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Author

Mizuno, Naoki

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**A Propaganda Film Subverting Ethnic Hierarchy?:
Suicide Squad at the Watchtower and Colonial Korea**

Naoki Mizuno, Kyoto University Institute for Research in the Humanities
Translated by Andre Haag

Abstract

In the film *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* (1943), the appearance of a Korean female physician carries with it the potential to subvert the film's representation of the colonial ethnic hierarchy. The film's director, Ch'oe In-gyu, had in his earlier film *Homeless Angels* presented the edifying message that a Korean female orphan could aspire to become a physician. This message was also incorporated into *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower*. In these two films the story of a Korean woman who studies to become a physician (or at least desires to become one) unfolds through the same actress, Kim Sin-jae. The suggestion that a Korean could achieve a social position equal to or even higher than a Japanese introduced the possibility of subverting the colonial ethnic hierarchy. But while the screenplay for the film had explicitly portrayed the female physician, the film version suppressed the representation, making it less evident. Nevertheless, it is possible to see *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower*'s enlightened message as an element with the potential to upset the ruling colonial order.

Introduction

In April 1943, the film *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* (*Bōrō no kesshitai*, 望楼の決死隊) was released in Tokyo and Keijō (present-day Seoul). It was directed by Imai Tadashi and produced by the Tōhō Cinema Company. Set on the border between Korea and Manchuria (or, strictly speaking at this time, the border between Korea—a part of the Japanese empire's territory—and the empire of Manchukuo), at a Korean village along the Yalu River and the police outpost that protects it, this film tells the story of Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese cooperating in order to drive off an attack by “bandits” (*hizoku*).

The screenplay of *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* (hereafter, *Suicide*) ran in the March 1943 issue of *Dai-tō-a* (K. *Tae-dong-a*; “Great East Asia”), a Japanese-language magazine

published in Korea. This screenplay was introduced with a statement about the “Spirit Behind This Film’s Production,” which declared, “*Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* is not simply an action movie meant to entertain. The spirit and lifestyle of the border police runs through the entire film.” The article then proceeded to explain the reasons for portraying the activities and lives of the border police as follows:

The border police uphold a spirit of self-sacrifice for the nation just like the imperial army, tirelessly and humbly devoted to the discharge of their dangerous duties. This film shows that, in every instance, through their actions and lives they fully bring to bear the strengths of our people—bravery, perseverance, dedication, harmony, collaboration and unity. . . . That the police outpost is even asked to mediate in the villagers’ marital spat is a single [vivid] sign that the outpost constitutes the center of the village, and the fact that the officers’ wives receive instruction as midwives from the Government-General is perhaps the best concrete example of the activities that the police and their families perform for the village. After the China Incident [Sino-Japanese War], the police outpost’s leadership role has strengthened even more, and we have seen and heard of their myriad activities they undertake through the village associations and self-defense squads. (*Dai-tō-a*, March 1943, 164)

Despite this clear statement of the objectives behind the making of *Suicide*, the actual film includes elements that depart from this purpose, or even contradict it.

In this article, I locate *Suicide* in the history of Korean film and seek to examine how ethnic hierarchy and the potential for its subversion are depicted and appear in this film. The existing scholarship on *Suicide* analyzes it either as a cinematic work depicting Japanese rule over Korea (and particularly Korean society during the war) or as an expression of the Japanese government’s hopes for Korean society and the social relations it tried to force on Korea.¹ While treating the film as a work of propaganda intended to mobilize Koreans for Japan’s war effort, this body of research has focused primarily on analyzing representations of ethnic hierarchy that placed Japanese people at the apex and Koreans and Chinese in subordinate positions. The premise of these studies has been that this ethnic hierarchy was rigid and could not be shaken or subverted. And, indeed, if *Suicide* is taken as a propaganda film, subversion of the hierarchy certainly would have been inconceivable.

Because *Suicide* was produced by Tōhō and directed by Imai Tadashi it cannot be called a “Korean film,” even though it takes place in Korea. There is thus a tendency to think it

unnecessary to discuss this film in the context of Korean film history.² As a result, *Suicide* is seen as not truly reflecting Korean subjectivity or the situations in which Koreans were placed. Nevertheless, a significant number of Korean filmmakers and actors were involved in the production of *Suicide*, and, although relations between Japanese and Koreans were not equal, the film was a collaborative Japanese-Korean production. Considered in this light, it might indeed be worthwhile to locate *Suicide* within Korean film history and examine what sentiments and ideas Korean filmmakers and actors might have invested in this film.

In this article, I uncover links between *Suicide* and another film, *Homeless Angels* (K. *Chip ōmnŭn ch'ōnsa*, J. *Ie naki tenshi*, 家なき天使), with which the Korean director Ch'oe In-gyu was also deeply involved. In doing so, I attempt to tease out the consciousness and feelings of Korean filmmakers—and perhaps more generally of Korean people at the time—as they appear in *Suicide*. I also demonstrate that the films contain a hidden potential to “subvert” the ethnic hierarchies depicted on screen. By drawing out from within this propaganda film those elements that are at odds with the propaganda objective, I believe it will be possible to better consider the film’s relationship to Korean society at the time it was released.

This article is not an attempt to discuss *Suicide* as a whole. I analyze only one aspect of the film—an important dimension related to *Suicide*’s standing as a propaganda film that nonetheless has never been touched on in previous scholarship. In short, this article attempts an original decoding and interpretation of a film for which multiple, diverse interpretations may be possible.

Incidentally, it should be noted that three texts of *Suicide* exist: the screenplay, the film itself, and the novel based on the screenplay. Furthermore, there are two texts of the screenplay—one printed in the Japanese magazine *Nihon eiga* (September 1942) and one printed in the Korea-based magazine *Dai-tō-a* (March 1943)—but the content of the two versions is nearly identical. The novel was written by Yamagata Yūsaka, who also drafted the screenplay with Yagi Ryūichirō. The novel is similar to the screenplay in terms of story, but its language is quite different and it contains more plot detail and background information than the screenplay. In this article I will compare the screenplay and filmic text of *Suicide* to examine differences between the two and will refer to the novelization only for supplementary purposes.

Even though a film is produced based on a screenplay, various alterations, additions, and omissions are made in the process of staging, filming, and editing. This can lead to major differences between the screenplay and the finished visual product. In the case of *Suicide*, while there may not have been significant changes in terms of plot, parts were greatly modified in ways directly relevant to the issues I discuss in this article. By considering the significance of these modifications, I examine the issues that emerge in relation to the discourse and representation of ethnic hierarchy.

Ethnic Hierarchy in *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower*

In the film *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower*, characters are visualized in accordance with an ethnic hierarchy. For the male characters, a clear hierarchy is presented, placing the border police outpost chief Takatsu at the uppermost point, followed in descending order by the outpost's Japanese patrolmen; Korean patrolmen; Korean members of the self-defense brigade organized by village youth to support the outpost's activities; the Korean villagers in general; and, finally, the Chinese character Wang Long, who manages a local restaurant. Some of the villagers feel antipathy toward the police outpost. The film thus illustrates a rift within the village, and, further challenging the hierarchy, Wang Long's son Wang Hu even joins the bandits.

For the female characters, the film establishes a hierarchy paralleling that of the men, with Takatsu's wife, Yoshiko, at the top, followed by the Korean patrolman Im's wife, Im Ok-sŏn³; patrolman Kim's younger sister, Kim Yŏng-suk; the women of the village; and, finally, Wang Long's daughter, Wang Yan. Ethnic hierarchy is represented with particular vividness by the female characters.⁴ Yoshiko wears a kimono, Yŏng-suk and the other Korean women wear Korean dress (*ch'ima chŏgori*), while Wang Yan wears Chinese dress (figure 1). As for language, Yoshiko speaks Japanese, the Korean women speak Japanese peppered with Korean words, and Wang Yan speaks Japanese with a Chinese accent. The characters' ages also mirror the hierarchy, as Yoshiko is the eldest, followed by Yŏng-suk and Wang Yan.⁵ Kim Yŏng-suk and Wang Yan look up to Yoshiko like an older sister.

All village activities center around the outpost. The patrolmen do the rounds of the village, mediating in marital spats, taking part in the villagers' farmwork, and even helping the

children with their studies. Takatsu's wife, Yoshiko, serves as the village midwife and also provides first aid for the injured.



Figure 1. Yu Tong-sun, Kim Yōng-suk, Im Ok-sōn, and Takatsu Yoshiko (left to right) in *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower*.

The first half of the narrative unfolds as follows. The night that the new patrolman Asano arrives at the outpost, one of the bandits disguised as a laborer also comes to scope out the village. When the bandit is discovered, he kills Patrolman Kim and escapes. In turn, Kim's sister, Yōng-suk, returns from Keijō, where she is studying to become a doctor. Having lost her brother, Yōng-suk declares that she will give up on school, but her lover, Yu Tong-sun, arranges to provide her a scholarship that is nominally bestowed by the outpost's chief, Takatsu. Yōng-suk returns to Keijō to resume her studies.

As this summary suggests, the first half of the narrative clearly establishes the film's ethnic hierarchy, but at the same time it implies that some of the villagers are in cahoots with the bandits, while others refuse to cooperate with the police outpost's activities.

In the second half of the film, winter comes and the outpost strengthens its defenses against the bandits who are expected to cross the frozen Yalu River and attack the village. The police hold a meeting with the villagers, at which Takatsu makes a plea for greater cooperation with the outpost. Nevertheless, Wang Long is killed by bandits who infiltrate the village, and Yu Tong-sun is injured. Wang Hu is almost killed by the bandits, who suspect that he betrayed them, but instead he is arrested and imprisoned in the outpost. The same day, Yōng-suk comes back from Keijō and sees to Tong-sun's medical care. Finally, the bandit group attacks the village, but a reformed Wang Hu and the other uncooperative villagers come to work alongside Takatsu to defend the village. Reinforcements arrive and the bandits are ultimately vanquished, thus bringing the narrative to a close.

Suicide depicts a community made up of multiple ethnic groups coming together as one in the face of an external enemy. It thereby tells a story of rifts in the community being mended by the model character of its leaders. Chief Takatsu refuses to leave the outpost even after receiving a telegram from Japan informing him that his mother is gravely ill. Asano recoils from the severity of border defense work and says that he will quit the police force, but Takatsu rebukes him sternly for this, all the while showing Asano the consideration of a parent. In this narrative, everything in the village revolves around the outpost and Chief Takatsu; thanks to this unifying power, the village is able to triumph over an enemy attacking from the outside. This is, without a doubt, an analogy for the empire of Japan and the emperor who serves as its core.

Produced during the war and released in 1943, *Suicide* is a propaganda film with a message: to win the war, it is vital for the inhabitants of the colonies to come together under the emperor to fight both on the battlefields and on the home front.⁶ However, the potential to subvert ethnic hierarchies also lurks within *Suicide*'s reels. This potential surfaces in the hierarchies among its female characters.

The Potential for “Subversion” and Its History

As noted above, the hierarchy of *Suicide*'s main female characters is presented in the relationships between Yoshiko, Yōng-suk, Ok-sōn, and Wang Yan. As Yoshiko performs the

role of village midwife and nurse, she supports—and controls—the “medical” aspects of the village. However, when Yǒng-suk returns from her studies in Keijō on the eve of her graduation, the hierarchy is inverted. This is a consequence of the appearance of Yǒng-suk as a “lady doctor” (*joi*). In the screenplay, when Yǒng-suk comes home, Takatsu, Yoshiko, and the outpost’s patrolmen all hail her as “lady doctor.” When Tong-sun is wounded, it is Yǒng-suk—not Yoshiko—who provides medical treatment. What’s more, when Yǒng-suk enters the scene transformed by Western-style clothing, the patrolmen call her the “Keijō beauty” (figure 2). The contrast between “lady doctor” Yǒng-suk, in Western attire, and Yoshiko the nurse-midwife, in a Japanese kimono, makes clearly visible this inversion of hierarchy.

Needless to say, Yǒng-suk assumes the top position only within the female hierarchy—not in the male hierarchy or the overall village hierarchy. Thus, the ethnic hierarchy in its entirety is not subverted; nevertheless, we find in *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* the suggestion that at least part of the colonial ruling order—which was supposed to be so rigid—could crumble or be subverted.



Figure 2. Kim Yǒng-suk (played by Kim Sin-jae) dressed in Western-style attire in *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower*.

From whence, then, did the image of a Korean female physician as depicted in *Suicide* emerge? Did it simply appear by coincidence because the film is set in a border village? If *Suicide* were merely a propaganda movie, wouldn't the narrative of Yǒng-suk and the romance between Yǒng-suk and Tong-sun be superfluous? Nishiki Motosada, who wrote the script for *Homeless Angels*, commented in a film review of *Suicide* that

the relationship between Kim Yǒng-suk and Yu Tong-sun is [nothing] more than a trite love story. . . . One can point to obvious flaws even in the staging and technique of the scenes in which the two appear. If these are just superfluous episodes unrelated to the main storyline, based on the length of film, I would have liked to cut out the scenes where these two popular actors of the peninsula make appearances. (Nishiki 1943, 95–96)

Nishiki argues that the love story between Yǒng-suk and Tong-sun, and even more so the narrative of “lady doctor” Yǒng-suk, plays no crucial role in this propaganda film.

In order to understand the background and context for Yǒng-suk's appearance as a female doctor in *Suicide*, we must examine the film written by Nishiki, *Homeless Angels* (hereafter, *Angels*). This film was produced by the Koryō Film Association, directed by Ch'oe In-gyu, and first released two years before *Suicide*, in 1941.

Based on real events, *Angels* tells the story of Pang Sǒng-bin, a fictionalized version of the actual person Pang Su-hyōn, a Christian minister who established and ran a facility to house and educate the orphans who roam the streets of Keijō. Pang Su-hyōn's efforts had captured the attention of society and received a great deal of support in 1940.

In the film, Dr. An, the elder brother of the wife of the minister who is trying to establish the orphanage, donates his villa to the cause, and the orphans led by the minister run the facility themselves, living together and making udon noodles to cover the costs of its operation.

Meanwhile, Myōng-ja, the elder sister of one of the orphans (Yong-gil), makes a living by selling flowers in the entertainment district, but her earnings are taken by a local gangster boss. Escaping from the crime boss, Myōng-ja is taken in by Dr. An's clinic, where she becomes an apprentice nurse.

One day, Yong-gil, who has entered the orphanage, attempts to stop his friends from escaping from the institution but falls into a river and loses consciousness. As Dr. An and Myōng-ja rush to his side to provide first aid, the gangster and his minions violently force their

way into the orphanage. At the end of all this commotion, the criminals topple from a collapsing bridge and are injured. Dr. An and Myōng-ja tend to their wounds and minister to their souls and, as a result, the gangsters vow to change their ways and become upstanding citizens.

Finally, everyone gathers beneath a Japanese flag and, following a recitation of the “Oath of Imperial Subjects,” Dr. An turns to the children and lectures them: “All of you must obediently follow Mr. Pang’s teachings and become fine young men who serve the nation. If you do so, there will be no more unfortunate children.” With this, the credits roll.⁷



Figure 3. In *Homeless Angels*, Myōng-ja (played by Kim Sin-jae) tells her brother that she will study and become a doctor.

Toward the end of the film, Myōng-ja tells her younger brother Yong-gil, “I’ll go to Dr. An, study, and someday become a doctor” (figure 3). These words of resolve are noteworthy when viewing *Angels* in relation to *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower*. Myōng-ja is transformed from a flower-selling girl into a nurse (or at least an apprentice nurse), and harbors still greater dreams of becoming a doctor. Among the narratives of self-reform and transformation enacted

by the characters of *Angels*, Myōng-ja's transformation is particularly striking. The scene in which Myōng-ja makes clear her resolve to become a physician does not, interestingly, appear in Nishiki Motosada's screenplay for *Angels*.⁸ As the screenplay for *Angels* was based on a true story, there exists no "original work" per se, suggesting that Myōng-ja's transformation and resolve must have been added during the staging and production of the film. One may surmise that it was the director, Ch'oe In-gyu, who modified Nishiki's screenplay with this addition.

It is possible to conceive of Myōng-ja, the girl who declared her intention to become a doctor, reappearing in *Suicide* in the form of Yōng-suk, the woman who is actually studying medicine in Keijō. Certain commonalities and continuities offer support for this thesis. The first commonality connecting Myōng-ja and Yōng-suk is that both are orphans who have lost their guardians (parents or elder brother). Both manage to rebound from such adversity, resolving to become doctors, and continuing their studies toward this goal. An even more important fact is that the roles of Myōng-ja and Yōng-suk were both played by the same actress, Kim Sin-jae.⁹ Although this could be mere coincidence, Kim Sin-jae was also the wife of director Ch'oe In-gyu. Thus, in the eyes of Ch'oe, who served as either director or assistant director on these two films, Yōng-suk as portrayed by Kim Sin-jae must have appeared to be the same person as Myōng-ja, or perhaps her reincarnation.¹⁰

But what role did Ch'oe In-gyu play in the production of *Suicide*? It is quite possible that the commonalities and continuities between Myōng-ja and Yōng-suk were not coincidental, but instead the product of Ch'oe In-gyu's deliberate intentions. According to *Suicide*'s credits, Ch'oe In-gyu was an "assistant director"; according to other sources, he was involved in the film's "development" and "production."¹¹ Would either of these roles have afforded Ch'oe the position to take the subplot of a Korean woman becoming a doctor from *Angels* and incorporate it into *Suicide*?

The development of *Suicide* as a joint production between Tōhō and the Koryō Film Association first began at the end of 1941.¹² Koryō Film Association, the film studio with which Ch'oe In-gyu was affiliated, had also just produced *Angels*. Tōhō producer Fujimoto Masasumi (who became the postwar vice president and then president of Tōhō), said the following about Ch'oe's involvement in the new film:

This project [*Suicide Squad at the Watchtower*] was developed based on a suggestion by Ch'oe In-gyu, who directed the masterpiece *Homeless Angels*. Ch'oe offered his across-the-board cooperation with the film. He even took on the role of assistant producer. (Ozaki 1981, 173)

Fujimoto spoke in greater detail about the story behind the development and production of *Suicide* at a roundtable discussion held immediately prior to the film's original release:

When I was at Nan'ō Film Studios, there was talk of making a film about Korea . . . and I continued this project at Tōhō. . . . We ended up shooting a film about the police force that guards the border. That was because I consulted with Ch'oe and we spent about ten days walking around the border. (Imai, et al. 1943, 88)

The Japanese film production company Nan'ō was absorbed by Tōhō in late October 1941 (*Yomiuri shinbun*, October 19, 1941, morning edition, 4). This suggests that “talk of making a film about Korea” had started by October; in December the company began efforts to make this idea a reality. Fujimoto and Ch'oe walked the border region around the Tumen and Yalu Rivers in December 1941, right around the outbreak of the Asia-Pacific War. An article in *Maeil sinbo* from December 24, 1941, reported that “Mr. Fujimoto Masasumi has come to Korea to bring to fruition a film being developed by Tōhō and the Koryō Film Association that will focus on the police force on the Korea-Manchuria border. They plan to begin production in February of next year.” Thus, the path leading to the development of *Suicide* was that Fujimoto and Ch'oe talked of making a movie based on interviews with the border police about their activities and, in Fujimoto's words, “I thought ‘What a great idea for a story’—that's where it began” (Imai, et al 1943, 88).

The reason that Fujimoto decided to produce a film with Ch'oe In-gyu—although, based on the recollections of Fujimoto cited above, it would be more accurate to say that Ch'oe brought the idea for *Suicide* to Fujimoto—was that Ch'oe had built his reputation as the Korean film director of *Angels*. Yet it may have also had something to do with the fact that Ch'oe's father, Ch'oe T'ae-gyōng, had served with the border police in North P'yōngan Province in the 1910s. Ch'oe T'ae-gyōng had in fact been a lieutenant, second only to the police commissioner of North P'yōngan areas, such as Pakch'ōn, Yongamp'o, and Yōngbyōn.¹³ Ch'oe In-gyu was himself born in North P'yōngan, likely giving him greater access to the police in that region.

The story for *Suicide* was drawn up when Imai Tadashi, Yamagata Yūsaku, and Yagi Ryūichirō came on board the project initiated by Fujimoto and Ch’oe.¹⁴ Yamagata Yūsaku, who supervised the writing of the screenplay, provided the following testimony:

By the time I joined the production of *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* as the writer of the adaptation, my cowriter Yagi Ryūichirō, stage director Imai Tadashi, and producers Fujimoto Masasumi and Ch’oe In-gyu had already produced a first draft of the story. But after that, with the tremendous support of the Government-General of Korea’s Security Bureau and the police of North P’yōngan Province, we began actually visiting sites and collecting materials, refined draft after draft, and ultimately finished the current script. (Yamagata 1942, 130)

The “first draft of the story” mentioned by Yamagata was thus already written by the early spring of 1942. *Suicide* was originally scheduled to be completed after shooting on location between the winter and early spring of 1941, but because the watchtower built on the open set collapsed when the snow thawed, the production period was drawn out, with shooting on location postponed until the winter of 1942 to 1943. The film was finally completed in the spring of 1943. In the meantime, the screenplay was revised. It appears, however, that the storyline originally created by Fujimoto and Ch’oe was maintained, which is to say that by the time filming on location was under way in March 1942, the characters and casting had mostly been decided. By this point, Ch’oe In-gyu had selected Kim Sin-jae and the other Korean cast members, and the Japanese actors Takada Minoru (who was to play Takatsu) and Hara Setsuko had arrived in Korea (Ozaki 1981, 173). That the characters of the completed work had been mostly assembled at this time suggests that the storyline was also nearly settled.

We can infer from the above course of production that Ch’oe In-gyu did not simply help by gathering material on the border, negotiating with the police, and choosing the Korean actors, but that he also played a major role in developing the story. Perhaps Ch’oe put to use the experience and fame he had gained through completing *Angels* in early 1941 for this collaborative project with Tōhō.¹⁵ Without putting too fine a point on it, for Ch’oe, *Suicide* was in a sense the sequel to *Angels*.

Was “Subversion” Intended?

The discussion above shows how the injection of a subplot centered on a Korean “lady doctor” into the propaganda film *Suicide* brought about the potential of subverting the film’s ethnic hierarchy. But did Ch’oe In-gyu intentionally aim to depict a subversion of hierarchy? If such subversion was intentional, this would not only necessitate a major reappraisal of the film, but could even result in a major rethinking of Ch’oe In-gyu’s position in film history as a “pro-Japanese” (J. *shin’ichi*, K. *ch’inil*) director. I will not argue that we must dramatically revise the prevailing views of *Suicide* or Ch’oe In-gyu. However, I do believe that it is necessary to consider what thoughts Ch’oe might have entrusted to these films from a perspective other than that emphasizing his “pro-Japanese” orientation.

The depiction in both *Suicide* and *Angels* of a Korean woman becoming a doctor was likely the brainchild of Ch’oe In-gyu. However, it was not his intention to subvert the hierarchy; rather, he sought to enlighten the Korean audiences who saw the film. In *Angels* and his earlier film *Tuition* (produced by Koryō Film Association and directed by Ch’oe In-gyu and Pang Han-jun in 1940), Ch’oe insists that Koreans must study diligently and become upstanding people, or perhaps that Koreans *can* become upstanding people if they study diligently. This reflects a simplistic understanding of “enlightenment,” but considered in the context of colonial rule, it connotes merely “indoctrination.”

On the other hand, considered within the hierarchy of colonial rule, when the meaning turns into a message of “enlightenment” and suggests that Koreans can become upstanding people just like Japanese, or can even surpass Japanese, the potential for subversion appears. The message that, through learning, even a woman can become a doctor is precisely one of such “enlightenment,” and in *Angels*, which features no Japanese characters, the message goes no further than that. By contrast, in the film *Suicide*, which takes as its framework a colonial ethnic hierarchy, the same message introduces the potential for “subversion.”

In the backdrop of the two films’ depictions of young female Korean doctors was the budding possibility and reality that women in Korea could, in fact, become physicians. In the spring of 1938, the Keijō Women’s Medical School opened its doors. In the period prior to this, no medical training institutions designated by the Physician Examination Regulation (an ordinance promulgated in July 1914 by the Government-General of Korea) accepted female students, so there were only two ways for a Korean woman to become a doctor: by studying

abroad at institutions such as the women's medical schools in Japan, or by passing a certifying examination in accordance with the Physician Examination Regulation.¹⁶ To become a female physician within Korea without studying abroad would require passing through the very narrow path of first studying at the medical training school of the provincial hospitals or the Korean Women's Medical Training School established in Keijō in 1928 by Christian missionary Rosetta S. Hall (see Kim Sang-dōk 1993) and then taking the certifying examination.

The recognition that female doctors were needed in order to provide medical treatment to Korean women had been spreading throughout Korean society. In 1934 prominent Koreans, such as Pak Yōng-hyo, Yun Ch'i-ho, Yō Un-hyōng (Lyuh Woon-hyung), and An Chae-hong made efforts to organize a group to promote the establishment of a women's medical college (*Tong-a ilbo*, April 22, 1934). The group was unable to raise the necessary funds, however, and the establishment of a women's medical school thus remained out of reach. But in 1937, when the wealthy magnate Kim Chong-ik of South Chōlla Province passed away, his widow declared that she would follow her husband's wishes and donate his estate to the creation of a medical education institution for women (*Tong-a ilbo*, June 27, 1937). Despite numerous twists and setbacks, in the spring of 1938 the Keijō Women's Medical School opened its doors, having received the approval of the Government-General, who appointed Satō Gōzō (president of the Keijō Government Medical School) as its principal. Although the principal was Japanese, many of the instructors and most of the students were Korean. Enrollment capacity for each year was 60 students and, by 1945, the school had produced roughly 200 graduates, of whom 190 were Korean (Satō 1956, 97–102). The Keijō Women's Medical School was thus a medical training institution for Korean women founded using Korean private funding.¹⁷ The establishment of this school in the spring after the Sino-Japanese War began widely opened up the potential and reality for Korean women to become doctors and was, in a sense, a groundbreaking event.

It is unclear what Ch'oe In-gyu thought about these developments, but the opening of the Keijō Women's Medical School formed the backdrop of his films' portrayal of Korean women dreaming of becoming doctors or studying medicine in school. The reason that Yōng-suk, a resident of a wintry border village, goes to Keijō rather than Japan to study medicine is that the establishment of Keijō Women's Medical School was fresh in Ch'oe's mind.¹⁸ There can be little doubt that Ch'oe In-gyu, not the Japanese filmmakers who were in the dark about the circumstances of Korea, knew about its establishment. The first graduation ceremony for Keijō

Women's Medical School was held on September 30, 1942, with Governor-General Koiso Kuniaki in attendance. This was immediately before the filming of *Suicide* began in earnest.¹⁹ It seems unlikely that this was mere coincidence.

If women were able to join the medical profession, this would mean that they had reached the most exalted occupation within colonial Korea. It has previously been shown that myriad occupations were open to women in colonial Korea: teacher, company office worker, bus girl, department store clerk, and telephone switchboard operator, among others. But there is no need to explain that the profession of doctor was at a much higher level than any of these positions.

The message that with ability and effort even a Korean woman could reach this highest profession indeed represented the greatest, highest form of "enlightenment." It is likely that Ch'oe In-gyu intended these two films to offer a message of enlightenment, rather than one of subversion. It would also be safe to assume that members of the film's Japanese staff, such as Yamagata Yūsaka and Imai Tadashi, supported this message of enlightenment. In neither the screenplay nor the filmic text is the storyline of Yōng-suk becoming a doctor rejected. On the contrary, when Yōng-suk considers abandoning her studies, she is encouraged to return by her lover Tong-sun, Takatsu and Yoshiko. As long as the message did not go beyond "enlightenment," it would have been welcomed by even the Japanese authorities, who were at the time extolling the philosophy of *Naisen ittai* ("Japan and Korea as One Body") and working to maintain and strengthen colonial rule while mobilizing Koreans for war.

Barriers to the Potential for "Subversion"

Hidden within the screenplay proposed by Ch'oe In-gyu and Fujimoto Masasumi and written by Yamagata Yūsaku and Yagi Ryūichirō, however, was a potential to subvert hierarchies that went beyond mere "enlightenment." But a comparison of the screenplay and the film that was actually produced reveals that, to a significant degree, this subversive potential was removed from the film. This is apparent first in modifications and deletions from the dialogue, and second in the depiction of Yoshiko and Yōng-suk during the climactic battle scene.

In the first case, the most noteworthy issue in the dialogue centers on the words "lady doctor" (*joi*). As previously noted, in the scene in which Yōng-suk returns home immediately before graduation, she is both portrayed as a modernized woman due to her Western-style attire and regarded as a "lady doctor" by the other characters, thus inverting the vertical hierarchy in

her relationship with Yoshiko. While in the screenplay the words “lady doctor” appear five times, they are not uttered even once in the completed film. Scenes in which the words “lady doctor” appear in the screenplay were either cut from the film in their entirety, or the expression was replaced with other words.

In the screenplay, the words “lady doctor” or other words with similar import surface in the following passages. Returning to the village, Yōng-suk tells Yoshiko, “I brought some medicine that might be of use.” The lines make clear that Yōng-suk is more knowledgeable about medicine and pharmacology than Yoshiko and is directing her. Even Takatsu turns to Yoshiko and remarks, “What do you think? She’s become the perfect image of a lady doctor,” to which Yoshiko responds, “That’s really true.” This scene is not presented in the filmic text. Similarly, during the New Year’s celebration, Patrolman Kumazawa jokes with Yōng-suk that “if I were in the hands of a lady doctor like you, I know I’d get well right away—or maybe I wouldn’t get better, because I’d want to stay in your hands forever, haha.” There is also a scene in which Yoshiko expresses optimism about the wounded Tong-sun’s recovery by saying, “Now we have a real lady doctor here.” Yet these scenes from the screenplay were all removed from the filmic text, as were the words “lady doctor.”

In the following scene, the words “lady doctor” were replaced with other expressions. Once again during the New Year’s celebration—when the patrolmen, Yoshiko, and Yōng-suk learn of the death of Takatsu’s mother—a pensive mood takes hold. In the screenplay, Takatsu enters and says, “What’s wrong, lady doctor, why do you look so down?” In the filmic text, however, Takatsu says, “Why is everyone so stiff?” The words “lady doctor” have been changed to the neutral term “everyone.” Thus, the filmic text pointedly avoids calling Yōng-suk “lady doctor.” The only lines in the film that suggest that Yōng-suk is a (female) doctor occur in the scene in which Yoshiko and Yōng-suk rush to provide care for the wounded Tong-sun, and a member of the self-defense brigade says, “Yu, Mrs. Takatsu has come for you. Yōng-suk will give you first aid.”

In contrast, in the novelization of *Suicide*, which was penned by one of the film’s two screenwriters, Yamagata Yūsaku, greater emphasis is placed on the fact that Yōng-suk has become a superb “lady doctor” (*joi*) and “physician” (*isha*). Not only are scenes in which Yōng-suk is called a “lady doctor” kept virtually unchanged from the screenplay in the novel, there is also a passage in which the president of the medical school encourages her to remain at a

laboratory or large hospital and continue her research (Yamagata 1943, 150). The novel, which was published simultaneously with the film's release, clearly portrays Yōng-suk as a female physician, suggesting that it was *not* the screenwriter Yamagata who removed the words “lady doctor” from the filmic text.

The second case in which hierarchy-subverting potential is kept in check can be found in the depiction of Yoshiko and Yōng-suk during the battle scene with the attacking bandits. As the two tend to wounded patrolmen and self-defense brigade members, there are no elements suggesting hierarchy—for instance, shots of Yōng-suk the doctor issuing orders to Yoshiko the nurse. Perhaps at the front lines of a conflict, it was possible only to depict females as “combat nurses” caring for wounded soldiers, rather than as doctors. Yoshiko and Yōng-suk's parts in the battle scene of *Suicide* do, however, seem to demonstrate that the most devoted role that a woman can play in war is that of the combat nurse.²⁰ In this capacity, Yoshiko and Yōng-suk come to stand on equal footing.

What is even more deserving of attention is the inclusion of one scene in which Yoshiko grabs a gun and fires it at the bandits (figure 4). It can be confirmed from various sources and photographs that the wives of the border police were actually trained with firearms, and thus this shot cannot be regarded as anything special in and of itself.²¹ But considered in light of Yoshiko's relations with Yōng-suk, the image of gun-toting Yoshiko standing on the front lines shoulder-to-shoulder with the police officers emphasizes her difference from Yōng-suk, and thus works to restore the hierarchy that was potentially being neutralized or even subverted. In the screenplay, it is written that “even Yoshiko and Ok-sŏn [Patrolmen Im's wife] grabbed Mauser guns and leaned against the ramparts,” but Yoshiko never fires. In the filmic text, Im Ok-sŏn never holds a gun; only Yoshiko takes part in the battle alongside the male patrolmen and fires a gun at the bandits.

Additionally, Yoshiko, who thus far in the film had worn a kimono, appears in Western attire during the battle scene. In contrast, Yōng-suk is shown wearing westernized Korean dress. Thus, even in terms of clothing, Yoshiko is portrayed as occupying a dominant position in the film.

How lines and scenes written in a screenplay will be portrayed on screen is a matter left to the stage directing and editing. Therefore, one might speculate that it was Imai Tadashi, the one in charge of the staging and editing, who became aware of the potential for subversion and,

in order to remove it, cut out the word “lady doctor” and had Yoshiko take up a gun in the battle scene in order to reinforce her superior position vis-à-vis Yōng-suk. But because at present it is not possible to locate any materials to conclusively support such a view, this is merely speculation.



Figure 4. Yoshiko takes up a pistol and shoots at the bandits alongside the policemen in *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower*.

It is not clear what the director Imai Tadashi was thinking when he put the final touches on this work. What is certain is that the final film product of *Suicide* functioned to suppress potential hierarchy-subverting sentiments in order to maintain the colonial ruling order.²²

Conclusion

The film *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* was a propaganda film that aimed to mobilize Korea for the war to construct a “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” on the basis of an order in which Japan occupied the top position. This required it to be a “collaborative” film involving the cooperation of members of the Korean film world. Yet the ideas that the Korean filmmakers brought (or tried to bring) into this “collaborative” film were subtly different from the ideas of the Japanese side. As has been shown, when Ch’oe In-gyu extended the message of “enlightenment” from *Angels* and tried to visualize it in *Suicide*, the potential of “subverting” ethnic hierarchy and the colonial ruling order, which contravened the aims of a propaganda film, appeared.

Though it is unlikely that either the Japanese or the Koreans involved in the making of *Suicide* consciously intended such subversion, considered in light of the situation in which Korean films were placed and the direction they were heading in at the time, one might say that the emergence of this subversive potential was inevitable. One of the primary functions that Korean films had been expected to shoulder in previous periods was to “enlighten” Korean people. But at the time when *Suicide* was being planned and produced, this shifted toward the indoctrination and mobilization of Koreans who were expected to cooperate with a Japanese war under the order of the “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.” The message that, with effort, Koreans could become “fine imperial subjects” just like (or even greater than) Japanese, when stated in the context of a colonial ruling order based on ethnic hierarchies, took on the potential to disrupt these very hierarchies and orders.

In the actual discursive space as well, messages of “enlightenment” and “indoctrination” with the potential to disrupt hierarchies appeared, only to then disappear a short time later. This occurred in relation to propaganda messages surrounding the decision to extend the military draft to Koreans. On May 8, 1942, it was determined at a Japanese cabinet meeting that the system of military conscription would be applied to Koreans starting in 1944. The following day, Governor-General of Korea Minami Jirō released the “Governor-General Statement on the Promulgation of Military Conscription.” Minami stressed that while the application of military conscription was the result of Koreans’ heightened consciousness of themselves as imperial subjects, they must not be complacent but instead vigorously strive to realize the ideal of *Naisen ittai* and “master the Japanese spirit.” Yet the following passage requires closer attention:

The adoption of this system ensures that our Korean brethren will be given the position of core leaders in the construction of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, which marks the highest honor. Because the granting of military duty to our peninsular brethren, who now make up one-fourth of our nation of one-hundred million, has shared with them a superior position as the leaders of East Asia in both name and substance, now is the time to enhance your substance and cultivate your spirits so as to secure this honor. (Chōsen sōtokufu bunshoka 1943, 316–316)

The words “core leaders in the construction of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere,” which appear in the Governor-General’s statement, are also included in “Policies for Directing Public Opinion About the Promulgation of Military Conscription,” a document formulated by the Government-General of Korea Secretariat Information Division on May 13. This document determined how the meaning of military conscription would be disseminated among Koreans:

This system recognizes that Koreans, as true imperial subjects, have an honored position as leaders of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. Peninsular subjects must make even greater efforts to master and exalt the Japanese spirit of [indecipherable] in order to show that they are the core leaders in the Co-Prosperity Sphere (Chōsen sōtokufu, 1942).

Much like the Governor-General’s statement, the Government-General’s propaganda line included a promise that Koreans would be given the position of “core leaders in the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” as a way of sending Korean youth off to the battlefield. The words “core leaders” appeared in Governor-General instructions issued during this period, but subsequently begin to vanish.²³ The Governor-General and other colonial authorities must have realized the danger inherent in the message they were disseminating. The message that Koreans could, or even must, attain the position of core leaders equal to Japanese may have been effective propaganda for war mobilization. Yet these words could also potentially have inappropriate effects in the context of actual colonial rule founded on ethnic hierarchy.

The screenplay of the propaganda film *Suicide* suggested that Korean women’s dream of reaching the exalted occupation of physician could in fact be realized, and thus the film included aspects aimed at the “enlightenment” of Korean people. Yet because the elements of “enlightenment” also held the latent potential to subvert ethnic hierarchy and the colonial order,

these were largely excluded in the filmic version. Nonetheless, the traces of this enlightenment message clearly remain in the completed film. Comparison of the screenplay and filmic text brings into relief these elements of enlightenment that disrupt hierarchies in a space where the power of ethnic hierarchy dominates. The propaganda film *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* was also a visualization of the many contradictions at the heart of wartime discourses of total mobilization in Korea.

Naoki Mizuno is professor of Modern Korean History at the Kyoto University Institute for Research in the Humanities.

Notes

1. See studies on *Suicide*, including Takasaki (1981), Fujitani (2006), and Ch'oe (2010) in Japanese; Kang (2004) and Kim Ryō-sil (2006, particularly pp. 295–309) in Korean; and Rhee (2008) and Fujitani (2011, particularly pp. 306–318) in English.
2. For example, Yi Yōng-jae's study of Korean films during World War II limits the scope of discussion to "films in which Koreans occupied roles as the principle agents of creation" and thus treats films directed by Japanese like *Suicide* merely as objects of comparison (2008, 265).
3. In the film, Patrolman Im's wife is called Im Ok-sŏn. However, this is at odds with the Korean family system, which at the time the film was set would have used separate clan surnames for husband and wife. Only after 1940, when the policy of the name change ordinance, *ch'angssi-kaemyōng / sōshi kaimei* (literally, the creation of surnames in place of clan names and the changing of given names) legally established that families registered in a single-family registry use a surname as the name for the family, would it have been natural for Patrolman Im's wife name to be Im Ok-sŏn. *Suicide* was released in 1943, but the setting depicted by the film is the border region in 1935, and thus this represents an anachronism from the standpoint of historical fact. On the other hand, the screenplay's setting was 1937, but this was changed in the filmic text to 1935. I will not attempt to explain this change in temporal setting here.
4. See Rhee (2008) for an example of an essay focused on the hierarchical ordering of female characters in *Suicide*, although this article does not analyze elements that inverted such hierarchies.
5. In reality, Kim Sin-jae (1919–1998), the actress who portrayed Yōng-suk, was one year older than Hara Setsuko (1920–), who played Yoshiko.
6. Released more or less simultaneously in Japan and Korea in the spring of 1943, *Suicide* was the first film directed by Imai Tadashi to achieve commercial success. I have spoken to a number of people in both Japan and South Korea who were students or older at the time of the film's release and recall going to see it. They told me that students would go to see the film in groups, while others saw it with their families, because it was a film recommended at school. Those who saw it generally resided in urban areas, as there were few opportunities to see this film in rural villages.

7. In studies of Korean film history, *Angels* was seen as the work that pioneered “cinematic realism.” Following the discovery of a copy of the film in 2004, it has also been counted as a “pro-Japanese film” because it depicts the indoctrination of delinquent youth and in particular because the Oath of Imperial Subjects is recited in the last scene. Furthermore, when the film was shown in Japan it was first recommended by the Ministry of Education, but, as a result of a second round of censorship by the Home Ministry, this recommendation was revoked and parts of the film were removed. The reasons that the Ministry of Education rescinded its recommendation and the Home Ministry censored parts of the filmic text were never announced. To note a point that has not been raised in previous studies, there is a slight but key difference between the original Japanese subtitles that appeared in the film and the lines of Korean dialogue actually spoken by Dr. An as he exhorts the children to “become fine young men who serve the nation.” The word that appeared in the Japanese subtitles as “*o-kuni*” (the nation) was actually spoken in the Korean dialogue as “*urinara*” (our country). The difference between “*o-kuni*,” which suggests the Japanese nation and empire, and “*urinara*,” which when spoken in Korean in this context suggested neither Japan nor the empire but Korea, would have been clear to Korean audiences.
8. The screenplay for *Angels* is included in the DVD box set produced by the Korean Film Archive (2007). According to personal communication with Chonghwa Chung, this copy of the original screenplay was provided by the family of the screenplay writer Nishiki Motosada.
9. For more on Kim Sin-jae, see Pak (2008). Pak’s research is fascinating in that it compares two major actresses, contrasting Mun Ye-bong as the chaste Korean female and Kim Sin-jae as the lively modern woman (“new woman”). It does not, however, touch upon Kim Sin-jae’s role as Yōng-suk in *Suicide*. Among surviving films, *Suicide* can be said to be the first film in which Kim Sin-jae portrays a “new woman.”
10. As for other similarities in casting, it should be noted that both *Angel’s* Dr. An (who encourages Myōng-ja to become a doctor) and *Suicide’s* Patrolman Kim (the brother who supports Yōng-suk’s studies) are played by the actor Chin Hun. Yi Hwa-jin suggested this point (personal communication).
11. An advertisement from the April 24, 1943 *Maeil sinbo* lists Ch’oe along with Fujimoto Masasumi as responsible for “planning,” while another advertisement from the April 27 edition of the same paper lists him along with Fujimoto as “producer.”
12. The Koryō Film Association was absorbed into the Korean Motion Picture Production Corporation established in September 1942, but it does not appear to have been formally disbanded until February 27, 1943 (*Chōsen sōtokufu kanpō*, May 24, 1943, 173).
13. According to Ch’inil inmyōng sajōn p’yōnch’an wiwōnhoe (2009, 805), he seems to have died in the 1920s. This same encyclopedia also describes Ch’oe In-gyu’s history as a pro-Japanese collaborator.
14. It was reported that director Imai Tadashi and Yagi Ryūichirō, who wrote the screenplay with Yamagata, arrived in Keijō on January 10, 1942, met with the Government-General’s Security Bureau, and planned to begin filming in earnest in early February or March. See *Maeil sinbo*, January 13, 1942 and January 15, 1942.
15. *Angels* was shot during the summer of 1940 and opened at the Keijō Takarazuka Theater in February 1941. See *Maeil sinbo*, February 21, 1941.

16. There were no institutional regulations prohibiting the matriculation of female students to Keijō Imperial University School of Medicine and Keijō Medical School; thus, in principle, it would have been possible for women to enter. Furthermore, an article in the *Tong-a ilbo*, dated November 11, 1930, reported the decision to open the doors of Keijō Imperial University to female students. However, it is unclear whether any women were actually admitted.
17. In 1948, following liberation, this school became the Seoul Women's Medical University, and in 1957 it was reorganized as the coeducational Metropolitan Medical University. Subsequently, it was absorbed into the Usōk Medical University and then the Korea University School of Medicine, and thus it no longer exists in its original form.
18. Yamagata Yūsaku's novel *Suicide Squad at the Watchtower* states that Yōng-suk is studying at a "women's medical" school in Keijō (1943, 91).
19. Because the period of study at this school was five years, the first graduation was originally scheduled to take place in March 1943. But in order to meet the need for physicians during the war, graduates were sent off six months earlier than planned. An article about the September 1942 graduation ceremony appeared in *Maeil sinbo* on October 1, 1942, while an article reporting on-location filming of *Suicide* ran in the October 23, 1942 edition of the same newspaper.
20. Following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, combat nurses were also sent to the Chinese front from Korea, but initially there were only Japanese nurses. Newspaper articles about Korean combat nurses begin to appear starting around 1941, and after the Asia-Pacific War began articles reported that Korean nurses had "volunteered" to be dispatched to the South Pacific. When *Suicide* was released in spring 1943, articles about Korean combat nurses appeared many times in the newspapers. For example, there were articles such as "20 from the peninsula/The grand fighting spirit of our military country's virgins in emergency nurses" (*Maeil sinbo*, March 14, 1943) and "She heads to the front lines in her brother's place/This angel in white clothing/A flower of the peninsula blooming in the shade of our imperial army's military prowess" (*Keijō nippō*, April 7, 1943). It is possible that the scenes in *Suicide* were filmed to harmonize with the contemporary propaganda about combat nurses in Korea. I will leave this as a problem for later consideration.
21. For example, the July 15, 1936, issue of the Japanese photograph magazine *Asahi gurafu* (*Asahi graph*) was titled "Northern Korea Border Guard Special" and featured articles about and photographs of the police on the Korea-Manchuria border. The cover of this issue featured a photograph of the wives of border police being trained to fire pistols.
22. One possible reason for differences between *Suicide*'s screenplay and the filmic text is that film censorship in Korea was growing dramatically more severe due to the enactment of the Korea Motion Picture Ordinance of August 1940 and the 1942 consolidation of Korean film companies and establishment of the Korean Motion Picture Production Company. Yet the publication of the screenplay in Japanese and Korean magazines demonstrates that the word "lady doctor" had not been excised from the screenplay. Furthermore, not all scenes in which the words "lady doctor" appeared in the screenplay were deleted; instead, the word was replaced, suggesting that it is unlikely that lines were changed due to censorship at the editing stage. In short, one can surmise that differences between the screenplay and film emerged at the stages of production and filming.
23. An instruction issued by Governor-General Minami Jirō at the Prefectural Governors' Conference on May 20, 1942, which took place shortly before the decision to extend

military conscription to Koreans, includes the words, “Our Korean brethren make up one quarter of our imperial subjects, and are aware that they are in the honored position as core leaders of the construction on a Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.” See Chōsen sōtokufu bunshoka (1943, 57).

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