International Labor Markets:

Ode to My Father (2014) & South Korean Development

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In English, the title *Ode to My Father* suggests a nostalgic tone that focuses on the family. The film certainly evokes nostalgia: it follows Yoon Duk-soo, now a wizened patriarch, as he reminisces about his life through a series of four flashbacks that track South Korea's extraordinary economic development in the latter half of the twentieth century. Beginning with the Korean War and the family's life as refugees in the 1950s, *Ode* shows Duk-soo, an "ordinary man" modelled on the character of Forrest Gump, as he registers major turning points in South Korean history: labor migration to West Germany in the 1960s, military labor in the Vietnam War in the 1970s, and finding his long-lost sister during a landmark 1980s television program designed to reunite family members separated by the Korean War. Each vignette is carefully designed to evoke a sense of familial life in the past decades, relying on props, costumes, and cameos of major historical figures like the founder of the firm Hyundai, to conjure a bygone South Korean domestic life that appealed to the film's audiences. This nostalgic presentation earned the ire of critics who accused the film of nostalgia-washing the difficult and politically sensitive reality of the postwar period. We might answer this critique by looking at the film itself and returning to its original title.

In Korean, *Ode* is named after the Busan marketplace in which Duk-soo's family settles and works after they flee the war: Gukje sijang, or "International Market." Since the term *gukje* means "international," this title points away from home and nation. It suggests that international markets of labor, capital, and commodities play a significant role in the narrative and in South Korean history. In contrast to the emphasis on domestic life (the backdrop of Duk-soo's family home and neighborhood), the film's Korean title points outward, into the complexities of world politics and economics. Duk-soo can provide for his family because of South Korea's connections to the Cold War world. His family runs an import shop in a city with a significant US military presence. The money he later earns in Germany and Vietnam provide material comfort to the family back home, but his labor migrations are a source of repetitive trauma. While he works in West Germany, a mine shaft explodes, in Vietnam, he relives the horrors of war he experienced in childhood. Because of the crippling injuries he sustains while working abroad, Duk-soo's mobility in the international labor marketplace underscores the darker reality of postwar South Korean development. Migrant worker remittances were significant foreign currency injections that helped the domestic economy grow, but these men and women, including nurses like Duk-soo's wife, worked under difficult, dangerous, and exploitative conditions, hardly the stuff of nostalgia. Together, the two titles provide the parameters through which to understand the film: both a nostalgic embrace of South Korean history and a critical illustration of the political and economic forces that shaped the country's development.

Understanding *Ode to My Father* requires viewers to appreciate one more term: North Korea. Duk-soo's family arrives in Busan, a major port in South Korea as refugees fleeing the destruction of the Korean War. While their background is only glancingly mentioned throughout the film, familial roots in North Korea would have marked the Yoon family as "other" in the highly suspicious anti-communist political environment of the postwar South. Until the 1980s democracy movement challenged authoritarian rule, South Korea was ruled by a conservative, repressive regime that vied with the North for legitimacy as the Korean state. Any sign of belonging to the enemy state in the North was potentially dangerous, and North Korean war refugees like the Yoons were marginalized in society. The film's final act, in which Duk-soo is reunited with his long-lost sister on a popular television show, is especially meaningful because it matches the family's economic success with a final sense of belonging, reconciliation that comes at the cost of forgetting North Korea and embracing the South Korean future.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This 2014 film is structured around a frame story set in the mid-aughts, when the protagonist, Duk-soo, is an old man looking back on his life. In this period, South Korea was already a wealthy, highly industrialized and democratic nation. In 2012, the country elected Park Geun-hye, the daughter of dictator Park Chung Hee, president. Before a massive corruption scandal led to her impeachment in 2016, Park's tenure as president was marked by a nostalgia boom for her father's South Korea. During his rule (1961-1979), Park Chung Hee presided over South Korea's "miracle on the Han," finally outpacing North Korea's postwar development and delivering a sense of prosperity in the 1970s. The positive memory of his reign as a period of growth, however, overlooks the human and political costs of South Korean development, costs made visible in Duk-soo's dire work conditions as a migrant worker in the same period.

After the Korean War (1950-1953), the Korean peninsula's infrastructure and economy was devastated in both North and South, two countries now acrimoniously divided by Cold War ideology. While some South Korean entrepreneurs, like the founder of Hyundai, Chung Ju-yong, who appears briefly in the film, took advantage of economic opportunities afforded by the US military presence in postwar Asia, and the state worked to secure developmental aid from the United States, ordinary South Koreans faced difficult economic conditions. Jobs were scarce and unemployment high, leading the government to formalize migrant labor programs that sent nurses and miners to West Germany (and later other countries like Saudi Arabia). These workers were expected to work hard, mitigating labor shortages in West Germany, and contributing to the "miracle on the Rhine" that turned West Germany into a Cold War economic success story for the West.

Wages earned in foreign currency were in turn crucial investments back home in South Korea, which was perpetually short of funds. Embarrassingly for Southern leadership, living standards in North Korea, which was rebuilding with help from the Soviet bloc, were higher

throughout the 1960s. Workers like Duk-soo were encouraged to take on short labor contracts, earning relatively high wages, but relegated to difficult tasks and unable to stay abroad long enough to benefit from generous social benefits available to West Germans. Their back breaking labor was celebrated by nationalist rhetoric at home, where South Korean companies likewise relied on exploitative labor practices to become internationally competitive.

The escalation of hostilities in the Vietnam War in the mid 1960s gave South Korea an opportunity to both politically prove its anti-communist bona fides and develop its economic potential by partnering with the American war project. Over 300,000 South Korean troops fought in the war on the US side; meanwhile, thousands of workers like Duk-soo provided logistical support for military operations working for both American and South Korean contractors. In addition to their wages, which were relatively cheap compared to those paid to American personnel, but significant for domestic economic development, the South Korean government received billions in developmental aid. Meanwhile, South Korea's domestic politics became increasingly fraught due to repression, especially against labor activists who criticized the cronyism of the state and big businesses. *Ode to My Father* only briefly alludes to the controlling hypernationalism deployed by Park Chung Hee in the 1970s: in one scene, an entire park of people is shown standing to profess their allegiance to the South Korean state as a recording of the newly minted pledge plays over public loudspeakers. The repressive politics espoused by the South Korean state were problematic in the context of the Cold War, since the United States was ostensibly fighting for freedom and democracy around the world all while bankrolling a dictatorial regime in Seoul. When democratization finally came, it was thanks to a home-grown grassroots movement, met with brutal repression in the early 1980s, but eventually successful in transforming the political life of the nation by the turn of the decade.

Unlike many recent films about the 1980s, *Ode to My Father* avoids any mention of the democracy movement, instead showing the 1980s in the context of an extraordinary television program, *Finding Dispersed Families*, which successfully reunited over 10,000 families within South Korea and several international locations (thoughnotably, not North Korea). In the film, Duk-soo is reunited with his sister, who was separated from the family as the were evacuated from their North Korean hometown by US troops during the war. Although she was rescued, she was unable to identify her family and was eventually adopted to the United States.

There are several significant implications to notice here. For one, the program serves as a climax for the Yoon family, restoring a lost daughter and offering a sense of closure to the trauma of the Korean War. It functioned like this at the national scale, too. Now living in a relatively prosperous country, South Koreans were able to cathartically face, and overcome, their national trauma. Since North and South remain divided, meaning that Duk-soo's family could never really "return" to their home, the film offers a different solution, offering the Yoon's a sense that now the South, and specifically, the Gukje Market in Busan, where the family forged their postwar life, is home. After all, Duk-soo's father, who stayed behind to search for his missing child, is never found. Like North Korea itself, he has no role to play in the South Korean nation. In a final ironic twist, however, at the very end of the story, the film implies that Gukje Market will soon be redeveloped, erasing another layer of South Korea's history in pursuit of an economically prosperous future.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHILE WATCHING

1. **Memory and History**
   Ode to My Father presents historical moments that may not be familiar to American audiences, but the film uses familiar cinematic techniques to indicate that characters are remembering or that something very significant is about to happen. As you watch, consider how historical moments are represented and how we are alerted to their historical significance. Consider also what kind of history we are watching and how the "big" narrative of history intersects with an "ordinary" person's life. What kind of story is produced by a film that we've these two things together as *Ode to My Father* does? What are the political stakes of exploring history this way? How is it different from other historical films students may have seen? How do "ordinary" people experience/participate in "history"? What "counts" as a significant historical moment?

2. **Labor**
   Struggles over labor conditions and economic inequity are an incredibly important part of South Korean political and economic history. Strikingly, *Ode* chooses to tell the story of South Korean development not by looking at labor history in the domestic space, but by turning out towards the world, a marketplace where South Korean labor was a popular Cold War commodity. How are the politics of work represented in the film? What does the international backdrop against which Duk-soo's life unfolds add to our understanding of South Korean economic development?

3. **Traumatic Repetition**
   Duk-soo experiences a childhood trauma, separation from his father and sister during the Korean War, that is evoked repeatedly during violent and emotional moments in his life. As you watch keep track of the repetitions and the flashbacks that the film uses to explicitly mark these repetitions. What is the significance of the moments in which Duk-soo remembers? How is personal trauma embedded into a larger narrative about the nation and about belonging? What changes with each repetition, and how is Duk-soo, and by extension, the South Korean nation, able to overcome its past?

4. **Media and the Nation**
   Ode to My Father includes several sequences in which groups of people convene around media devices to listen to or watch together. Though the circumstances differ, in each case, the crowds that engage with media technologies are presented as a South Korean nation that listens, watches, and even cries together. Identify these moments in the film and consider how they bring people together as a national body and how they expose tensions, emotional difficulty, and political coercion. For example, compare the radio announcement in the 1950s vignette with the television broadcasts in the 1980s. How has Duk-soo's position as an outsider changed?