reveal a vicious Junsu.²²⁴ This moment is salient because Kurushima represents everything terrible about the actions of the Japanese soldiers, as established in his first appearance and discussed in the first section of this paper. This becomes a moment of satisfaction for the film since Kurushima is associated with killing children, mutilating and beheading men, as well as having no morals.²²⁵

Kurushima breaks away from Junsu, only to be met and hit with a volley of arrows.²²⁶ Despite his fatal injuries—evidenced by blood dripping out of his mouth and more than five arrows embedded in his torso²²⁷—Kurushima still rises and screams “Yi Sun-shin!” as he runs towards the Admiral, sword drawn.²²⁸ For what should be a climactic battle when Kurushima finally reaches Admiral Yi, victory is swiftly determined. Admiral Yi swiftly slices his sword through the air and a spray of blood across the screen reveals all, as moments later Kurushima’s head falls to the bloody deck of Admiral Yi’s ship.²²⁹ While the battle is not over, the shots’ finality as the non-diegetic soundtrack ends shares the information that Admiral Yi has faced his most formidable opponent. The satisfaction from this moment “lies in the possibility of returning, not to the same arc of movement, but to a slightly altered orbit where a new engagement with the other occurs.”²³⁰ The new engagement is the defeat of the man who represented Japan’s harmful actions during *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*.

²²⁴ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:45:45-01:45:48.

²²⁵ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 00:09:59; 00:12:19; 00:23:11.

²²⁶ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:46:10.

²²⁷ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:46:28.

²²⁸ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:46:37.

²²⁹ 명량 [The Admiral: Roaring Currents], 01:46:49.

²³⁰ Hyon Joo Yoo, “The Chronotope of Trauma in National Cinema,” 82.

These two moments during the film's portrayal of the Battle of Myeongnyang are essential in formulating catharsis. It is the transformation of the 'ordinary' people from "a state of passive resignation in the crisis of death into protagonists of independent determination."²³¹ By evoking similar imagery to that of the colonial period, a point of massive collective trauma, the repetition of traumatic moments in *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* is not just a recreation of the past; it offers an alternative outcome with Admiral Yi's victory.²³² Here, 'ordinary' people are instrumental in the defeat of Japan, and this becomes a cathartic expression of a desire to reorder history and rewrite Korea's colonization. Since "resentment and often pure enmity towards the Japanese is a palpable component of South Korea's postcolonial collective memory and national identity,"²³³ *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* also works as an expression of resentment towards Japan. By showcasing a historical battle where all the odds were in Japan's favor according to Admiral Yi in the *Nanjung Ilgi*,²³⁴ the film emphasizes Japan's defeat. College student Kim Young-dong said it best in an opinion article for *The Korea Times*: "many Koreans harbor [sic] feelings of hatred towards Japan and want to express their feelings ... These feelings are exposed through sports or movies based on nationalism."²³⁵

Hyunseon Lee frames the significance of films like *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* with the question: "Archiving historical narratives, keeping a collective memory of war and myth thereafter alive, unwritten history, unhealed historical wounds and traumas, and the nation - how better can these be collected, preserved and appreciated on a wide scale than with the 20th century mass media, film?"²³⁶ Although the film is a 21st-century production, it aligns with this idea by preserving and reinterpreting the Battle of Myeongnyang. Through its dramatization, the film keeps historical memory alive and engages with unhealed wounds and collective traumas, drawing connections between Korea's colonial past and the Imjin War. By envisioning

²³¹ Han Yeonghyeon, "영웅의 대중적 호출과 역사적 상상력: 영화 <명량>" [A Public Call for a Hero and Historical Imagination: The Movie *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*], *Contemporary Cinema Studies* 11, no.1 (2015): 106-7, Author's Translation, <https://doi.org/10.15751/cofis.2015.11.1.89>.

²³² Hyon Joo Yoo, "The Chronotope of Trauma in National Cinema," 83.

²³³ Jerry Won Lee, "Legacies of Japanese Colonialism in the Rhetorical Constitution of South Korean National Identity," 1.

²³⁴ Yi Sun-shin, *Nanjung Ilgi: War Diary of Admiral Yi Sun-Sin*, trans. Ha Tae-hung, 312.

²³⁵ Young-dong Kim, "Nationalism and Korean Movies," *The Korea Times*, August 5, 2009, accessed February 15, 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/special/2009/08/173_49678.html.

²³⁶ Hyunseon Lee, "The South Korean Blockbuster and a Divided Nation," 264.

alternative outcomes and centering the resilience of ordinary individuals, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* provides a narrative space for catharsis.

Melodrama as a Tool For Catharsis in *War of the Arrows*

The final confrontation in *War of the Arrows* serves as an example of how melodrama inevitably offers the space for catharsis.²³⁷ As Nam-yi sacrifices himself to save Ja-in, a narrative is created that symbolizes broader historical struggles faced by the people of Korea, particularly as discussed in the sections on nationalism and history. This scene offers moral clarity in a complex world,²³⁸ in particular by portraying Nam-yi's sacrifice as a transformative act of resistance against foreign aggression and a reaffirmation of Korean identity. Ja-in knows Nam-yi's fate before he dies, which becomes clear as she screams in horror when he pulls an arrow out of his body.²³⁹ The camera uses an extreme close up shot, with some slight reframing of Ja-in as she cries out. Her face is not completely in the frame; by not fully showing her face, *War of the Arrows* emphasizes the intensity of her emotions, leaving some of it to the imagination of the audience. In addition, the dramatic non-diegetic music throughout the scene, particularly loud when Ja-in screams and as Nam-yi dies in Ja-in's arms²⁴⁰ enhances the affect of the film by intensifying emotions, building tension, highlighting key moments, and creating emotional resonance with the audience. Because "viewers tend to interpret and remember scenes in ways that are congruent with the emotion conveyed by the music,"²⁴¹ this music heightens the emotional intensity of scenes, making viewers more deeply connected to the characters and empathetic to Ja-in's suffering as Nam-yi dies. It also builds tension leading up to Nam-yi's sacrifice, making the eventual release of tension when he passes away more impactful.

Nam-yi's sacrifice becomes not just a personal tragedy but a moment of national significance, echoing Gaines' argument that tears in melodrama signify resistance against tragic outcomes.²⁴² Despite the tragedy of Nam-yi's death, he has sacrificed himself to redeem Ja-in from a darker fate. The scene suggests hope for a better future, as Nam-yi's act of selflessness

²³⁷ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:55:39-01:57:20.

²³⁸ Linda Williams, "Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the 'Classical,'" 524.

²³⁹ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:53:39.

²⁴⁰ 최종병기 활 [War of the Arrows], 01:56:59.

²⁴¹ Siu-Lan Tan, Matthew P. Spackman, and Elizabeth M. Wakefield. "The Effects of Diegetic and Nondiegetic Music on Viewers' Interpretations of a Film Scene," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 34, no. 5 (2017): 608, <https://doi.org/10.1525/mp.2017.34.5.605>.

²⁴² Jane M. Gaines, "Even More Tears: The Historical Time Theory of Melodrama," 332.

and bravery reinforces the idea of melodrama as a mode of feeling that generates outrage against injustice. Going back to the beginning of this thesis, Jane M. Gaines' "historical time theory of melodrama"²⁴³ is essential to the catharsis created by Nam-yi saving Ja-in in *War of the Arrows* because it frames the events of the film within the history created by the film. *War of the Arrows* uses melodramatic elements like non-diegetic music extreme close ups, and framing to create a narrative that not only entertains but engages with historical events like the Second Qing Invasion. Nam-yi's heroic act of saving Ja-in is a moment of catharsis within *War of the Arrows* because it represents a triumph over adversity and a restoration of order.

The portrayal of Ja-in in *War of the Arrows* embodies the vulnerability of a nation in the face of invasion. This further reinforces the connection between personal and national narratives and allows the narrative to reflect on the complexities of history and identity. Through the articulation of space and the gendered nature of national sovereignty—Ja-in still needs to be redeemed and saved by a man—*War of the Arrows* offers a cathartic experience that eventually transcends individual stories like Nam-yi and Ja-in's to resonate with larger historical forces. By redeeming Ja-in from the invaders and ultimately sacrificing himself for her, Nam-yi ensures a space of innocence because his actions become the center of a moral good.²⁴⁴ In this way, *War of the Arrows* offers an opportunity for narrative catharsis in the redemption and salvation of Ja-in from the invaders.

Surrender as a Form of Resistance

Finally, in *The Fortress* King Injo's eventual decision to surrender to the Qing invaders creates a seemingly paradoxical opportunity for narrative catharsis.²⁴⁵ This choice is not a simple act of submission to the invading force, but a complex strategy made to retain the identity of King Injo and the Korean people. The scene begins with an establishing shot, with deep focus and deep space. As the camera ascends and moves forward, the true scale of the Qing is shown.²⁴⁶ The scene is devoid of non-diegetic sound, the absence of which heightens the tension, highlighting the wind and the eerie silence of the army, which underscores the gravity of the situation. If King Injo had not chosen to surrender, the Joseon dynasty would not have been able to withstand the sheer number of invaders. King Injo says, "Your mercy is immeasurable, your

²⁴³ Jane M. Gaines, 329.

²⁴⁴ Linda Williams, "Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the 'Classical,'" 525.

²⁴⁵ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 02:08:11-02:10:10.

²⁴⁶ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 02:08:15.

imperial majesty.”²⁴⁷ Although surrender is not a situation where the underdog emerges victorious, this moment is nonetheless an important action of national preservation. By surrendering, King Injo has ensured his people and nation's survival.

A translator declares: “The King of Joseon will now perform the ritual of three bows and nine prostrations!”²⁴⁸ The camera is angled up at the translator and the platform where the leaders of the Qing invaders sit. King Injo, by contrast, is on the ground. The camera acts as a placeholder for King Injo here, showing his view as he looks up at the invading force that holds the power to determine the fate of his nation and his position as the King of Joseon. The sky is grey above the platform, and the diegetic sound of the wind continues alongside the shouting of the translator. The point of this invasion in more traditionally accepted versions of history and the film’s version of history was that “the Manchu emperor wants to compel the Koreans, beholden to bigoted delusions and internal fragmentation, to come to their senses and capitulate on their own.”²⁴⁹ Because King Injo chose to surrender and because the Qing had no desire for any further power, the nation, its people, and its culture were safe from further risk. The camera angles sound design, and mood provided by the mise-en-scene all serve to further highlight just how outnumbered King Injo would have been if he fought. This also highlights the prudence of his choice to humble himself before the invading force by bowing, showing how King Injo in *The Fortress* is a leader willing to sacrifice his pride for the sake of his people.

It is in this way that King Injo's surrender in *The Fortress* also creates narrative room for catharsis, challenging some conventional notions of heroism and victory. Instead of glorifying a futile last stand or a dramatic victory, it presents surrender as a pragmatic choice that, while painful, ultimately preserves the lives of those inside Namhansanseong and beyond. This portrayal subverts traditional narratives of heroism and sacrifice, suggesting that courage lies not only in fighting to the end but also in making difficult decisions for the greater good. King Injo’s sacrifice of his pride as a leader for the sake of his nation by bowing and prostrating himself is a quieter type of heroism, but it is heroism.²⁵⁰ By embracing the complexity of what it is to be a

²⁴⁷ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 02:08:49.

²⁴⁸ 남한산성 [The Fortress], 02:09:03.

²⁴⁹ Kyung Moon Hwang, “Chapter Two. Forces of Nature on the Topographies of the Nation: Responses to the Calamitous Foreign Invasions, 1590s–1630s,” 44.

²⁵⁰ Eyal Ben-Ari, Uzi Ben-Shalom, Nehemia Stern, and René Moelker, “Introduction: Seven Theses on Heroism in Post-Heroic Societies,” in *Military Heroism in a Post-Heroic Era*, ed. Uzi Ben-Shalom, René Moelker, Nehemia Stern, and Eyal Ben-Ari, (Springer Cham, 2024), 3-19.

hero, *The Fortress* allows the opportunity for catharsis. Catharsis exists not only in triumphant victory but also in the recognition of resilience.

Conclusion

The analysis of three melodramatic South Korean historical films in this thesis reveals a complex interplay between national identity, historical memory, and collective trauma. *War of the Arrows*, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, and *The Fortress* serve as narratives that intertwine melodrama with historical events, providing audiences with a unique lens through which to view Korea's past. These films not only recount tales of heroism and struggle but also prompt reflections on the nation's history, encouraging viewers to empathize with the challenges faced by the fictional characters and historical figures on screen. Melodrama plays a particularly pivotal role in shaping collective memory and reinforcing narratives of Korean national resilience within these films. By portraying Korea as an underdog confronting formidable invasions, melodrama elicits empathy and underscores the nation's capacity to overcome historical injustices. This thesis used melodrama to underscore how these films craft a cinematic representation of national identity, offering audiences a cathartic journey that resonates with broader contemporary historical contexts. Moreover, the examination of collective trauma in these films reveals how they provide viewers with a cathartic outlet for grappling with the legacies of colonization and historical injustices.

By analyzing the three films and the historical context of the time their plots occurred and the contemporary context in which they were released, this thesis explored how they can transform history. Melodrama served as the central framework of this analysis, revealing in tandem with considering the representation of history how the emotional dynamics and narrative strategies in these films shape collective memory and national identity. In conclusion, this thesis has examined how three melodramatic South Korean historical films, *War of the Arrows*, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, and *The Fortress*, construct nationalist narratives, evoke catharsis, and shape a cinematic collective memory. By analyzing the intersection of melodrama, historical events, and nationalist themes in these films, this thesis has provided insights into how the films engage with Korea's past, as well as offer alternative understandings of national identity and historical memory in South Korea. These films inevitably provoke contemplation on the complexities of history and highlight film as a form of cultural narrative.

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