

The New Korean Cinema, Kwangju and the Art of Political Violence □ 韓国の新しい映画製作、光州、および政治的暴力

Mark Morris

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This is part two of a supplement on South Korea's Kwangju Uprising: Fiction and Film. Part one is Ch'oe Yun and Mark Morris, [South Korea's Kwangju Uprising: Fiction and Film](#).

2010 will be a year of commemorations in South Korea. The 25th of June will mark the sixtieth anniversary of the beginning of the Korea War. Midway between 2010 and 1950 was 1980. The Kwangju Uprising of May of that year was an event almost as significant as the US-Korean War in framing the contemporary nation.

We have brought together in this section two articles, both of which look at how South Korean artists have attempted to describe, understand and represent the impact of Kwangju in the form of words, images and sound. The essay by author Ch'oe Yun looks back over her career and gives fresh insight into her novella, 'There a Petal Silently Falls', perhaps the single most eloquent literary attempt to make sense of the massacre at Kwangju. [[link](#)] The present article examines recent films which approach Kwangju and its aftermath in very different ways.

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In 2007 two South Korean films debuted which place the May 1980 Kwangju Uprising at the heart of their stories. The Old Garden (Oraedoen chŏngwŏn) was released in January. It is a rather free adaptation of one of the most significant works of fiction to appear in the last decade, the novel of that name by Hwang Sŏg-yŏng. The second film, May 18 (Hwaryŏhan hyuga), which appeared in July, was the first big-budget narrative film to propose to tackle the May uprising head-on. Mixing elements of romance and comedy, the film tries to recreate in the form of a docu-drama the extraordinary period between 18 and 27 May almost three decades ago. This essay will look in some detail at the films to consider the artistic and commercial choices made by these two very different productions. It will briefly take into account as well two other cinematic visions of insurrection: Luo Ye's Summer Palace and Paul Greenglass' Bloody Sunday.

The Kwangju Uprising

The assassination of Pak Chŏng-hŭi in October of 1979 was followed by a coup-d'état engineered by another military figure, Chŏn Tu-hwan, in December of the same year. Yet the forces for change and democratization which had been building through the long years of Pak's regime, one characterized by its mix of forced economic development and suppression of political and human rights, carried on organizing and protesting. By the time

university campuses reopened in March of 1980, the situation was still volatile in the wake of waves of arrests of students and their teachers. After mass demonstrations in the capital on May 15 brought out some 150,000 people, leaders of the Seoul protests decided to pull back temporarily and see how the new regime would respond to such a massive show of solidarity on the part of ordinary citizens. The new regime chose Kwangju to show its intentions.

Protests had continued after 15 May in Kwangju. As news of the hardening of current martial law restrictions became known by the morning of 18 May, students protesting outside the gates of Chŏnnam University challenged the soldiers occupying the university.



Student demonstrators

Troops like these had been sent to occupy university campuses elsewhere, but the students and citizens of Kwangju found themselves facing shock troops especially trained for combat against North Korea, not civilian crowd control. The soldiers waded into the students with long-handled clubs, boots and bayonets.



When protestors reassembled closer to the city centre, the troops went after them there. The unprovoked violence continued over the next two days, leading to a confrontation before Province Hall on 21 May. Although it has never been made clear who gave the order, on this occasion the soldiers opened fire on the crowd massed in front of them, then hunted down survivors. Some people, students but also significant numbers of young working-class men, seized arms where they could and began to fight back. Troops were pulled out of the city centre to its outer perimeter, from where they continued to fire on unfortunate individuals while sealing Kwangju off from the outside world.

From 22 to 25 May the battered citizens of Kwangju engaged in an exhilarating if frantic experiment in grassroots political and defensive organizing, while senior members of the community tried to negotiate a settlement with the military. It was clear after a few days the new regime had no intention of making deals with people labelled hooligans and reds by the media it controlled. A small group of young men from the hastily organized citizens' militia defiantly remained in Province Hall when the troops returned in the early hours of 27 May to retake the city. Gi-Wook Shin has called the ten days between 18 and 27 May 'the single most important event that shaped the political landscape of South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s' (Shin and Hwang 2003: xi).

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Film poster for The Old Garden

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A scene from May 18

Before considering some of the artistic and commercial choices made by these two very different productions, it should be worth a brief look at the immediate context in which they were made: the South Korean film industry.

South Korean film in 2007

The South Korean film industry seemed to continue on its upward curve during 2007, at least as regards output. A record number of films were released, 112, and almost 159 million admissions recorded at the box offices. The average cost of production, around KRW 5 billion (3.7 billion production costs plus 1.2 promotion and advertising/USD 4.7 million+), had not changed significantly from previous years. However there was a widely held consensus that ‘the film industry is currently facing a “knife wind” due to the drastic negative profitability levels last year’ and production companies began to have serious worries about how to slim-down costs while maintaining quality (Han 2007:10). To add to industry woes, a predicted down-turn in the Korean Wave of cultural exports seemed to be taking hold: whereas in 2005 the South Korea film industry had exported films worth some USD 76 million abroad, a full 79% to Japan, the figures for 2007 were down to a total below USD 13 million and Japan’s share of 27% seemed to reflect a chill in the Hallyu air.¹

Within a less than confident financial mood gradually came more bad news from the part of ordinary film-goers and the critics: 'with fewer strong films than in previous years, local audiences beginning to cool on Korean film, exports showing a continued decline, and the film industry suffering through a recession of sorts. The first half of the year was particularly tough, with hardly any Korean films stirring up any excitement among viewers' (Paquet 2007). If in 2005 almost 59% of tickets sold were for Korean rather than imported films, the domestic market share would eventually slip to just over 50% for 2007. *The Old Garden* appeared on 4 January, making it the first major release in what would prove to be a disappointing year.

May 18 opened in late July. It was one of two blockbuster-scale films which would be the major commercial successes of the year. Box office success and critical success/artistic achievement do, of course, often seem to inhabit different planets. *The Old Garden* was made for a modest budget (KRW 3.7 billion/USD 3.5 million, according to KC 2007: 126). It was directed and scripted by Im Sang-su, a well-respected director known for mixing artistic style with a coolly ironic view of Korean society, and shot by Kim U-hyŏng, one of the most talented young cinematographers in the business. The two had collaborated before on the 2003 film *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (*Baramnan kajŏk*) and in 2005 on Im's accomplished political black comedy *The President's Last Bang* (*Kŭ ddae kŭ saram-dŭl*). *The Old Garden* opened on 212 screens yet struggled to sell 300,000 tickets. On the other hand – and on that other planet – *May 18*, produced by the media *chaebŏl* CJ Entertainment with a budget of some KRW10 billion and backed by an extensive advertising campaign, opened on 551 screens and went on to sell over 7.3 million tickets. Even this success needs to be balanced against the overall picture for this leading production company. 'CJ Entertainment, invested, produced, and distributed 36 films

this year, but only five of them . . . surpassed break-even point' (KC 2007: 5).

The Old Garden

Adapting a well-known work of literature can be both a blessing and a curse. Almost all Koreans will know of Hwang Sŏg-yŏng. He is widely considered the country's most likely candidate for the Nobel Prize and, in the eyes of readers and critics in many countries (reading translations in English and French), Hwang's short stories and epic-scale novels seem, if anything, overdue for their place in the sun. *The Old Garden* was seen as a return to form upon its publication in 2000, even if many readers would come to prefer the next work in his twentieth-century trilogy, *The Guest* (*Sonnim* 2001). (A French translation of the third, *Shim Ch'ŏng* [2004], will appear soon.)

A film carrying the title *The Old Garden* can thus hope to attract audiences via the novel's success and the esteem many hold for its writer. The connection implies a seriousness and an artistic register, however, that might seem rather unusual in a cinematic marketplace dominated by commercial imperatives and the rom-coms and various permutations of the gangster film which that marketplace has tended to favour in recent years. That Im Sang-su is very much positioned as an 'art' director is clear though the support system his film, like the two which preceded it, has depended upon in order to exist in a business which can provide more than three times the budget of his *The Old Garden* for a film such as *May 18* (to say nothing of the greater advantages of a CJ Entertainment product when it comes to advertising and exhibition leverage). The film was backed by the Korean Film Council (KOFIC), a government-funded organization which while promoting mainstream commercial films is a crucial support, among other things, for independent small and middle-scale film-making (KC 2007: 8-11). KOFIC provided

funding for subtitling and print production which in turn allowed the film to supplement its limited domestic box office through participation in film festivals from South America (Rio and Buenos Aires) to Edinburgh and San Sebastian, and four cities in the US (KC 2007: 126).

Literary adaptation and art-film status do, however, carry certain expectations. For one thing, Hwang Sŏg-yŏng's reputation rests on much more than his writing. He is intimately linked in fact and in the popular imaginary with the best aspects of the Korean left, in particular the deeply ethical moment of the democratic citizen's struggle that followed the Kwangju Uprising² and massacre and paved the way for Korea's democratic breakthrough (or some such language?). When in 1985 Yi Chae-hŭi and his friends sought to publish the results of the first systematic investigation into what had happened in Kwangju, Hwang took a considerable risk in stepping in and allowing his name to be used as that of the work's author; he even made a draft of the manuscript in his own writing to provide extra cover for the young Kwangju researcher-authors behind the project. When police raided the publisher in mid-May of that year, they seized 20,000 copies of a book eventually known internationally as *Kwangju Diary*, and arrested Hwang for good measure (Lee 1999: 14). (Some people still identify Hwang as the author of the book, including it seems the young director of *May 18*, Kim Chi-hun: KFO 23: 44). Later Hwang would serve several years in prison, after self-imposed exile in Berlin, for an un-authorized visit to North Korea in 1989; he was finally released in 1998 thanks to the arrival in the Blue House of Kim Dae-jung.

The narrative of Hwang's *The Old Garden* is complex, a performance in two voices. It follows a former activist, O Hyŏn-u, who after sixteen and one-half years of prison emerges blinking into the superficially self-confident society of mid-1990s South Korea; he attempts

to trace the woman, Han Yun-hŭi, who had sheltered him in her rural studio during the crack-down that continued most brutally during the first years of the Chŏn Tu-hwan dictatorship. Hyŏn-u had been one of many 'submarines' hiding from the police after May 1980. He and Yun-hŭi shared life together till the next autumn, when Hyŏn-u felt compelled to rejoin the struggle, this time in Seoul, where he was soon arrested.

Yun-hŭi has been dead for several years before the novel begins. Her voice emerges mainly from the notebooks she left behind in the simple cottage she used as painter's studio and retreat from the pressures of family back in Seoul. Hyun-woo, now all these painful years later, has fled there in turn, attempting to gain some sort of purchase on a world bewildering in its forgetfulness of the violent recent past. There he discovers the notebooks, reads them, and pauses to reflect on his long hard years of incarceration. Some of the most compelling pages in Hwang's novel detail in all its grubby chaos the life of the activist 'submarine'. On the one hand, the dull cold ache of fear, the difficulty of getting fed or staying clean, the frantic, almost comic efforts to stick up posters or hurl pamphlets in the face of tanks and guns; on the other, the dedication to a long struggle and to continuing resistance that will almost inevitably lead to arrest, brutal treatment and incarceration. Still other sections lay out the grim routine of life inside. Korea's modern history has been generous in providing many writers with field-work opportunities in the carceral underworld developed first by the Japanese, later by home-grown military strongmen such as Pak and Chŏn. Hwang has skillfully drawn upon his own years in prison to fill in the minute oscillations between hope and despair of a man serving a life sentence. Chapters shift back and forth between the voices, and jumps in chronology keep the reader wary as one chapter hands over to the next. It is a big book, with ambitions to tell the story of 'a generation which had followed the

dream of a better life'.³

Im Sang-su, in recasting this long text into a filmable scenario, had to make some major excisions and simplifications. Before considering them, it might be worthwhile to give some account of the skill with which the director has transformed Hwang's prose into visual and sound imagery in the powerful opening sequences of the film. The opening shots are close-ups of a sleeping man, apparently bundled up in rags and wearing a scruffy wool cap, being woken by the drip of water from the scaly concrete ceiling above him. It is Hyŏn-u's day to leave prison. From the dark interiors he is accompanied outside the prison by a large, avuncular guard who, recalling his sixteen years and eighteen months spent locked up, wishes him well; this amiable guard is quite a contrast with the other coldly brutal, anonymous police or prison guards inhabiting the prison system. Hyŏn-u exits the prison into a dark snowy night. Snow will return later as a kind of aesthetic echo in key scenes of the film. Night and snow, black and white, will be invested with much beauty, as is the visual design of the film overall: harmony of staging and set design with Kim U-hyŏng's camera-work throughout the film mean that whatever its shortcomings, *The Old Garden* always looks good.

After less than five minutes of the opening prison sequence, Im cuts to a completely different scene. It is night, but now rain is falling. Hyŏn-u – much younger looking, his graying hair is now noticeably black -- and a young woman wait under an umbrella as a small bus comes bumping along a country road toward them. They say silent farewells, he boards the bus, then moves to the back to look from the window out at the woman standing in the rain. Cut: close-up on Hyŏn-u, now in a regular bed, though with the same scruffy wool cap over his grey hair. He has returned home from prison. He remains silent while those around him, and most eagerly his mother, try to

bring him back into their world: scenes follow of a doctor's consultation and a visit to a trendy clothing shop. While he was inside, Hyŏn-u's mother had grown rich through property speculation. She is that new Seoul/Kangnam misogynistic cliché, the 'mega-rich middle-aged woman living the good life' (Yi 2007), who shops in places offering champagne to the patrons. Her son's prison rags are replaced by designer clothes topped by a 13-million-won overcoat. This later scene is carried off in a few minutes, with a light, gently humorous touch.

The family is next seen sharing a meal. Mother casually asks about Han Yun-hŭi. She has to repeat the name when he seems to remain blank; she goes on to ask if he had heard from her family about her death. Cut: back to the previous young couple waiting in the rain. Then another jump, one that moves into the future: Hyŏn-u is somewhere outside Seoul, in a dilapidated house, taking down a book from a shelf. It's a diary which he begins to read. Cut: the family is still at the table. Hyŏn-u seems more concerned about a painful molar; tears roll down his cheeks, as he gets up to go check the state of the tooth in a bathroom mirror. The face in the mirror seems devastated by the double shock of physical agony and this sudden intrusion of memory in the shape of the name Han Yun-hŭi.

Some eleven minutes into the film, we are abruptly relocated to contemporary Kwangju. The older Hyŏn-u arrives at Kwangju Airport, to be met by an old comrade. The old friend is balding and has a nervous twitch; life and years of political struggle have done him few favours. His simple working-class demeanor contrasts with the elegant-looking middle-age passenger from Seoul. Then comes the most dramatic cut so far. We suddenly realize that the camera is following the younger Hyŏn-u and his friend through a blood-spattered plastic curtain into what looks like a school gymnasium full of coffins, bodies wrapped in plastic sheeting and mourning family members. This scene, which

lasts less than two minutes, is the historical and emotional gravitational centre of the film. We are in the Sangmu Hall, the gym-cum-judo school on the other side of the central fountain and public plaza from the Province Hall where the final stand of the uprising would be crushed a few days later.

The iconography of Kwangju as uprising is most directly derived from photos and scraps of film footage made of the street demonstrations and/or citizen army trucks, jeeps and armoured personnel carriers on Kŭmnamro, the broad avenue running East-West which leads towards the fountain and Province Hall; other clusters of powerful images remain of rallies and speeches made from a stage improvised over the fountain or of rallies at the Province Hall itself. Kwangju as massacre, eventually given symbolic shape in the newer memorial cemetery, is in its less symbolic and more visceral form forever associated with the bodies collected in the impromptu morgue-funeral hall of the Sangmu Hall.

In Hwang's novel, what happened in Kwangju is left to the imagination; Hyŏn-u got out of town before the worst of the violence. One of the desperate tasks of those like him working underground is to try to find out what actually did happen and somehow to relay that fragmentary story to a public kept well in the dark by media censorship. Regarding his use of this sequence, Im has said simply that 'I tried to recreate the photographs of record that were taken at the time. Those are the representative images that we all remember, right?' (Huh & Jung 2008: 145). Im has not only chosen to use cinematic form to give visual form to what for the literary Hyun-woo remains a nightmare occurring off-stage. He has given the scenes a few 'unrealistic' touches as well; they tie into the particular poetics and ethos of the film.

For example, one of the best remembered photos from the hall is that of a little boy kneeling at the head of his young father's flag-

draped coffin, a funerary photo of the man in his arms. (*May 18* will, in its simpler realism, include in one extensive sequence at Sangmu Hall a scene of the photographer in the act of taking the photo; a later scene will show the photo as it appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*.) Im places what appears to be an older sister, standing beside the boy, touching his shoulder. The pietà-like couple of nurturing female and suffering male will be echoed through the film in flashbacks to the brief, intense relationship of Hyŏn-u and Yun-hŭi: a similar portrait made by Yun-hŭi of herself with Hyŏn-u becomes one of the final image on screen as the credits roll. Here, roughly a dozen minutes into a 112-minute film, Im and his team allow this poetic recasting of Kwangju iconography to remain in the background, only partly in focus and occupying only a matter of seconds on screen. This kind of restraint and attention to detail is characteristic of much of the director's best work.

So in place of Hwang's mixed voices and jumps from one to the other through twenty-seven chapters treating various eras between 1980, and even earlier, till the late 1990s of the novel's present, Im uses this technique of staccato flashbacks and, when needed, flashes-forward. Im is good at teaching the viewer to negotiate shifting planes of time and event, but it is important to learn the grammar through these opening minutes of *The Old Garden* as he begins giving visual clues as to the sources of Hyŏn-u's anguish and the lost object of his longing. It has long been observed that 'art cinema is less concerned with action than reaction: it is a cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes' (Bordwell 2008: 153).

In asking the viewer to do the work of connecting past to present, Im can assume we are familiar enough with the basic rules of 'plot manipulations of story order (especially flashbacks) ' to know that they will 'remain anchored to character subjectivity' (Ibid.: 154).



The actors chosen to embody Hyŏn-u and Yun-hŭi, Chi Chin-hŭi and Yŏm Chŏng-a, are at least as well known from roles on television as any of their work in film. You should probably never judge a South Korean movie by its poster: it is much more likely to represent the visions of the P&A office than anything the director may have wanted to emphasize or that you will see finally on the screen. In this poster the central couple act love-struck before a lurking knot of police in riot gear. The male lead Chi Chin-hŭi is mainly associated with comic roles in film or romantic ones in TV drama. Yŏm Chŏng-a, too, is associated with TV drama and some light comic roles in film, though she is probably best known outside Korea for her part as the evil, albeit implausibly elegant, stepmother in the horror film *A Tale of Two Sisters* (*Changhwa*, Hongryŏn 2003).

In casting these two as his lead actors, Im may

not have envisioned them as being as gorgeous as the film's posters sought to portray them; but he certainly did not chose to emphasize gritty realism. Chi does a reasonable job with what is a fairly limited role. When a flashback mid-way into the story takes us back to his years in prison, he can look haggard and worn. In one violent scene Hyŏn-u is bound and gagged, then carried off to solitary. The gag is finally removed, but not the cords binding his arms and legs. Once the door is slammed shut, Im allows the screen to remain pitch black. All we are aware of is a man sobbing. Chi's invisible performance is more moving than any overworked close-up. On the other hand, when Hyŏn-u slips into his mother's choice of male wardrobe, for all his embarrassment, he looks quite at home in a 13-million-won overcoat, as well as in the well-designed jumpers and jackets he will wear later on. The wear and tear of almost seventeen years in prison seem to have produced few physical effects other than tingeing his hair a bit greyer a bit quicker. Yŏm's Yun-hŭi has more to do, a wider range of experiences, and people to negotiate -- from her down-to-earth mother or her own little daughter to the student activists she finds herself spending time with, first as partner of an incarcerated comrade, later as friend and lover. For the most part, she maintains a cool elegance, even when chemotherapy takes away her long hair.

Im saw the role of Han Yun-hŭi as crucial to his way of transforming Hwang's *The Old Garden* to something more relevant to the present:

Many of the people who have seen this film view it with the opinion that it is Han Yoon-hee's film. There were also various opinions in the production company, but I think so too. . . . since during the stage of preparing the film, I made up my mind to minimize the sequences in the prison (Huh &

Jung 2008: 118).

Rather than display loyalty to Hwang's own loyalty to the sacrifices of the movement for democracy of the 1980s, Im wanted to question the negative effects of political nostalgia. To one critic's comment that it seemed cynical of Yun-hŭi, at one point late in the film, to say of her absent partner's imprisonment, 'What a tremendous waste. Of a life and talent,' Im replied: 'Could she say about his life, "He lived passionately, giving all of my [*sic* his] heart and soul"? I think there's nothing else to say but that it was a waste of life and talent' (Huh & Jung 2008: 119).

It can be difficult to judge whether Im Sang-su wanted to de-politicize or re-politicize the kind of left-wing democratic ethical commitment that Hwang Sŏg-yŏng's work continues to reflect.

When I complained that the characters in the novel were too lofty, one friend of mine told me, "There are some really noble people that you just don't know." Frankly, I don't believe that. I said that to Hwang Sok-yong, the book's author, and all he did was laugh (Huh & Jung 2008: 120).

There are scenes of violent confrontation in the film other than the flashback to Kwangju. Midway comes a university occupation brutally ended by riot police.

The long (4-minute) dialogue-free sequence (derived from the violent suppression of the student movement at Kŏnkuk University in the wake of Kwangju: [Huh & Jung 2008: 122, 146]) is not tied to either of the focal characters or given a particular connection to the rest of the narrative, nor does it appear in Hwang's novel. An incident which does feature

there, a strike of young female workers and the subsequent immolation of a student activist, is part of Yun-hŭi's story. In a scene where student radicals are meeting in Yun-hŭi's Seoul studio, Kim U-hyŏng's camera shoots first of all the moving lips of the debating students in extreme close-up; then the camera pulls back to show the group. Later scenes, in which Yun-hŭi's growing disenchantment with the doctrinaire atmosphere of politicking is made clear, prepare for her later conclusion that the sacrifice made by O Hyŏn-u was a waste of life and talent. The immolation of her young female friend leaves her with no different conclusion.

It would be possible, but mistaken I think, to conclude that Im used the framework of the novel merely to make a more mainstream melodrama than critics might have been prepared for from a director with his artistic credentials, and that the novel's politics were only acknowledged superficially. The three sequences of undeniably political confrontation are more than 1980s local colour.

The absence of any very clear-cut engagement with the politics of Kwangju and the politics of its aftermath on the part of director Im is connected with his own agnostic stance towards the politics of contemporary South Korea. What he seems to distrust is the way that the struggle from Kwangju till the election of Kim Dae-jung has become a fetish, a clichéd reservoir of political nostalgia that says nothing about the South Korea of the last decade.

There are common characteristics to the characters in my memory who participated in the 1980s student movement. They devoted themselves enthusiastically to the movement at one time, but at some point they dropped the movement and entered the mainstream of Korean society. Yet inside, they think they are living meaningful lives in some sense (Huh & Jung

2008: 118).

You can, however, accept Im's skepticism about political nostalgia without wanting to go so far as to dismiss the long struggle for democracy as irrelevant for present or future generations.

Biographical details of one individual, even when they are attached to the film's director, are not a very solid ground on which to explain the form taken by a feature film involving the skills and hard work of dozens of individuals. Perhaps Im's personal history goes some way at least to explaining the distance he maintains from any positive political identity in interviews. In a recent biographical sketch of the director, Huh Moon-yung has noted that Im, himself a university student at Yŏnsei during the turbulent early 1980s, remained apart from an increasingly sectarian, dogmatic climate of political debate. Huh speculates as well about a more distant family connection with politically-motivated violence that could explain a deeply ingrained suspicion of activist ideology. It seems his grandfather and father were survivors of the atrocities committed by all sides during the Korean War in their hometown of Sunch'ŏn (Huh & Jung 2008: 153-7), now in North Korea. Hwang Sŏ-yŏng's *The Guest* is a powerful shamanistic summoning of the ghosts of this massacre which preceded Kwangju by three decades.

One last comparison between film and novel concerns the politics of gender. The film is, as Im and others have pointed out, more Yun-hŭi's than Hyŏn-u's in several ways. Sometimes the female role has obviously been expanded in the direction of the melodramatic. There are two dream sequences in the film: in one, Hyŏn-u dreams that he has returned home to the old house to find his lover and their toddler daughter waiting for him; in the other, Yun-hŭi dreams that Hyŏn-u comes to visit her in her Seoul studio and to play with their young daughter. Neither is like anything in Hwang's book. At the end of the film, when the father

finally meets his teenage daughter for the first time, Yun-hŭi's spectre walks through the snowy night-time scene of her two loved ones meeting, invisible but her presence sensed for a moment by Hyŏn-u.

There is also the question of Han Yun-hŭi's life outside either political widow-hood or romance. She is an artist, a teacher and painter, by profession. Im mentions in an interview reproduced on the DVD extras that he gave her more prominence, in a sense, than Hwang was able to. It is an overstatement, however, to claim that 'he transformed the boundlessly modest and devoted leading female character of the novel into a polished and challenging woman' (KF 2007: 5). Many of Hwang Sŏ-yŏng's works do represent a very male universe. One other big, sprawling novel written during the 1980s, *The Shadow of Arms*, reproduces the shabby world of black marketeering and political corruption surrounding the Korean involvement in the Vietnam War.⁴ Female characters seem stereotyped, either innocent victims or scheming survivors. In the author's *The Old Garden*, however, the character of Yun-hŭi takes on a life of her own, quite apart from her imprisoned lover and apart even from South Korea. Hwang drew upon his own experience of exile in Berlin to allow her to live there as well. She works on her art, loves another man, witnesses the coming down of the Wall. She reflects on the art which moves her most: the epic, intensely socialist work of Käthe Kollwitz is prominent in her thinking, though we learn how Yun-hŭi's own style evolved in a more abstract direction. None of this makes it into the film.⁵

The relative lack of success of *The Old Garden*, Im's fifth film, is perhaps not surprising given the general downturn in audience and profitability experienced by the Korean film industry in 2007. Im's third film, *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (2003) was seen by twice the number of spectators (633,000) and his fourth,

the remarkable political thriller-comedy *The President's Last Bang* (2005),⁶ was seen by a million viewers; the box office was increased to some extent due to the controversy stirred up by the film's sharp irony aimed at Pak Chŏng-hŭi and cronies.

It may be that in trying to connect with the seriousness and political ethics of Hwang Sok-yong's novel, while simultaneously casting in the lead roles actors better suited to romance or rom-com, trimming the original story to fit better with melodramatic conventions and shooting most scenes in an aesthetic palate of soft muted tones, Im Sang-soo and team created a film that fell between audiences. Too serious to win over the kids, not sufficiently politically informed or innovative enough in cinematic terms to generate much debate among the critics, even though reviews were generally positive. Outside Korea, both of Im's previous films have had greater success as well. *A Good Lawyer's Wife*, which at home had won female lead Moon So-ri a Grand Bell Award for Best Actress in 2003, was nominated for the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. *The President's Last Bang* may have participated in fewer film festivals than has the new film, but it received a much stronger critical reception and has done moderately well in subtitled (English and French) DVD format.

There is one Chinese film, released only some six months before *The Old Garden*, which resembles it in the general shape of its narrative and seems to show that, even in our era of political disenchantment, it is still possible to set a love story in the context of a suppressed insurrection and produce a very powerful film. Luo Ye's controversial *Summer Palace* (2006) takes one couple, and several of their lovers, through the days leading up to and beyond the Tiananmen massacre and the brutal crushing of student protests on China's campuses. The 'film' was been shot on hi-def video, which can impart aesthetic softening to the images, but the love is raw and sexual and

the characters have nothing of the rather chaste, safely contained passion which seems to accompany the visual aesthetics settled upon in *The Old Garden*. Luo Ye's people drift -- through rooms and corridors and through alienating urban landscapes -- to no greater purpose than Hyŏn-u or Yun-hŭi. They do so with a gritty realism that shows one road not chosen by, or perhaps no longer realistically available to, contemporary South Korean filmmakers aiming for access to the commercial marketplace.

May 18

Imagine a middle-sized insular country facing a political crisis sometime in the second-half of the twentieth century. The conservative government of the time is faced with growing unrest in a region which, left behind by much of the economic development of recent years, often has justifiably felt discriminated against. In one particular city this bitterness and a growing desire for a more democratic society has brought about serious conflict with the local forces of order but has also spurred the formation of a vocal yet peaceful civil rights campaign. The more democratic elements are able to keep the lid on more violent youthful protestors. Rather than choose to negotiate, the government decides to crack down on the perceived rebellion. They have already incarcerated representatives of the region's people. Now they send in the troops.

And in so doing, the government and military commanders make a terrible mistake. The men have all been told they are facing what are at best 'hooligans'. From among the different forces deployed to the area, senior officers decide to set loose the toughest soldiers in a famously tough army: the special forces men, the ones proud of their snappy berets, the ones trained for the most brutal combat.

And the predictable happens. The soldiers attack and hunt down their fellow citizens, killing them indiscriminately. Student

protesters, working class youth and older inhabitants are all alike beaten and shot down. When investigations are first held, the military is of course exonerated while the dead are labelled 'terrorists'. It will take many more years for anything like the truth to be widely known. None of the soldiers will ever face charges, nor will their commanders all the way up the line. The latter will instead receive medals.

I may have over-simplified things considerably in attempting to draw parallels between what happened on Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972, in the northern Irish city of Derry and the Kwangju Uprising of May 1980. Such parallels are, however, easy to make, sometimes eerily close (Korean black berets/UK maroon berets) and are a stark reminder, certainly for those of us in the UK, that not only can it happen here, but it did.

The death toll in Derry was fourteen, which in numerical terms is a mere fraction of the some 200-plus killed outright in Kwangju. The peak of violence, the rampage of the 'paras', lasted perhaps 16 minutes – not whole days as in Kwangju May 1980. In Kwangju the protracted brutality left a swathe of damage through the community which can perhaps only be compared with that generated in Northern Ireland by the long years of the Troubles. It is very much to the credit of director Paul Greenglass and his collaborator-producer Mark Redhead that in their film *Bloody Sunday*, they are able to give a concrete demonstration of how this violent incident sparked a decades-long guerrilla war. Screened originally on ITV television in 2002 for the thirtieth anniversary of Northern Ireland's own small Kwangju, *Bloody Sunday* has left a docu-drama record of what happened on 30 January 1972, why and how it happened, and what the results turned out to be. It is perhaps the greatest political film ever made in Britain.

It must be to the credit of CJ Entertainment not

to have waited quite thirty years to commission the first full-scale feature film concerning the events between 18 and 27 May 1980 in Kwangju. It is more significantly to the credit of South Korea's hard-won democracy that *May 18*⁷ could be seen by millions of viewers. Compare the case of the Chinese film mentioned above. Luo Ye and producers took *Summer Palace* to the Cannes Film Festival in 2006, where it was deemed impressive enough to be included in the official competition. The filmmakers had not, however, secured government approval for screening the film abroad or anywhere else. Rather than being celebrated, Luo Ye and colleagues received a five-year ban from all filmmaking activity in China, a ban still in force. *Summer Palace* has been screened all around the world, but not (legally) in China.

The plot of *May 18* moves forward in straightforward chronological fashion. From about 23 minutes in, titles appear several times locating the viewer in the progression of events, from the first violence at the entrance of Chŏnnam University on 18 May to the final attack by government forces on Province Hall on 27 May. Woven through the main chronology are the stories of three couples of characters who represent the ordinary people of Kwangju. There is a duo of earthy working-class characters, a cab driver and the small-time hood he met through a fistfight: they will join the struggle and die heroically at Province Hall. More telling is the couple formed by a widower, retired army officer Pak Hŭng-su, and his young daughter Shin-ae: he will act as commander to the citizens' army, she will be the last voice of the uprising, calling out from a jeep-mounted loudspeaker for people to remember the men like her father about to be sacrificed. The last and most important couple is made up of two parentless brothers: the older, Kang Min-u, drives a cab in order to send his younger brother Chin-u through school, with a dream of sending him on to study law at Seoul National University. The three couples

will, over the course of the two hours of the film, have their stories woven together: Shin-ae, a friend of Chin-u, will be courted amidst the chaos by Min-u who works for her father: her father will lead the last stand at Province Hall where all the male characters will perish, except Chin-u who is gunned down on 21 May.

Several previous films have treated the uprising and aftermath in a much more tangential manner akin to *The Old Garden*. Chang Sŏn-u's *Petal* (Kkotnip 1996), like Im's film, is based on a polished literary text. Jang adapted the astonishing debut novella by Ch'oe Yun, 'There a Petal Silently Falls' ('Chŏgi sŏri ŏpsi hanjŏm kkonip'i chigo' 1988).⁸ Ch'oe writes in a modernistic, fragmented style. In choosing to tell the aftermath of Kwangju, she created a narrative of memory jumps and flashbacks⁹ which assault the shattered mind and feelings of a young female survivor of the massacre. Kwangju is not depicted but rather continually recreated in the violent memories which leave the young woman no peace, no escape.

Chang adopted a similarly fragmented narrative, adding sequences of animation to literal flashbacks to produce a small masterpiece. Cinema of course makes things visually concrete. Scenes from the Kwangju Uprising were physically reproduced with the co-operation of local government and citizens. Jang chose, however, to keep faith with Ch'oe Yun's non-heroic, psychological realism of scenes as refracted through a young woman's damaged mind. Flashbacks are shot in black and white – a standard enough practice. But Chang and team have managed to give the images a washed-out, over-exposed texture that allows shapes and movement to emerge almost like abstract strokes from an ink brush. Added to this is slow motion and slow sound; in early flashbacks, crowd noises register not like cheers and shouts but the groaning of souls in torment.¹⁰

The team assembled by CJ Entertainment (and KiHweck ShiDae) for the making of *May 18* was generally young and commercially oriented. Rather than look for any narrative model to realistic prose or the stylistic tour de force of a Ch'oe Yun, director Kim Chi-hun claims to have depended most on Yi Chae-hŭi's *Kwangju Diary* and the sort of documentation which went into its writing. In his initial approach to the subject, Kim seems to have made a decision which would have repercussions for the overall shape of the film: 'The most important extracts [of testimony] were from grassroots people during the ten days . . . rather than those who set out to change the course of history' (KFO 23: 44).

In more practical terms, the Kwangju Uprising was first reshaped for director Kim into a basic narrative by Pak Sang-yŏn, the writer who provided the story for Pak Chan-uk's breakthrough hit *Joint Security Area* (*Kongdong kyŏngbi kuyŏk JSA* [2000]). Kim Chi-hun himself had directed only one film before, a genre comedy-gangster film. Care seems to have been taken to surround him with industry veterans: special effects expert Kim Pyŏng-gi has since 1998 worked with many of the best and most successful directors (Yi Ch'ang-dong, Hong Sang-su, Pong Jun-ho); martial arts choreographer Shin Chae-myŏng has been acting and designing on-screen mayhem since 1991. Producer Yu In-taek had worked with avant-garde directors such as Chang Sŏn-u and Pak Kwang-su in the past, before producing Kim Chi-hun's first film.

A big-budget film such as *May 18* pays special attention to casting since, however controversial or serious the topic itself, the film has to appeal to the widest demographic. Kim Sang-kyŏng in the part of older brother Min-u has to play a character far removed from the roles he is known for in the work of art-film director Hong Sang-su; as Shin-ae, Yi Yo-wŏn retains the sort of fragile innocence shown in her first major role in Chŏng Chae-ŭn's *Take*

Care of My Cat (*Koyangi-rul pohak hae* 2001). Her father is played by Korean cinema's most ubiquitous actor, veteran An Sŏng-gi. Perhaps the most tactically astute casting concerns the youngest of the main characters, Chin-u. He is played by Yi Chun-gi [Lee Joon-ki], now a well-established star of the East Asian transnational culture market.

With An Sŏng-gi for the older audience (who would also be old enough to remember something about the years leading up to Kwangju) and Kim Sang-kyŏng or Yi Yo-wŏn for somewhat younger film buffs, Yi Chun-gi's presence could practically ensure the film would do well with the all-important youth audience. It may seem almost a by-product of casting that, as it turns out, Yi happens to be fairly good actor.

One could attempt to test the historical accuracy of *May 18* despite the pressures of genre convention threaded all through it, although less than eight minutes in, these conventions have been laid out with little subtlety: peaceful sunny countryside surrounding small city of poor but honest citizens versus the preparations for war begun in the dark; the down-to-earth good humor of working class people (usually speaking exaggerated dialect); innocent romance; loving, simple relations between parents and children and/or between siblings. *May 18* indeed starts out to be, as an advertising slogan for the film put it, 'A film to make us aware of the importance of family love' (cited in Kim 2007). We might insist, for instance, that there was no retired officer leading the young men who fought at Province Hall, and certainly no vet up on a rooftop pumping 50-calibre bullets at government soldiers as An does in this film; but middle-aged former soldiers had been part of the hasty training of the citizens' army, so An Sŏng-gi's character could be considered a kind of proximate synthesis. The final scenes of Shin-ae riding through the night-time streets of the city calling out for help at the Province

Hall, or for at least the memory of the martyrs to be recalled, is not pure fiction. Many accounts of the final hours remember such a voice. One of the three disks on the special edition DVD of *May 18* is an independent documentary of testimony from people caught up in the events; it includes an interview with one of two women who broadcast through the last moments during the pre-dawn of 27 May.¹¹ The scene of coffins and grieving relatives at the Sangmu Hall is placed midway through the narrative. The realism is effective, particularly because the scene has been preceded by harrowing recreations of the violence which produced all this suffering. Yet even here genre convention and sentimentality are brought forward as though to blunt the edges of the moment. The iconic little boy grieving beside his father's coffin is there, and so is Min-u grieving for brother Chin-u laying in his box nearby. The soundtrack plays in voice-over Chin-u's farewell letter to big brother.

It is in the key scenes of the attacks on students -- in the climate of the time, spurred on by the anti-communist fervour of their senior officers, the elite units generally saw students as combatants-in-waiting -- and civilians that the film goes beyond safe conventions. The first sequence at Chŏnnam University lasts only a minute. It is followed some five minutes later by the first extensive scenes of soldiers laying into people at random: the violence quite literally bursts into the cinematic world when one soldier chases a student into the theatre where Min-u, Chin-u and Shin-ae sit amid a happy crowd watching an old-fashioned comic melodrama. There is an irruption of unprovoked viciousness on the street outside, of heads clubbed again and again, of blood splattering a film poster; for two minutes the genre soft-focus is wrenched around to look at a chaotic vision of hell on ordinary city streets and alleys.

These two sequences prepare for the killings on 21 May. A crowd has assembled upon learning

that the military, at this point forced back to Province Hall, are preparing to retreat from Kwangju. When the national anthem begins playing from a speaker on top of the hall, the citizens stop their taunts and jeering and reverentially place hands on hearts. The soldiers in front of the hall open fire. What follows is a sustained five or so minutes of distilled terror created by a remarkable combination of set-design, special effects, stunt work, acrobatic camera work, editing, and every other craft in a very sophisticated industry's repertoire. Amid the whizzing bullets and exploding blood-squibs, Min-u searches for his brother. He is watching when Chin-u, trying to help a badly wounded man, is fatally shot. The film's father-figure, Pak Hŭng-su, rescues the two of them in a bullet-riddled truck; all arrive at the hospital where Shin-ae, a nurse, joins in the climatic scene of Chin-u's death.

The ability of *May 18* to deliver a visceral impact during the massacre before Province Hall takes the viewer out of the frame of reference of film as narration towards cinema's origins as spectacle – the train driving right off the screen at you, as experienced by audiences back in 1896 at the first screenings of one of the Lumière brothers' short films. The entire production focused a huge amount of effort and resources on achieving its hyper-realism. As director Kim recalled, 'We spent KRW 3.0 billion just on the set. We made a 500 meter street with real asphalt, established [sic] 85% of the real provincial office, and had to make the fountain in front of the office as well as the nearby buildings. . . . About 1,600 extras had to run away with the first gun shots' (KR 23: 45). The impressive set, built outside central Kwangju, was later opened to the public.¹²

During the scene, amid the mini-pyrotechnics and panic, it may still be possible to experience an uncanny sense of déjà vu imparted by the conjunction of screen violence and the theme of two brothers, one desperately searching for the other in the middle of a frantic battle. We have

been here before and, consciously or not, so have main story writer Park Sang-yŏn and the young writers who provided the continuity scripts. Kang Che-gyu's *Taegukgi* (*Taegukgi hwinallimyŏ* 2004) was at the time of its release the most expensive production in Korean film history (USD 12.8 million). It was also an even bigger hit than either *May 18* or *D-War* would be three years later. The first big-budget film the new Korean cinema had made about the Korean War, *Taegukgi* viewed the chaos and slaughter through two focal characters, an older working-class brother who sacrifices all for his younger sibling. The younger brother role was played by Wŏn Pin, then the sort of major transnational star of TV drama and film that Yi Chun-gi is now. *Taegukgi* was inevitably compared to films such as *Saving Private Ryan* and Spielberg's TV production *Band of Brothers*, both as regards narrative themes and the hyper realism of battlefield effects. (Its musical score more or less plagiarizes that of the latter.) The techniques developed for the film are those transferred to the recreated streets of Kwangju by *May 18*.¹³

Critics might applaud *Taegukgi*'s attempt to make a major film about the war, but have serious reservations about the leveling effect of genre conventions. 'For much of *Taegukgi*'s extensive running time we are focused on the melodramatic discord that springs from the older brother's decision to sacrifice himself. This personal story dominates the film to the extent that, in some ways, the war is merely an elaborate backdrop. The film also makes little effort to say anything new about the conflict' (Paquet 2004). It is difficult to avoid similar conclusions about *May 18*, despite the very real shock delivered by the carefully constructed scenes of violence against the people of the city.

While genre leveling may be inevitable in a large-scale production aimed at a mass audience, it can may have troubling results for the treatment of confrontation and political

conflict. Consider the way the ROK military are depicted in the film. The name Chŏn Tu-hwan is written on protest placards and shouted in slogans, yet the film refrains from actually tracing authority back to its source in Seoul. Apart from retired officer Pak Hŭng-su and one of his old comrades, still serving with the occupying special forces, the soldiers and their officers seem two-dimensional villains. The character actor playing the commander of the special forces had a similar role near the end of *Taegukgi*. His commander scowls and growls at junior officers; when Pak Hŭng-su arrives at headquarters to beg him not to kill everyone in Kwangju, he dismisses him with disdain. If in *Taegukgi* 'North Korean soldiers are portrayed as crazed fanatics' (Paquet 2004), *May 18*'s villains are not portrayed with much complexity either. In contrast, we can point to the UK-production mentioned above, *Bloody Sunday*, as a film that avoids easy simplifications of responsibility for state-sanctioned violence. '*Bloody Sunday* does not rely upon a narrative humanistic framework which by pathologizing unsympathetic characters would displace the state's culpability in the event or reduce the complexity of historical injustices to the human foibles of a single character or group of characters' (Blaney 2007: 122).

That a film could treat both sides of a conflict as bloody as Kwangju in less black and white fashion was demonstrated by the first major reconstruction of the Kwangju days: SBS's now classic 24-part TV drama *Sandglass* (*Morae shigye* 1995) devoted one full episode and portions of two others to events in Kwangju. The most sympathetic of the two male lead characters becomes a soldier in the conflict, the other a hoodlum who becomes caught up in the fighting. The technical level of realism available to a mid-1990s television production was limited. But the director-writer team of Kim Chong-hak and Song Chi-na managed to create a depiction of Kwangju as both human and political event that is still only rivaled by Chang Sŏn-u's film *Petal*.

If the officers and black berets are drawn in the stark outlines, what of the people they confront? 'If an intellectual is in a film,' director Kim Chi-hun has argued, 'he or she usually translates and presents direction. However, in this movie, there is no such intellectual. I thought that such a character was not needed in this film, as they get in the way of the real experiences of real people' (KR 23: 45). In an eloquent review in *Cine 21* (a film journal one might liken to Britain's *Sight & Sound* though the influence of the former is much greater) Kim Hyae-ri noted how in the opening sections of *May 18* Kwangju is depicted as a kind of 'cozy paradise'. Here, when new reports of a nation-wide crackdown on dissent comes on the television screen, a minor character simply switches off the noisy broadcast. 'Considering the point in time that May of 1980 was, the citizens in the drama fail to make mention of politics to an almost unnatural degree. Yet a few days later, hearts rent by the bloody deaths, beside themselves at the inhumane cruelty, these people will take up arms (Kim 2007)'. The Kwangju Uprising could not have been directed by 'intellectuals' even if the people of Kwangju and/or its intellectuals had wanted to plan such an event. As has been well documented, most activists had been rounded up in police raids in the days and nights before 18 May (Lee 1999 [1985]: 40-41). Kwangju began in reaction to unprovoked attack, but that reaction increasingly took on the shape of a not unpredictable but still spontaneous insurrection with democratic goals more ambitious than many intellectuals may have dared to dream in 1980.

Conclusion

The new cinema of South Korea has looked back at the Kwangju Uprising in the last few years and made films that do confirm the uprising - or, as the tamer official term puts it, the Kwangju Democratic People's Movement - as a central event on the long painful road to democratization. *The Old Garden* and *May 18*

are both reasonably well-made mainstream films, although the latter proved far more successful at the multiplexes. It is difficult to gauge, however, the significance of either film beyond the context of the film industry itself. They seem to have provoked little real intellectual or political debate.

The release of *May 18* might have been expected to lead to a wider social and political discourse about the recent past and its continued significance, or with Im Sang-su, its potentially negative legacies for contemporary South Korea. But it was another film that actually generated far more comment and debate well beyond the usual perimeters of the cinematic world.

The film which kept *May 18* from becoming the number-one Korean film of the year was *D-War* (*Ti-Wŏ*), known on release in the US, and now in DVD format, as *Dragon Wars*. It is a strange mishmash of CGI monsters, American actors and Korean patriotism assembled by the enterprising maverick Shim Hyŏng-rae.¹⁴ Not so much a work of art or entertainment as a summertime happening, *D-War* persuaded 8.5 million viewers to sit and watch it on any of 689 screens, and soon developed a huge cyber-fan base. As Chŏng Han-sŏk put it, writing in the Korean Film Council annual report, '*D-War* had been in the spotlight even before its opening, due to the expectations for the film to become a Korean blockbuster (KC 2007: 4).

Maybe it is the sign of a fairly healthy democracy that a film on such a potentially divisive topic as *May 18* can now be made, released and seen by millions of South Koreans without creating much of a stir. That the new Korean film industry has changed hugely since the 1990s and the daring required to make a film such as Chang Sŏn-u's *Petal* is without doubt; whether this industry still has a significant place for an auteur-director such as Im Sang-su is not clear.

Whether or not South Korean writers and film-

makers will continue to engage with the country's long years of political struggle in such a way as to make it part of contemporary social discourse in a culturally vital way is the sort of question which I doubt many people, perhaps especially people with far more experience and expertise than me, could answer with confidence. Writers such as Hwang Sŏg-yŏng and Ch'oe Yun have created extraordinary examples of how art can shape meaning, even beauty out of political violence. So did Chang Sŏn-u with *Petal*. The films examined above, *The Old Garden* and *May 18*, seem to connect with that kind of artistic engagement at best at second-hand, like earnest speakers of an already half-dead language.

Mark Morris is University Lecturer in East Asian Cultural History at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Cambridge, and Fellow of Trinity College. He mainly teaches Japanese modern fiction, and Japanese and Korean film. He is co-founder and co-ordinator of the first Cambridge course on Asia/East Asian cinema and member of the planning committee for the M Phil degree Screen Media and Cultures. An Asia-Pacific Journal Associate, he prepared this supplement for The Asia-Pacific Journal.

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Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all statistics are gleaned from the *koreanfilm.org* website. For a somewhat different, concentrated breakdown, see *KC 2007*: 492-98.

² Yi Chae-hŭi [Lee Jae-hui]'s *Kwangju Diary* (Lee 1999) is still the most important account of the days from 18 till 27 May 1980, now memorialized as 5.18, the day the troops started their rampage. (The book includes invaluable essays by Bruce Cumings and Tim Shorrock on US involvement.) A concise overview of the democratic movement is found in Cumings 1997: 337-93. A brief account with chronology and valuable links can be found in the English *Wikipedia*; the Japanese version is short but provides some statistics about the compensation scheme and other links; the version on the fledgling Korean *Wikipedia* is short but with useful links. The May 18 Memorial Foundation now has an [English website](#). A very helpful overview is provided by Gi-Wook Shin's 'Introduction' to Shin & Hwang 2003: xi-xxxi; a moving account of both the uprising and its painful aftermath is Lewis 2002.

³ 'In 1993, as soon as I returned to my country, I had been arrested; while taking a walk where you could circle about in the narrow, confined space between the walls, I thought of the legend of Wulingyuan and that of Shangri-La, and the title "The Old Garden" came to me. Recalling days spent in the company of my comrades, I felt a need to recount what we had lived, not abstract ideas about the future and prophecies, but the concrete process which had brought changes to reality. I wanted to show the world through the prism of days lived by ordinary, fragile individuals caught in a whirlwind, not through the epoch or history. . . . "The Old Garden" would be the portrait of a generation which had followed the dream of a better life': Postface, Hwang 2005: 565 (my translation).

⁴ For an important introduction to the work, see

Hughes 2007.

⁵ Im brought artist Cho Tŏk-hyŏn into the production to serve as adviser and to provide paintings for rare scenes involving Yun-hŭi painting or sketching. In one, she sits before an easel and copies from a photo of Hyŏn-u in high school uniform; she places his figure in the sheltering embrace of her own arm, although her own larger image, sketched from her reflection in a mirror, portrays her as a most unusual Madonna – shaven-headed and gaunt. Close-ups show Cho's hand doing the careful sketching and shading. It is a very touching scene, as is the scene of Hyŏn-u finally meeting his lost daughter, when he hands over custodianship of the iconic portrait to the teenager. Yet this portrait doesn't emerge organically as part of a woman artist's overall career, with trial and error, successes and failures, but arrives almost magically as a melodramatic tribute to lasting love. Cho Tŏk-hyŏn is a well-respected artist. Im refers to his style as 'ultra-realistic' during an informative interview included on the DVD version of the film. Yet how Yun-hŭi might have trained and worked at her craft to achieve the ultra-realistic skill displayed by the canvases scattered about her studio is not hinted at during the course of the film.

⁶ For an interpretation, see Morris 2008.

⁷ The Korean title *Hwaryŏhan hyuga* means 'elegant/stylish vacation'. This was the cruel euphemism given by the military planners to the operation directed against Kwangju.

⁸ For an English translation, plus valuable biographical note about Ch'oe, see Ch'oe 1997/8. Ch'oe, herself a scholar of French literature, has co-operated with Patrick Maurus on French versions of her work: see Ch'oe 2000. An excellent overview of both film and literature dealing with the Kwangju Uprising is Baker 2003.

⁹ The creative feedback loop between Korean

literary and cinematic form stretches back a long way. In the foundational work of modern fiction, Yi Kwang-su's *Mujǒng* (1917), when the male protagonist and the woman he once loved meet again, Yi describes the encounter like this: 'As the two of them looked at one another, events from over ten years ago flashed through their minds like a motion picture' (Yi 2005 [1917]: 91).

¹⁰ When *Petal* appeared in 1996, the marketplace for Korean film looked very different from today's supermarket of glossy products. Korean films occupied barely 23% of it, there were only some 511 screens (versus the 2000+ of today) in the country, and the average budget for a feature film was around KRW 0.9 billion, less than USD 900,000. Jang's film was number four among Korean releases that year: its Seoul box office of 214,000 still looks strong compared to that of *The Old Garden*, 64,000.

¹¹ Cambridge graduate student Jeon Yong-woog generously provided help with DVD extras, Korean web resources and his own interpretations of the films discussed in this essay. Cambridge colleague Peter Kornicki showed generosity and patience in reading Korean-language reviews with me.

¹² According to Naver News, 13 September 2006. Online: [Link](#). (accessed May 2008).

¹³ If *Taegukgi* translated themes and techniques from Hollywood battlefields, South Korean expertise has in turn been transferred to filmmaking outside the country. Feng Xiaogang's pioneering Chinese civil war blockbuster *Assembly* (2007) made use of South Korean technical staff; its scenes of urban warfare bear more than passing resemblance to those Kang Che-gyu created for *Taegukgi*.

¹⁴ For examples of a few of the more reasoned critical responses to the film, see Hartzell 2007 and Nam 2007. For a taste of the controversy

surrounding the battle between critics and fans, try 'Critic Jin, Film Fans Duel over "D-War"', in: *The Korea Times* 15 August 2007. Online: [Link](#). (accessed May 2008). The controversy over the film and its laboured appeals to nationalism are given prominence in the Korean Film Council's annual report: see *KC 2007*: 4.

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