


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kim Chae-gyu syndrome: South Korean politics and divergent filmic portrayals of the assassination of Park Chung Hee

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Abstract

The assassination of the dictator Park Chung Hee by his intelligence chief Kim Chae-gyu was a momentous events in South Korean history, which garnered two feature-length filmic depictions released fifteen years apart in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. *The President's Last Bang*, released in 2005, was an irreverent black comedy in which all those involved that fateful evening were villains in their own right. *The Man Standing Next*, from 2020, took a much different tack. Kim gained a righteousness and revolutionary motivation that had been absent in the portrayal in the earlier film, in which Kim's intentions remained open to interpretation. This article analyzes the changes in Kim's depiction in the context of shifting respective political contexts, particularly the impeachment of Park's daughter Park Geun-hye in 2016, and the shadow cast by the legacies of authoritarianism, the specter of which seemed to loom over Korea again during the younger Park's administration. Consequently, the outpouring of public fervor in the ensuing candlelight vigils reaffirmed societal support for democracy and consequently elevated Kim Chae-gyu, Park's bane, to the role of champion of Korean democracy when it seemed under threat once again.

Keywords: Collective memory; historical film; impeachment; Kim Chae-gyu; Park Chung Hee; Park Geun-hye; politics; South Korea

On October 26, 1979, South Korea's authoritarian president Park Chung Hee's eighteen-year reign abruptly ended at the hands of his own Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) chief, Kim Chae-gyu. After a dinnertime argument at a KCIA compound in the Kungjŏngdong neighborhood of Seoul concerning the suppression of the Pusan-Masan demonstrations that had arisen earlier that month, Kim (1926–1980) shot and killed both Park (1917–1979) and his chief bodyguard Ch'a Chi-ch'ŏl, with whom Kim had had especially sharp conflict due to Ch'a's growing influence over Park. Kim himself was arrested by the military shortly after his deed, eventually being tried and executed in the early months of 1980.

Analyses of motives behind Kim's assassination of Park, one of the most pivotal moments in South Korean history, have proven inconclusive. Kim himself argued during his post-assassination trial that his actions were premeditated, carried out for the sake of overthrowing Park's dictatorship and restoring democracy.¹ Kim's lawyers and other defenders insisted on his sincerity and argued that Korean democracy was “indebted to” Kim, who they asserted had accelerated its establishment through the assassination.² On the other hand, the military's investigation, led by General Chun Doo-hwan

¹An 2017, p. 42; Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, p. 90.

²Kim's lawyer Kang Sin-ok and the Catholic activist Ham Se-ung have been among the most strident defenders of Kim's legacy. See Kang Sin-ok, Preface to Mun 2013, pp. 8–10; Ham 2022.

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(Chŏn Tu-hwan) – who would quickly seize power as the new military strongman in his own *coup d'états* in 1979 and 1980 – instead declared that the assassination was the spontaneous work of a resentful man who aimed to eliminate his enemies in Ch'a and Park and who possessed a megalomaniacal desire to gain power, a claim that would be repeated by Park's supporters.³ The truth likely remains somewhere in the middle. The assassination exhibited signs of being "hastily improvised" in the use of deficient equipment (such as Kim's gun, which jammed) and the lack of "a serious plan for taking over the government," but it is clear that the personal and bureaucratic rivalries between Kim's KCIA and Ch'a's Presidential Security Service had long been simmering.⁴ Moreover, Kim was known to be a moderate voice within the Park regime against the increasingly hardline stance of Park and Ch'a, especially with regards to opposition politicians and how to handle the anti-government demonstrations in Pusan and Masan.

In addition to the unsettled nature of his motives, assessments of Kim and his act have remained ambiguous also because they have been so closely wrapped up in the mixed legacy of Park's regime itself. While he has often been credited with directing South Korea's meteoric economic rise, Park had ruled South Korea through authoritarian means for close to twenty years between 1961 and 1979. The significance of the assassination thus differs depending on one's view of the Park regime's merits and flaws. Was the assassination an end to brutal dictatorship which helped to usher in democracy within a decade after 1979? Or did it end the life of a man who has widely been seen as shepherding South Korea's prosperity? Moreover, even if Kim ended up killing Park, the fact remained that he was a top insider within the regime as head of the KCIA as well as a close friend of the president, with whom he shared a hometown. Could Kim truly become a symbol of democracy? Outside of a select group of admirers as seen above, many Korean progressives remained skeptical.

This ambivalence toward Kim has undergone a significant change since the mid-2010s, however, when the South Korean public noticeably began to embrace Kim's side of the story amidst the political turmoil that engulfed the presidency of Park Geun-hye (2013–2017), Park Chung Hee's daughter, in late 2016. Her time in politics was shrouded in controversy from the beginning due to her father's lengthy and oppressive reign. But rather than evade her father's legacy, she consistently embraced it, emerging as a stout defender of the elder Park's rule and anti-democratic activities.⁵ Actions such as the dissolution of the opposition United Progressive Party in 2014, the creation of a cultural blacklist, and the attempt at imposing a single state-produced historical textbook for all students caused critics to opine that Park Geun-hye sought to emulate her father in terms of a more authoritarian ruling style as well.⁶ Thus, the two Parks were invariably linked to authoritarian politics.

Once the younger Park fell, the star of Kim Chae-gyu, the figure responsible for the end of the elder Park's regime, correspondingly rose, as Koreans sentimentally looked back to a previous time when a Park had been removed from power. If Park Geun-hye's rise to prominence was propelled by a wave of nostalgia about her father's rule – a phenomenon labeled "Park Chung Hee syndrome" – due to the socioeconomic uncertainties and dislocations arising out of the 1997 economic crisis (nicknamed the "IMF Crisis") and a desire for strong leadership and competent economic management by the state that Park Chung Hee represented, then Kim became a symbolic counterpoint. One can thus arguably find a similar "Kim Chae-gyu nostalgia" among opponents of Park Geun-hye's administration, although perhaps smaller in scale than Park Chung Hee syndrome. The positive reevaluations of

³An 2017, pp. 42–43. These included Park's nephew-in-law Kim Chong-p'il, who was one of the masterminds of the military coup d'état on May 16, 1961, that brought Park to power while also serving as Prime Minister and the inaugural director of the KCIA under Park. Kim Chong-p'il dismissed Kim Chae-gyu's claims about a democratic motivation as a "self-deception," arguing that the lack of preparation (i.e., not counting bullets, making sure his pistol worked, etc.) indicated a spontaneous act of emotion. See Kim Chong-p'il 2016, p. 32.

⁴Joo-Hong Kim 2011, pp. 194–99; Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, p. 90.

⁵One example included her labeling of Park Chung Hee's military coup d'état on May 16, 1961, as a "revolution to save the country" (*kuguk hyŏngmyŏng*), which converged with how the elder Park and his accomplices' characterized their act. See Han'gyŏre 2007.

⁶Doucette and Koo 2016.

Kim in the aftermath of the impeachment scandal demonstrates his transformation into a symbol of Korean democracy, although there remain questions about his suitability for that role.

The shift in attitude toward Kim can be seen in two films depicting the assassination, released fifteen years apart in 2005 and 2020, which will be the focus of this article. The first is the 2005 film *The President's Last Bang* (*Kū ttae kū saramdŭl*), in which Kim emerges as more or less a cynical individual with a personal vendetta, a man with few ideals and even fewer plans to deal with the aftermath of his deed.⁷ “Democracy” is a mere afterthought in this portrayal. However, the 2020 film *The Man Standing Next* (*Namsan ūi pujangdŭl*) offers a drastically different interpretation of the KCIA chief.⁸ The figure of Kim Chae-gyu (renamed Kim Kyu-p'yŏng) is depicted as a flawed but ultimately idealistic individual seeking to turn the country back onto the road of revolutionary ideals with which the military regime had begun. This later film thus reflects the broader positive turn in the public memory of Kim Chae-gyu in the fifteen years between the two films' production, catalyzed by the change in public sentiment toward Kim (and by extension toward Park Chung Hee and his daughter) after the 2016 scandal.

Park Chung Hee syndrome and the rehabilitation of authoritarian rule

To understand the nature of opposition to Park Geun-hye's rule, one must first examine the nostalgia of the Park Chung Hee era, Park Chung Hee syndrome, that carried her to the presidency and sparked critical backlash against both the father and daughter. Initially, when Park died, the mood in Korea was somber but reserved. Even certain South Korean government officials admitted that “his time had come,” while U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke claimed that “there wasn't a wet eye in Seoul.”⁹ Massive demonstrations in support of democracy erupted soon after his death in what is known as the “Seoul Spring,” indicating public disaffection with dictatorship and readiness to adopt democratic government, although these were soon suppressed upon Chun Doo-hwan's (1931–2021) rise to power and eventual assumption of the presidency in 1980. But by the late 1990s, although the harsh, oppressive nature of Park's authoritarian regime continued to color many Koreans' views of him in the decades afterward, growing disillusionment with democratic politics fed a marked upswing in nostalgic reminiscences of the Park regime to the point that the term “Park Chung Hee syndrome” began to be applied as a general social phenomenon during this time. In an April 1997 poll asking respondents who they believed was the greatest president, Park won by a landslide, receiving over three-quarters of the vote, while in a later poll that year, Park was also voted as the greatest Korean historical figure ahead of even King Sejong the Great, who helped invent *han'gŭl*, and Admiral Yi Sun-sin, the hero credited with saving Korea against the Japanese invasions in the 1590s.¹⁰ While critical views of Park continued to be promoted by progressive intellectuals, it was the celebratory, “hagiographic portrayals” of Park as a “superhuman leader” and a thrifty, selfless, self-sacrificing, and “tragic hero” whose contributions to South Korea's development were immeasurable that gained ascendancy among the public in the early 2000s.¹¹

A strong contributing factor in sustaining this nostalgia was the onset of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, nicknamed the “IMF Crisis” in South Korea due to the drastic economic restructuring advised by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which contributed to massive layoffs and a persistent sense of insecurity that has pervaded South Korean collective psychology to the present day. With South

⁷Im 2005.

⁸U Min-ho 2020.

⁹Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, p. 90. This sentiment might be contradicted by the scenes from Park's funeral, as broadcast by *Taehan nyŭsŭ* (Taehan News) No. 1264-5, in which crowds of mourners visibly and audibly display emotion at Park's passing. Perhaps there is a performative aspect to their public mourning, but it is difficult to assume the lack of authenticity on everyone's part. This footage can be seen on the official YouTube channel operated by Kungmin Pangsong (or Korea TV (KTV)) that provides archives of *Taehan nyŭsŭ* broadcasts. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rs0p42Eib9w> (accessed April 16, 2022).

¹⁰Moon 2009.

¹¹Moon 2009.

Korea facing unprecedented economic downturns, many in the public yearned for strong political leadership and effective economic management by the government, both of which Park and his regime embodied.¹²

Nostalgia for Park Chung Hee was manifested in the presidential elections in 1997. One of the presidential candidates, Rhee In-je (Yi In-je), notably resembled Park in looks and even allegedly deliberately fashioned his hair and attire in Park's style to appeal to nostalgic voters.¹³ Meanwhile, various candidates sought to emphasize their own ties to the Park regime and its modernizing drive, including highlighting literal kinship (in the case of Kim Chong-p'il, who was Park's nephew by marriage).¹⁴ Even Kim Dae Jung, the victor in the elections and one of the most prominent and persecuted critics of the Park regime, announced that he would support the construction of a memorial for Park Chung Hee.¹⁵ Such was the power of Park Chung Hee nostalgia that even his political opponents scrambled to capitalize on his now-positive legacy.

This nostalgia remained powerful into the 2000s, directly benefiting Park's daughter Park Geun-hye after she entered politics in 1998. The younger Park quickly rose through the political ranks, being elected as a National Assemblywoman that same year and then, just a few years later, becoming chairwoman of the main conservative party, the Grand National Party (GNP; K: Hannaradang), between 2004 and 2006.¹⁶ Within a decade, she was a top contender for the presidency; she narrowly lost the 2007 GNP presidential primaries to eventual president Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and was assured the nomination for the next election cycle in 2012.

During her time in politics, Park consistently praised her father, his leadership, and his accomplishments in her autobiography and on the campaign trail, including adopting the slogan of "Try to Live Well."¹⁷ It is also probably no coincidence that Park's coiffed hair strongly resembled her mother Yuk Yöng-su, a beloved figure among supporters of the Park regime who also fell victim to an assassin's bullet in 1974.¹⁸ Moreover, the fact that Park Geun-hye had to step into the role of First Lady after her mother's death for the remainder of her father's rule while still only in her early twenties certainly endeared her to older generations in the 2000s. In those ways, Park appealed to voters as the successor to both of her widely admired parents. This paid dividends as older Koreans voted for her in droves and propelled her to the presidency in 2012 when she defeated Moon Jae-in.¹⁹

Indeed, there has also been a strong generational component to Park Chung Hee nostalgia. Well into the 2010s, the "baby boomer" generation of Koreans who were born in the mid- to late-1950s have been noted to hold intensely sentimental memories of the Park regime due to its successes in industrializing the South Korean economy and lifting them up out of poverty, even if it came at the expense of democracy, which was waved away as unworkable at the time and whose advocates were suspected to have been infiltrated by communists.²⁰ Park himself has been given the lion's share of the credit for economic growth, with positive attributes converging with those found in the narratives produced amidst the post-1997 "Park Chung Hee boom," and even decades after the democratic reforms of 1987, many members of this generation were noted to favor "strong leadership" in the vein of Park and even Chun Doo-hwan.²¹ This older generation of Koreans has made up the core of the so-called T'aegükki (Korean national flag) rallies that emerged as counter-demonstrations

¹²Kang 2010, pp. 4–8.

¹³Hwang 2007; Moon 2009.

¹⁴Chin 2006, p. 297.

¹⁵Moon 2009. Kim also appointed two central figures of Park's regime, Kim Chong-p'il and Pak T'ae-jun, as his Prime Minister.

¹⁶The GNP's successive victories in parliamentary and local elections under her leadership despite unfavorable conditions in the mid-2000s gained her the nickname "Queen of Elections."

¹⁷Kim 2014, pp. 59–60.

¹⁸Kim 2014, p. 60.

¹⁹Kim 2014, pp. 50–51.

²⁰Ma and Kim 2015, pp. 87–96. Residents of Honam (the Chölla provinces) were a notable exception to this aversion to the democratic movement and (progressive) opposition parties, however. See Ma and Kim 2015, pp. 97–106.

²¹Ma and Kim 2015, pp. 106–111.

against the anti-Park candlelight vigils in 2016, emphatically supporting Park Geun-hye, and then becoming a vocal force protesting against the ensuing Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022).²²

What of Kim Chae-gyu, then? Kim remained an ambiguous figure throughout the early years of the twenty-first century. When there was consideration by the government in the early 2000s to officially recognize Kim as a democratization activist, there was opposition from not just pro-Park conservatives, but also from some progressives. The latter's reasoning was twofold. First, Kim himself had no relation to the broader democratization movement, and as director of the KCIA, his recognition as a democratization activist would merely insult other activists who had been persecuted by the institution he led. Second, it was believed that Park's assassination merely sped up the inevitable process of the collapse of the harsh *Yusin* system of the 1970s, which was well on its way as seen in the Pusan-Masan protests that rocked the regime in October 1979. In fact, progressive intellectuals contended, Kim's action only led to the continuation of dictatorship through Chun Doo-hwan's seizure of power, which may not have happened had Kim not killed Park; instead, the regime might have collapsed on its own and democracy could have been achieved eight years earlier. Progressives argued that the end of *Yusin* and the death of Park by themselves did not consist of "democratization."²³

The President's Last Bang

Given this resurgence in Park Chung Hee nostalgia and lingering skepticism among progressives about Kim's democratic credentials, the public mood was not yet favorable to a sympathetic view of Kim Chae-gyu. It was in this context that *The President's Last Bang* was released in 2005, a black comedy that lampooned the event of assassination as well as all the major players involved, including Park Chung Hee, which unsurprisingly caused the film to be met with controversy upon release. Notably, Kim Chae-gyu, played by veteran actor Paek Yun-sik, was not spared from satire, showing him as deep down in the mud with the rest of the unpleasant cast of characters that made up the Park regime.

The central setting in the first half of *The President's Last Bang* is the KCIA itself, which serves to accentuate Kim's lack of heroism. The KCIA's brutal nature is shown in the film's opening scenes as the camera pans through various interrogation rooms as agents torture democratization activists and insult their genitals and manhood. In a recreation room, agents play billiards while laughing about the ways the Defense Security Command (Poansa) can use the law to frame and convict people of spying for North Korea and violating the Anti-Communist Law (*pan'gongbōp*). This is the KCIA, the dreaded enforcement arm of the authoritarian regime, and an institution that Kim Chae-gyu leads and in which he is fully ensconced.

Another unsavory aspect of not just the KCIA, but the regime in general, that the film underscores is the pervasiveness of Japanese influence, referencing the Japanese colonial period and the accusations that Park and his regime were extensions of it. This is highlighted by regime-associated characters' repeated lapses into the Japanese language, a scene of one agent practicing kendo just within the gates of the KCIA compound, and Park's request that the invited singer (played by rock musician Kim Yun-a) sing a Japanese *enka* song. Notably, Kim Chae-gyu himself partakes in this use of Japanese. He is introduced in the film as calling himself a samurai. Later, moments before shooting Park in the head, Kim calls the president by his Japanese name (Takagi Masao) and insults him, all in Japanese. The omnipresence of Japanese in the Park regime reflects Park's personal reputation in the public as a pro-Japanese collaborator given his eager participation in the Japanese military during the Japanese colonial era (1910–1945).²⁴ With deep anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment entrenched in South Korean society, the association of Park with Japan acted as a disadvantage and earned him lasting suspicion. That Kim also actively uses Japanese in the film thus marks him as

²²Yang 2020.

²³Paek Ch'ang-sik 2004.

²⁴For more on Park's time in the military academies of the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA), see Eckert 2016.

something different than a heroic protagonist, but someone stained with the same corruption as the rest of the Park regime.

As a black comedy, it should not be a surprise for the film's portrayal of Park Chung Hee to diverge from the mainstream view of him as a stolid, frugal man completely devoted to the affairs of the country he ruled. Film scholar Kyung Hyun Kim notes how *The President's Last Bang* "primitivize[s] or infantilize[s] Park Chung Hee, to end up challenging the orthodox image of him that has persisted as a hypermasculine and military corporate man."²⁵ Instead, Park is depicted as an intensely lonely, lecherous old man devoted to fulfilling his voracious sexual appetite. It appears that there was some truth behind this, as An Tong-il, a lawyer for Kim Chae-gyu, claimed that Park visited the safehouse in Kungjōngdong almost excessively for his rendezvous with women.²⁶ Kim notably discouraged accomplice Pak Sōn-ho, the Chief of Protocol (*ūijōn kwajang*), from testifying about Park's philandering, which is referenced at the end of the film during the descriptions of the characters' fates.

In contrast with his portrayal in *The Man Standing Next*, Kim is given no revolutionary motives in *The President's Last Bang*. There is passing reference to Kim's more moderate stance toward demonstrators, as he mildly pushes back against Ch'a Chi-ch'ōl's advocacy for bloody suppression, stating that the protesters were merely students and should not be beaten so much. There is no hint given that Kim was planning anything before the dinner other than his request to the Army Chief of Staff Chōng Sūng-hwa to join him for dinner after hearing Park will be in the safehouse and later loading his gun in his office while talking to Colonel Min (a stand-in for Kim Chae-gyu's aide Pak Hūng-ju). Of course, this has ramifications down the line because no one else at the agency has any idea what is going on, what to do, what the next steps are, and as such this lack of planning leads to their downfall. With his failing health and his rage at Ch'a and Park, the film sets up Kim's decision as a spur-of-the-moment one, reflecting the historical reality in which there is evidence for both some degree of planning as well as spontaneity in Kim's assassination of Park. Indeed, according to the film scholar Noh Kwangwoo, the whole assassination, from planning (or lack thereof) to execution to aftermath, "is treated as an absurd, poorly planned, and disorganized affair."²⁷ Not only is the assassination itself rather abrupt, but Kim in the film offers no guidance to his subordinates on what to do afterwards, even something as basic as how to dispose of Park's corpse. Kim shows no concern for the aftermath of his deed, telling Chief Agent Ju (a stand-in for Pak Sōn-ho, played by Han Sōk-kyu) that there is nothing to worry about and to clean things up, giving no further instructions.²⁸ In addition, as I will discuss further below, Kim readily acquiesced to Chōng Sūng-hwa's request to travel not to the KCIA headquarters located at Namsan (South Mountain), where Kim would be secure in his power, but to Army headquarters, leaving him vulnerable to capture – and indeed, once the truth is revealed by Secretary Yang (representing then-Presidential Chief Secretary Kim Kye-wōn), Kim is quickly arrested by the military, leaving his subordinates out to dry and get arrested themselves.

Moreover, the film scoffs at Kim's supposed democratic motivations. Minutes before the final confrontation with Ch'a and Park, Kim storms out of the dining room muttering, "I'll show you today how frightening the KCIA can be," indicating that personal resentment against Ch'a was a prime motivator for the violent act. As Kim gathers his direct subordinates Colonel Min and Chief Agent

²⁵Kyung Hyun Kim 2011, p. 85.

²⁶An asserted that the number of women Park met with exceeded 200, and that among these women were included actresses, models, and other figures in the entertainment industry. In addition, An alleged that an incident similar to the opening scene actually happened, in which the mother (played by Yun Yō-jōng) of a young woman urges that her daughter be given another meeting with Park. See Kim Sun-hūi 2005.

²⁷Noh 2006, p. 57.

²⁸The spontaneity of the whole day is punctuated in the film when it seems Kim failed to notify many of his agents of the presence of the Army Chief of Staff; when Chief Agent Ju asks an agent who was in the car with Kim as Kim and the Army Chief of Staff Chong drive away, the agent replies that all he knows is that it was the president of a university, but does not know which specific university, making a play on the word "*ch'ongjang*," which can refer to both the Army Chief of Staff (*Yukkun ch'ammo ch'ongjang*) and a university president (*taehak ch'ongjang*).

Ju for one last meeting before the violent deeds commence, he says to them after a sigh, as an afterthought, “For the sake of democracy, we’re offering our lives.” Paek Yun-sik’s performance as Kim as he shoots Park in the head – letting out a strangled cry as he pulls the trigger – truly personifies Kim’s famous saying that he “shot at the heart of *Yusin* with the heart of a wild beast,” but regarding whether this savagery that overtook Kim was derived from democratic motivations or from personal frustration, the strong indication is that it was the latter motive. Kim makes a brief reference to revolution when he tells Kim Kye-won during a lull in the emergency cabinet meeting convened after the assassination that “revolution is not a cocktail party; it’s a bloody war,” but his mention of revolution comes off as self-serving with no ideological heft behind his words. When he is being interrogated after his arrest at the end of the film, Kim’s desperate pleas that he killed Park for democracy (“with the heart of a wild beast”) come off as disingenuous as a result. The ending narration, provided by Youn Yuh-jung (Yun Yŏ-jŏng), derisively mocks Kim’s attempts at associating himself with democracy. Youn asks rhetorically, “Does he look like a revolutionary champion of democracy? Or a megalomaniacal Don Quixote?” – with the word “megalomania” (*kwadae mangsang*) referring to Chun Doo-hwan’s infamous characterization of Kim in his investigation of the assassination. Her skepticism of Kim’s sincerity indicates to the viewer that the latter is more correct.

The Ch’oe Sun-sil Scandal and Kim Chae-gyu’s emergence as a hero of democracy

Kim’s reputation was thus left ambivalent for much of the first two decades of the 2000s until the Ch’oe Sun-sil scandal broke out in the fall of 2016, in which Ch’oe, a confidante of Park Geun-hye, was discovered to have significant influence over Park and her administration despite being a private citizen, while amassing wealth and favors for herself and her daughter through her association with the president. Kim’s reputational revival then gained serious momentum in the aftermath when it became widely known that he had expressed serious reservations of Ch’oe’s father Ch’oe T’ae-min in the late 1970s and his undue control over Park Geun-hye. Ch’oe T’ae-min, dubbed as a Korean “Rasputin” figure, was a founder of a religious sect called the Church of Eternal Life who tried to ingratiate himself with Park after her mother Yuk Yŏng-su’s death in 1974. He approached Park, telling her that Yuk had asked him in a dream to help her daughter. Park quickly found solace in Ch’oe and his purported ability to act as a medium between her and her mother, and Ch’oe was able to profit much from this association. There were rumors about how deep this relationship between Park and Ch’oe went, with the American Embassy mentioning in a 2007 cable that some Koreans believed that Ch’oe “had complete control over Park’s body and soul during her formative years and that his children accumulated enormous wealth as a result,” and some rumors even indicated a sexual relationship between the two, although Park denied this.²⁹

Even during the 1970s, this unusually close relationship between Park and Ch’oe did not escape notice, including by the KCIA. Kim Chae-gyu had apparently repeatedly reported on their “inappropriate relationship” to Park Chung Hee, only for the elder Park to disregard Kim’s warnings.³⁰ Indeed, during his trial, Kim mentioned that Ch’oe’s influence over the younger Park, and Park Chung Hee’s failure to restrain the elder Ch’oe, was a factor in his decision to assassinate the president.³¹ Even well after Kim had been arrested, he reportedly continued to rage to his lawyer that Ch’oe was someone who had a “cancerous existence for the country” and needed to be “punished,” whether by a car accident, for the sake of the country.³²

Interestingly, in a 2005 interview, Kim Chae-gyu’s lawyer An Tong-il noted that one of Kim’s stated motives for killing Park was in part a reaction to Park’s immoral private life as well as problems related to his children. But here, it was not so much Ch’oe T’ae-min’s alarming involvement in Park Geun-hye’s life, but rather the degree to which Park was intervening on behalf of his children in

²⁹Bae 2016; Choe 2016.

³⁰Han 2016; Kim Ŭn-bin 2016.

³¹Choe 2016.

³²Kim Ŭn-bin 2016.

enlarging their public roles. The one time An mentioned Ch'oe in this interview was to note how the latter came out on the wrong end of a power play. Park, who had begun to fuss over his children after his wife's death, intervened to make Park Geun-hye the president of the Women's Volunteer Corps for National Salvation (Kuguk Yösöng Pongsadan) and Ch'oe T'ae-min the honorary president – a role with no real power – whereas previously their roles had been reversed. Kim in general was said to have felt disdain for how Park Geun-hye was being worshiped by the people despite being merely the daughter of the president and also was contemptuous of the president's son Park Chi-man's behavior as an Army cadet.³³ What this demonstrates is how it was only after the news coverage of the Ch'oe Sun-sil scandal in late 2016 brought to light Park Geun-hye's relationship with Ch'oe T'ae-min that Kim's comments about seeking to contain Ch'oe's influence became widely known.³⁴

As a result of this revelation about Kim's early opposition to Ch'oe, there was greater public attention paid to Kim Chae-gyu and his assassination of Park, accompanied by a reevaluation of Kim himself as someone who not only ended the *Yusin* dictatorship but also foresaw the troubles and corruption surrounding Park Geun-hye. Episodes of the SBS television program "Unanswered Questions" (*Kū kōsi algo sipta*) that featured a reassessment of Kim Chae-gyu aired in January 2017 and attained ratings above 10 percent, reflecting high public interest in revisiting Kim's story.³⁵ In early 2017, it was reported that there was a swell of visitors to his gravesite where they left bottles of the Chivas Regal whisky, which was infamously known to have been drunk by Kim and Park on the night of the assassination, as well as copies of newspapers of the day the Constitutional Court removed Park Geun-hye from office, indicating how public goodwill toward Kim clearly surged as a result of the revelations about his involvement in trying to stop Ch'oe T'ae-min's association with the Parks.³⁶

Reassessments of Kim recast him as a "martyr" (*ūisa*) for the cause of democracy. Kim's lawyer An Tong-il published a book in 2017 shortly afterward the impeachment called *I Was Kim Chae-gyu's Lawyer*.³⁷ This was a revised and enlarged edition of a previous book published in 2005, which had a different title with no mention of Kim.³⁸ The fact that the 2017 version was retitled to explicitly include a reference to Kim Chae-gyu – proudly informing the reader of the author's association with Kim – is telling of the turn in public sentiment. An had long been involved in trying to rehabilitate Kim's image, and his original 2005 book was also part of this effort.³⁹ In the Afterword of the 2017 edition, An unambiguously labeled Kim an "admirable righteous person" who had "resuscitated liberal democracy for the people."⁴⁰ He stated in an interview shortly after the book's publication that he believed that Kim had acted out of a motivation to return South Korea to democracy and avoid further bloodshed in the suppression of demonstrators in Pusan and Masan.⁴¹ Likewise, in May 2020, there were calls by the bereaved of Kim Chae-gyu as well as an organization of lawyers calling for a re-trial of Kim, arguing that there were irregularities in Kim's trial, such as interference by the Defense Security Command, and that ultimately, Kim's assassination of Park should not be considered an act of rebellion because it was an "unavoidable shooting (*pudūgihan sasal*) for the sake of recovering liberal democracy."⁴²

The Man Standing Next and unfulfilled revolution

It is in this context that *The Man Standing Next* was made and released in 2020. The film was loosely based on the bestselling 1992 book series *Namsan ūi pujangdŭl* (literally "The Directors of South

³³Kim Sun-hŭi 2005. Even in an interview in 2017, An downplayed the mention of Ch'oe T'ae-min in Kim's court testimony. See Chōng Hŭi-sang 2017.

³⁴In addition to the *Chungang ilbo* article above, SBS also reported on Kim's views on Ch'oe. See Chōng Yun-sik 2016.

³⁵Wōn 2017.

³⁶Kim Min-uk 2017.

³⁷An 2017.

³⁸An 2005.

³⁹Kim Sun-hŭi 2005.

⁴⁰An 2017, p. 427.

⁴¹Chōng Hŭi-sang 2017.

⁴²Kim Myōng-il 2020.

Mountain (*Namsan*),” more colloquially translated as “The Directors of the KCIA,” since the agency was located at Namsan), authored by the journalist Kim Ch’ung-sik.⁴³ The book, which sold around 530,000 copies, began as a weekly series of articles written by Kim for the *Tonga ilbo* from August 1990 to October 1992 that shed light on the major events and inner workings of the Park regime, centered on the successive directors of the KCIA.⁴⁴

It must be noted here that the director U Min-ho approached Kim Ch’ung-sik about adapting the latter’s book into a film in early 2016, before the outbreak of the Ch’oe Sun-sil scandal.⁴⁵ Moreover, U claimed to not have had an explicit political purpose in rehabilitating Kim’s image. Rather, U conceived the film as being part of a larger trilogy centered on the theme of “greed” or “ambition” (*yong-mang*), accompanying two previous films he had made, the 2015 film *Inside Men* (*Naebujadül*) and the 2018 film *Drug King* (*Mayagwang*). In all the films in this so-called “ambition trilogy” (*yongmang 3 pujak*), the director’s stated purpose was to provide nuanced and complex portrayals of the powerful and corrupt and how “empty” ambition and desire drove human actions, although noting that “ambition to succeed in one’s field” is not necessarily evil.⁴⁶ In this sense, one can see the theme of ambition and greed play out in Park Chung Hee’s obsession with hiding his wealth and recovering that of his subordinates. In the case of Kim, the emotional responses by Kim Chae-gyu (renamed as Kim Kyu-p’yöng), played by Lee Byung-hun (Yi Pyöng-hön), to his increasingly tenuous position is thus a core element of the film’s narrative as well as Kim’s characterization.

Despite this apolitical framing of the film on the director’s part, however, *The Man Standing Next* – perhaps unconsciously – embodies the reevaluation of Kim happening in society at large at the time of the film’s production.⁴⁷ If a key theme is ambition, it is not necessarily for personal gain; there are hints that Kim, as well as all the other “men standing next” to Park, may have thought about replacing the latter, but as seen above, Kim does not kill Park in order to succeed him. Instead, Kim’s true ambition is the fulfillment of the unfinished revolution begun almost two decades prior. The emphasis on revolution reflects the growing societal sympathy toward Kim’s insistence during his trial that he was motivated by a determination to save Korean democracy.

As a result, Kim Chae-gyu’s portrayal in this film noticeably diverges from his counterpart in *The President’s Last Bang* in being imbued with a more conflicted and idealistic personality. His assassination of Park builds on accumulated slights and betrayals and growing sense of guilt over unfulfilled revolutionary promises, the last of which I will explore further below. Predictably, this seemingly positive portrayal of Kim in the film sparked conservative backlash which downplayed Kim’s “heroism” and “righteousness.”⁴⁸ In this view, Kim was no righteous hero, but a murderer of a great man (Park), and had already been judged officially as a murderer who had killed for the purpose of “insurrection.”

Despite these accusations of whitewashing history, Kim Chae-gyu is not portrayed as a flawless man, but a complex one. Kim is directly implicated in former KCIA chief Kim Hyöng-uk’s (“Pak Yong-gak”) disappearance and death after his testimony regarding the Koreagate scandal, which was a scheme in the late 1970s by the South Korean government and the KCIA to bribe and influence American legislators, and the publication of his tell-all memoirs.⁴⁹ He directly orders an operative to

⁴³Kim Ch’ung-sik 1992.

⁴⁴Chöng Hyön-sang 2020. Kim himself had made the dreaded “trip to South Mountain (*Namsan*)” in 1985 – a euphemism for a visit to the KCIA – and was tortured for an article he had written.

⁴⁵Chöng Hyön-sang 2020. Upon reading the book, the director reportedly aspired to create a film akin to *The Godfather*.

⁴⁶Cho Chi-yöng 2018; Kim Si-gyun 2016.

⁴⁷Moreover, the author Kim Ch’ung-sik himself argued that the significance of the film’s release in 2020 lay in the charged political landscape after Park Geun-hye’s scandal, pointing to the rise of the pro-Park, right-wing T’aegükki rallies after 2016, which spoke to the enduring loyalty to the spirit of Park Chung Hee among the older generations. See Chöng Hyön-sang 2020.

⁴⁸A book by Nam Chöng-ok titled *Kim Chae-gyu Was Neither a Righteous Man nor a Hero* (Kim Chae-gyu nün üiin to yöngung to anida) was published in March 2020, shortly after the release of the film in January that year. A review of it was featured on the conservative website *New Daily* (*Nyu teilli*). See Cho Kwang-hyöng 2020.

⁴⁹Kim Hyöng-uk (1925–1979?) was KCIA Director from 1963 to 1969 and then fled to the US in 1973. He reemerged into public consciousness through his testimony in front of the Fraser Committee regarding the Koreagate scandal. Kim disappeared in France in October 1979, believed to have been killed by South Korean agents.

carry out the murder of the latter, with the added pleasure that the KCIA successfully gets to him before Ch'a Chi-ch'öl's ("Kwak Sang-ch'ön") team.⁵⁰ It is plain that in real life, Kim Chae-gyu did order his agency to be involved in Kim Hyöng-uk's disappearance, but it is unclear if this was what historian Han Hong-gu called Kim's "last act of loyalty" to Park or if there were other motives.⁵¹ But at least in the film, this act is done not out of cold blood, but due to Kim Chae-gyu's belief that getting rid of Kim Hyöng-uk would put him back in the good graces of Park. Of course, as Kim Hyöng-uk had warned him earlier, this only gave Park a reason to make Kim Chae-gyu a scapegoat and kick him decisively out the door. So even this act of ordering Kim Hyöng-uk's murder is depicted as being conducted through Park's Machiavellian machinations.

Indeed, Park himself is portrayed as unscrupulous in his greed for not just power, but also money, while also unhesitatingly pitting his subordinates against each other. Park suspects both of his KCIA chiefs, Kim Hyöng-uk and Kim Chae-gyu, of corrupt dealings in money and property and withholding funds from the state and uses those suspicions as pretexts for removing them. Furthermore, there are repeated mentions of Swiss bank accounts that Park allegedly had to hold slush funds.⁵² Chun Doo-hwan ("Chön Tu-hyök"), revealed as the "Iago" that managed those Swiss bank accounts, is shown at the end of the film staring at the president's empty seat and cartoonishly sweeping gold bars from a Blue House safe into a military rucksack, foreshadowing his own rise to power and accumulation of his own massive slush funds, which reportedly reached the billions of dollars at one point.⁵³ And as mentioned above, Park is repeatedly shown emotionally manipulating his KCIA chiefs like Kim Hyöng-uk and Kim Chae-gyu, reflecting Park's real-life pattern of behavior of carefully managing his subordinates and institutions to mitigate their threat to his power. Regarding the KCIA specifically, political scientist Byung-Kook Kim notes, "To dodge popular fury, but also to keep the KCIA in line, Park always used it as a scapegoat and dismissed its director when public discontent increased and protests reached a dangerous level."⁵⁴ In this sense, the English title "The Man Standing Next" refers not just to potential successors to Park, but also the unhappy fates of Park's unfortunate underlings, who succeed each other only to face similar consequences.

As for why Kim shot Park, the film does not give a straightforward answer. One popular rumor has been that Kim believed the U.S. was hinting that it wanted Park removed from the scene, although American accounts vehemently deny that this happened.⁵⁵ In *The President's Last Bang*, there is a passing mention during the emergency cabinet meeting of Kim's conversations with the U.S. ambassador William Gleysteen, but otherwise, the Americans are absent. However, in *The Man Standing Next*, not only does the American ambassador ("Robert" in the film) appear in several scenes, but he is also a menacing presence to Kim, speaking in a highhanded manner while making sinister threats. The U.S. is discovered to have bugged the Blue House, something that happened a couple years before the main film plot in real life, and also has knowledge of Park's alleged Swiss bank accounts.⁵⁶ But even more alarming, the ambassador even threatens to pull troops out of South Korea in response to Kim denying any KCIA involvement in Kim Hyöng-uk's disappearance.⁵⁷ When Kim asks, "What is it that you want from me?", the imperious ambassador states, "Prepare for the next step! Before we have to

⁵⁰However, unlike in the film, Yi Sang-yöl, the South Korean diplomat in Paris (named Yun T'ae-ho in the film), was working with the KCIA in dealing with Kim Hyöng-uk. See Han 2013.

⁵¹Han 2013.

⁵²See Nam 2013; Oh 2017.

⁵³Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, p. 297. The film also foreshadows the outcome of the Kwangju Massacre in showing Chun suggesting to the president to send in an airborne brigade (i.e., paratroopers) into Pusan to suppress demonstrations there, just as the military paratroopers began committing indiscriminate violence against the citizens of Kwangju in May 1980.

⁵⁴Byung-Kook Kim 2011, p. 144.

⁵⁵Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, pp. 90–91.

⁵⁶For a report on U.S. bugging of the Blue House, see Halloran 1977.

⁵⁷This is likely a reference to President Jimmy Carter's longstanding commitment to withdrawing US troops from Korea, although Carter had to back down on this issue eventually.

intervene. Park is finished.” With regards to what the “next step” entails, the ambassador gives no concrete answer, but the implication is that the U.S. wants Kim to remove Park.

Another plausible reason is survival: Kim preempting an imminent purge from power. Throughout the film’s narrative, Kim begins to fear – for good reason – that he is falling out of favor with the president. One symbol of closeness with the president is the provision of cigarettes and lights for the president. Progressing through the film, Kim ends up empty-handed while both Ch’a Chi-ch’ol and Chun Doo-hwan are both ready with a cigarette and lighter, reflecting the latter two characters’ growing intimacy with the president. In addition, Kim had hoped that disappearing Kim Hyöng-uk would leave him back in Park’s good graces, but Park merely uses the same line he used with Kim Hyöng-uk in making the KCIA chief a scapegoat. In another scene, Kim sneaks into a room and overhears Park talking to Ch’a and then on the phone, during which Park expresses his distrust of Kim and conspires to eliminate him. This sense of distance from the president and anger at the latter’s betrayal clearly is one motivation for Kim to kill Park. The question arises, does Kim kill Park mainly because of his fears of being the next Kim Hyöng-uk, or because of idealism?

If preempting one’s removal was one possible motivation for the assassination, the film emphatically removes another reason often given, that Kim had hoped to replace Park in a massive shift of power. Here, a major plot divergence with *The President’s Last Bang* becomes significant, namely the fact that *The President’s Last Bang* continues the narrative after the assassination and to Kim’s downfall and arrest, while *The Man Standing Next* ends with the shooting itself. In *The President’s Last Bang*, as mentioned above, Kim is shown to be lackadaisical in his handling of the post-assassination situation, changing his destination from KCIA headquarters, his power base, to Army Headquarters on a whim at the panicked suggestion of General Chöng Süng-hwa. He even takes a nap while the emergency cabinet meeting is in brief recess. Kim acts like he is in complete control of the situation and only has his aide-de-camp there with him; he is promptly detained once knowledge of his actions reaches the Army Chief of Staff’s ears as Secretary Kim Kye-wön (“Secretary Yang”) babbles about Kim Chae-gyu’s direct involvement in the death of the president. The treatment of Kim’s post-assassination actions – the spontaneity, false confidence, and immediate downfall – offer an interpretation of Kim himself as someone who appears to have killed Park on a whim, due to the numerous slights and petty personal grievances that had piled up too high by that fateful night, and was improvising along the way but eventually would have been more than comfortable being in charge.

On the other hand, the narrative of *The Man Standing Next* ends with Kim’s fateful decision to turn around to the Army Headquarters with no explanation given as to the reasons for it nor any depiction of what happened next. Kim is in a daze, staring at the blood on his hands and his socks. The implication is that he was too shocked to think rationally. But one option that is ruled out is whether he truly wanted to succeed Park. He had no plan in place to consolidate power; his actions certainly removed any possibility of this. Kim felt betrayed by Park for many reasons, including the failure to fulfill the promises of the revolution; he had no ambition to power, or at least, not enough to carefully plan his next moves.

Thus, while both films, similarly to historical events, show the seeming spontaneity of Kim’s head-scratching decision to not head to the safety of Namsan in favor of the uncertainty of the Army Headquarters, the reasons for that decision are different. In *President’s Last Bang*, Kim does so because of his self-assuredness that everything would go his way as well as his lack of care for anything or whimsicalness in carrying out the assassination. In *The Man Standing Next*, Kim is in emotional and mental turmoil whose vengeance on behalf of himself and the people was fulfilled; taking power was not part of his goal. Perhaps – and the film leaves open the possibility – Kim wanted to end his life to an extent. He mutters, “It’s finished” over and over as he walks away from the scene of the killing – is he referring to the deed, or his life?

The Man Standing Next ends with contrasting accounts of Kim’s motivations. The first is the summary of the findings of the official investigation led by Chun, read out by Chun himself in a television broadcast, in which he stated that Kim was seized by “megalomania” and sought the presidency

himself. The irony here, of course, is that Chun himself was plotting to take over the presidency in the aftermath of Park's assassination. This clip is followed by audio from Kim's final testimony during his trial, in which he declared that he wanted to "restore liberal democracy" and block further sacrifice of the people. He emphatically stated that he did not commit his acts, which he deemed revolutionary, to become president. He called himself a "soldier" and a "revolutionary."

Here, one can find one sign that the film favors the argument that ultimately it was Kim's idealism that caused him to pull the trigger. Kim's testimony about his democratic ideals is given the last word, leaving a lasting impression in the viewer's mind. It is clear that the audience should consider Chun's testimony to be unreliable – perhaps projecting his own intentions to seize power.

In contrast, Kim's assertion of his revolutionary purpose is imbued with more credibility, especially given how the film has been building up his growing ideological disillusionment with the Park regime. Kim's growing use of the word "revolution" (*hyŏngmyŏng*) throughout the film reflects this development. In a fictional meeting in the U.S. between Kim Hyŏng-uk and Kim Chae-gyu amidst the Koreagate scandal, the former asks the latter, "Why did we risk our lives and go through with the revolution?", referring to Park's May 16, 1961 coup. Kim Hyŏng-uk's lasting words about revolution reverberate in Kim Chae-gyu's head later in the film, including while he inspects the uprisings in Pusan from his helicopter, ultimately causing him to view Park as having betrayed the promise of revolution and democracy. Right before shooting Ch'a and Park, Kim asks, "Why did you start the revolution? Why did we risk our lives and participate in the revolution?" Surely not to crush and kill one to two million citizens with tanks, Kim exclaims. And right before shooting Park in the head, Kim declares, "I punish you as a traitor to the revolution." By the end, the film makes its position clear that Kim was primarily driven by his desire to fulfill the unfulfilled promise of the revolution of May 16 and end the authoritarianism and corruption that had permeated the Park regime.

But here, a puzzle emerges. In *The Man Standing Next*, as mentioned above, Kim Hyŏng-uk rhetorically asks Kim Chae-gyu why they joined in the May 16 coup. During the night of the assassination, Kim reminisces about the night of the May 16 coup with Park, asking the latter if he remembers how they crossed the Han River guarded by the military police. In this story, Kim himself speaks as if he were there, mentioning how he followed Park even as bullets flew past their ears. Kim states that Park asked him what they should do, and that it was Kim who urged him to move forward with the coup.⁵⁸

But the problem is that Kim was famously not involved in May 16. During the planning for May 16, Kim was judged by the plotters as someone who was disinterested in participating in the coup.⁵⁹ In fact, Kim Chae-gyu not only did not participate in the May 16 coup, but he was also even arrested as a suspected anti-revolutionary in the coup's aftermath, saved only by Park Chung Hee's intervention.⁶⁰

Despite Kim's lack of participation in the coup, his close friendship with Park facilitated a rapid ascent. He was rescued by the fact that he was from the same hometown, Kumi, and the same class year as Park in the Korean Military Academy. Within a month of the coup, the junta had named Kim as the head of the Honam Fertilizer Corporation (Honam Piryo Chusik Hoesa).⁶¹ Kim continued to be promoted within the military, reaching a final rank of Lieutenant General, and attained several key posts in the military while also serving in the government, including serving in the National Assembly as a legislator and being named Minister of Construction, before reaching his final post as head of the KCIA from 1976 onward.⁶² Despite his closeness with Park that caused

⁵⁸In the film, Kim is said to have been a colonel (*taeryŏng*) at this point, although in reality, he was already a one-star brigadier general (*chunjang*) at the time of the coup.

⁵⁹Cho Kap-che 2015, p. 143. At the time of the coup Kim had become the head of the General Affairs section (*ch'ongmu kwajang*) of the Ministry of National Defense. See also Yi Man-sŏp 2009, p. 79. In 1960, Kim was the Vice-President of the ROK Army College (Yukkun Taehak) and after a car accident, was rescued by the President of the college, Kim Kye-wŏn, who would later be the Chief Presidential Secretary to Park in 1979 and was present at the scene of Park's assassination. See Cho Kap-che 2006.

⁶⁰Yi Chŏng-sik 1980, p. 20.

⁶¹*Chosŏn ilbo* 1961.

⁶²See *Han'guk minjok munhwa taebaekwa sajŏn* [Encyclopedia of Korean Culture], "Kim Chae-gyu."

his appointment to the top position in the KCIA, however, the fact remains that Kim was never involved with the events of May 16 and was even suspected of “anti-revolutionary” sentiments.

So why did the filmmakers explicitly have Kim involved in the coup, regardless of the historical record? It is because linking Kim with the ideals of May 16 was the best way to give credence to Kim’s final words about his revolutionary motives for shooting Park. The problem of Kim never having participated in May 16 is outright ignored, as it proves inconvenient for this narrative. Without May 16, there is a real danger that the idealistic characterization of Kim crumbles, for there is little else in his life history to give him such impetus for drastic action outside of the usual explanations of personal animosity as seen in *The President’s Last Bang*. The legacy of May 16 – and the failure to uphold it by the regime and its leaders – propels Kim forward in an attempt to belatedly achieve what had been lost on the wayside, but it is falsely implanted in Kim’s biography.

Conclusion

No historical film or novel is free from taking liberties with “what happened” in the past, and *The Man Standing Next* is no exception.⁶³ The film, as part of the director U Min-ho’s “ambition trilogy,” focused on showing the inner turmoil of an individual struggling with the conflicting impulses of ambition, idealism, and loyalty through the portrayal of Kim Chae-gyu, certainly a complex character in real life. Thus, the distortion connecting Kim Chae-gyu with the May 16 coup d’état that launched Park Chung Hee to power can be seen as a conscious choice to make the larger point about human nature.⁶⁴

But the film needs to also be understood in terms of the historical context in which it was made, into which its storytelling goals and choices can provide a lens. Indeed, in his spirited defense of film as a medium of history, Robert Rosenstone argues that historical films are “not meant to provide literal truths about the past” – although noting that written history has its own limitations in that regard – but can be seen as offering “metaphoric truths which work, to a large degree, as a kind of commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse.”⁶⁵ Rosenstone adds that historical films “can intersect with, comment upon, and add something to the larger discourse of history out of which they grow and to which they speak.”⁶⁶

In this regard, the storytelling choices regarding the narrative of Kim Chae-gyu in *The Man Standing Next*, including the fictional element of his participation in the May 16 coup, can provide insights into the larger contemporary discourse surrounding Kim, his assassination of Park, and memory of the two figures in the context of the politics of the 2010s. In particular, the impeachment of Park Geun-hye sparked a reevaluation of the legacies of her father and his assassin, leading to a rehabilitation of the latter in the public eye in the wake of the swelling tide in support of Korean democracy that ensued, to which the two Parks were deemed central figures in opposition.

If we think more broadly as well about Park’s own deep association with her father’s legacy, the revival of Kim Chae-gyu during the time of her impeachment and its aftermath serves as a rebuke to not just Park Geun-hye and whatever relationship she had with Ch’oe T’ae-min as well as his daughter, but also to Park Chung Hee himself and his legacies. The revival in interest in Kim and in his reputation after 2016 has consequently acted to counteract the Park Chung Hee Syndrome, in combination with the fallout from the Ch’oe Sun-sil scandal and subsequent disappointment with Park Geun-hye.⁶⁷ This has involved taking Kim at his word that he was shooting at “the heart

⁶³Acknowledging unavoidable differences but affirming fundamental similarities across the book and film, the author of the book series *Namsan üi pujangdül* Kim Ch’ung-sik stated that “if the original work is the uncle, the film is its nephew.” See Chông Hyôn-sang 2020.

⁶⁴At the same time, the director U Min-ho claimed that he was not making any political statement or an attempt at reevaluating Kim Chae-gyu, but rather was basing his film on real events. See Pak Chun-ho 2020.

⁶⁵Rosenstone 2012, p. 9.

⁶⁶Rosenstone 2012, p. 34.

⁶⁷Paek 2016.

of *Yusin*” and subsequently elevating Kim as the champion of democracy, especially in light of the resurrection of Park in the form of his daughter’s presidency. Kim thus emerged as a champion of democracy through his act of assassination, which not only ended Park’s *Yusin* regime but also was an attempt at preventing the continuance of his rule through his daughter and her associates in the Ch’oe family. What appears to be arising now is a more minor, but not insignificant, counterpart to Park Chung Hee Syndrome, that is, Kim Chae-gyu Syndrome or Nostalgia.

Even if Rosenstone is correct in films being a legitimate form of historical narrative in their capacity of providing metaphorical truths even as they often fail to provide literal ones, one cannot help but wonder whether the metaphorical truths of Kim Chae-gyu’s life, character, and motivations are actually as *The Man Standing Next* depicts them to be. Where does metaphorical truth end and historical distortion begin? It is not just Kim’s life that comes under reevaluation, but the other individuals and events with which Kim was involved. For example, was May 16, the basis of Kim’s idealistic portrayal, truly revolutionary? Just as Park Chung Hee syndrome can rightfully be criticized for downplaying key aspects of Park’s authoritarian rule, this new Kim Chae-gyu nostalgia threatens to mythologize and whitewash a complex historical figure. In this instance, can the literal truth of Kim’s actions be waved away when its existence weakens the evidentiary grounds of metaphorical truth?

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