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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

Korean Animation: Aesthetics in the Age of Globalized Production

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in East Asian Studies

by

Zachary Samuel Gottesman

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Kyung Hyun Kim, Chair

Professor Joseph Jonghyun Jeong

Professor David Fedman

2024

DEDICATION

To
my parents, wife, siblings, and friends
in recognition of their worth

an apology

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

Karl Marx

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

and hope

Nothing human is alien to me

Karl Marx

“Confession”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
VITA	viii
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	ix
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction - Korean Animation as a Problematic	1
CHAPTER TWO: The Effaced Origins of Korean Animation	29
CHAPTER THREE: The Limits of Japanese Developmentalism	84
CHAPTER FOUR: <i>Wonderful Days</i> and The Limits of Imperialism	124
CHAPTER FIVE: The Nature of Outsourcing and its Ideological Presuppositions	167
CHAPTER SIX: North Korean Animation and the Convergence of Korean Outsourcing	226
CHAPTER SEVEN: New Korean Animation, Webtoons, and Platform Imperialism	266
CHAPTER EIGHT: Conclusion - Korean Animation as Told by <i>The Simpsons</i>	297
BIBLIOGRAPHY	311

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: “President” Pororo meets South Korean president Moon Jae-in	4
Figure 2: An animation cel for an unnamed show for Japanese anime studio Ekachi Epilka with notes in Chinese and Korean telling animators to improve the shape of the head	10
Figure 3: “ <i>Spring Dawn at Mt. Baegak</i> : Spring and Fall Version	30
Figure 4: “Past, Present, and Future Coexist in <i>Millenium Actress</i> ’s Layered Cels	38
Figure 5: The Japanese Credits and the Restored Korean Credits in <i>Hong Gildong</i>	64
Figure 6: The Hwalbindang end the film as loyal soldiers	70
Figure 7: The background overwhelms Hong Gildong climbing a mountain	71
Figure 8: Korean impressionistic ink painting as the village background	72
Figure 9: Characters go flying like cutouts when struck by Hong Gildong	73
Figure 10: Hong dramatically flying towards the screen with distorted proportions	74
Figure 11: Looney Tunes physical comedy with lush Korean backgrounds	75
Figure 12: Dancing skeletons in a pre-Hays code American animation style	76
Figure 13: Korean dancers with abstract figures in the background	78
Figure 14: Geobuksan and Yamato	100
Figure 15: Yi Sunsin appears in space to inspire the fighters	101
Figure 16: Robot Taekwon V, the steel giant, under construction	103
Figure 17: The first American anime convention proudly displays its Japaneseness	108
Figure 18: First-person shooter (FPS) aesthetics in an action scene	145
Figure 19: A surrealist music video in the middle of the film combines 2D and 3D	146

Figure 20: The film’s promotional image highlights the aesthetic layering of 2D and 3D	147
Figure 21 Hand glued miniatures show the physical labor that went into the production	148
Figure 22: Reference images of Seoul for the film’s backgrounds	149
Figure 23: The spine that connects the natural and the artificial shown during the credits	157
Figure 24: <i>Golgo 13</i> and <i>Blue Seagull</i> CGI helicopters	173
Figure 25: The credits of <i>Blue Seagull</i> show off the new computer technology that made the helicopter scene possible	174
Figure 26: A presumably Japanese dog teaches the subjects of the Empire as different animals Japanese in the same way Japanese children would learn	178
Figure 27: Song and her mother in hanbok in <i>Avatar</i>	207
Figure 28: Experiments in traditional painting from the Korean animators of <i>Avatar</i>	208
Figure 29: Poster for Amon’s anti-bender revolution explicitly evokes the Japanese Empire	211
Figure 30: An internet meme mocks the animation in <i>Korra</i> season 2 by Japanese studio Pierrot	218
Figure 31: A highly stylized East Asian backgrounds from <i>Beginnings</i>	218
Figure 32: Left a scene from <i>Korra</i> ; right Jeong Seon’s “Jang’an Monastery” (1711)	219
Figure 33: Cut backgrounds show elements of Korean landscape painting	219
Figure 34: Gom, the Soviet bear, is too drunk to help the villagers	240
Figure 35: The title card that appeared before <i>A Swift Winged Horse</i> . It reads: “This story was adapted from an old tale “A Swift Winged Horse” told by the great leader Kim Il-sung into a movie	246
Figure 36: Theatrical Poster for <i>Empress Chung</i> highlights the Sea King and animal friends	262
Figure 37: Yeon Sang-ho’s Aggressively Ugly Animation in <i>Love is Protein</i>	269
Figure 38: Yeon’s faces become contorted by emotion in <i>The King of Pigs</i>	270
Figure 39: A close up on a pungmulnori performance in <i>God of High School’s</i>	285

action climax

Figure 40: The Korean Director of <i>GOH</i> gets involved in mocap taekkyeon	286
Figure 41: Korean Animation Studio portrayed in a 1992 episode of <i>The Simpsons</i>	298
Figure 42: Banksy's 2010 rendition of the Korean animation studio	300
Figure 43: <i>The Simpsons</i> mocks both North and South Korea in 2004's <i>Fat Man and Little Boy</i>	301
Figure 44: The Simpsons uses Hangeul to present Korean film as cool in 2012	302
Figure 45: Lisa shows Marge her desire to go to Jogyesa in 2019's <i>E My Sports</i>	303
Figure 46: <i>E My Sports</i> 's incomprehensible joke about Korean animation	304
Figure 47: The end scene of Banksy's <i>MoneyBART</i> brings the message back to America	307
Figure 48: Evangelion Poster in the Background of AKOM studio	309

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- “The Japanese settler unconscious: Goblin Slayer on the ‘Isekai’ frontier.” *Journal of Settler Colonial Studies* 10, no. 4 (July 2020): 529-557
- “The Rotoscopic Uncanny: *Aku no Hana* and the Aesthetic of Japanese Postmodernity.” *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal* 13, no. 3 (November 2018): 192-206
- “Tetsuo and Marinetti: *Akira* as a cyberpunk critique of futurist modernity.” *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 8, no. 2 (October 2016): 104-126.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Korean Animation: Aesthetics in the Age of Globalized Production

by

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Professor Kyung Hyun Kim, Chair

Despite Korea's success in cultural export and industrial development, why did Korean animation fail to attract a domestic or global audience after massive state and corporate support? Why did Korean animation, one of the pioneer industries of globalization, collapse in the transition to neoliberalism and remain at the level of labor-intensive outsourcing while the rest of the Korean wave of popular culture took off? That is, why did state-led development and global outsourcing, two opposing strategies, reach the same dead end?

To answer these questions, this thesis traces the history of Korean animation from the colonial era to the present. As an industrial art, animation not only follows the history of Korean economic development but reflects on it aesthetically. Each chapter highlights important animated works that are representative of a Korean historical epoch and discusses both their production and aesthetic qualities. This dissertation argues that while each period gave birth to animation that aspired to represent the nation, the limits of capitalist development quashed each attempt.

Theorizing Korean animation as encompassing South Korea, North Korea, the international diaspora of Koreans, and the labor of Korean people in global animation

production, this dissertation asks three theoretical questions: what are some of the absences in animation theory filled by the addition of transnational Korean animation? What does the experience of Korean animation tell us about the evolution of global manufacturing based on labor arbitrage? How do we tell the history of outsourced commodities from the perspective of those who make them? Through these questions, this dissertation argues for the centrality of Korea to theorizing the general nature of global monopoly capitalism.

Chapter one introduces the fundamental theoretical issues imminent to Korean animation. Chapters two, three, and four go through history in chronological order, starting with the many potentially first Korean animations in the post-war period, then the era of Japanese industrial mimicry, and finally the Asian financial crisis. Chapter five discusses the concept of outsourcing going back to the Japanese colonial era up to the 1980s. Chapter six explores the history and ideology of North Korean animation. Chapter seven discusses Korean animation today and the possibilities and limits of webtoon based animation. Finally, chapter eight concludes with a retelling of Korean animation's history through *The Simpsons*.

Chapter One:

Introduction - Korean Animation as a Problematic

One of the surprises of the 21st Century is the rapid recognition and acclaim of South Korean popular culture all around the world. Korean movies have won major international film awards (Song 2022),ⁱ Korean music gets billions of views online (Park 2023),ⁱⁱ over a hundred million albums sold in 2023 (Smith 2024),ⁱⁱⁱ and millions of concert attendees across the world (Dong 2022; Lewis 2022; Kawasaki 2024),^{iv} Korean TV dramas are hot commodities for streaming services and have legions of fans worldwide (Shaw 2023),^v Korean video games dwarf the export revenue of other cultural contents (KOCCA 2023, 3),^{vi} and even Korean food,^{vii} fashion,^{viii} and language^{ix} are hip (Kwon 2024; Douglass 2023; MacDonald 2023). But one industry has been left behind by “hallyu,” the Korean “wave” of pop culture: animation.

This was not destiny. In the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis Korea was opened to global finance and, by extension, global cultural export. Unlike the cultural industries which had been protected from global competition by the state, Korean animation appeared to be the cultural industry most likely to succeed. The film industry, suffering from the perverse effects of screen quotas and cultural censorship which led to low quality “quota quickies” (Parc 2017, 621), released only 43 local features in 1998, “the lowest since 1957” (Paquet 2010, 82). Music and television faced a legacy of “outright piracy, government censorship or hostility, and rampant corruption” (Oh and Lee 2014, 81). All of these industries had suffered from their centrality to the military dictatorship, which demanded “quality films” (Kim 2001, 23) and “healthy popular songs” (Lee 2020) that conformed to government censorship. Though formal democratization promised the end of such political intrusions, struggles over the censorship of

Seo Taiji and Boys, in many ways the foundation of K-pop music, in the early 1990s (Maliankay 2014, 300) as well as struggles over the autonomy of the Korean Film Council by the state in 2000 (meant to replace the dictatorship's Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation, abolished only in 1999) showed the state was far from withdrawing from its regulatory function (Yuk 2019, 36). More fundamentally, in the new democratic era these industries lacked an economic foundation, as the withdrawal of state censorship also meant the loss of decades of autarkic protection and economic incentives based on it.

On the other hand, vacillating government censorship and relative indifference to animation had created a different incentive: animation had thrived through global outsourcing. Korean animation was by the late 1990s the world's third largest animation industry (Yu 1999: 37), and in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, already well exposed to global competition through decades of experience in global manufacturing, a close relationship to the rapidly growing Japanese anime industry, access to the latest American technologies, and large amounts of government and corporate support seeking easy returns on investment.

The reality was otherwise. After a post-crisis bubble, the industry collapsed in the early 2000s, and ever since has failed to succeed with either domestic or foreign audiences. Few Koreans know much about their own animation and scholarship on the subject is anemic even in Korea. However, the industry and government have not given up, and efforts continue to add animation to the mainstream list of the Korean Wave exports.

In fact, Korean animation does seem to be on the cusp of a renaissance. Bong Joon-ho, director of the global k-cinema hit *Parasite* (2019), is promising a feature-length animated film which he predicts will be the most expensive Korean film ever produced (Ruimy 2024). Partial

success in targeted markets, such as children's animation like *Pororo the Little Penguin* (2003), *Tayo the Little Bus* (2010) and *Larva* (2011) web animations like *Pucca* (2000; 2006-2008) kept the domestic industry alive, and a group of feature-length films in 2011, *Leafie, A Hen into the Wild* (2011), *The King of Pigs* (2011), and *Green Days: Dinosaur and I* (2011) were financially or critically successful enough to give a new generation of animators hope. Today, new areas of collaboration between Korean animation and other media forms show the potential maturation of those efforts. BTS's animated character merchandise, BT21, as well as collaborations between K-pop groups MOMOLAND and OH MY GIRL with *Pororo*, bring together Korean animation and the most successful K-pop acts in viral music videos. Webtoons, better suited to smartphone technology than the Japanese manga that served as their antecedent, have so far been mostly adapted as live action dramas, but animated adaptations continue to push for a breakthrough. *God of High School* (2020), *Tower of God* (2020), and *Noblesse* (2020) were Japanese animated television adaptations of some of the most famous Korean webcomics. Though primarily products of the Japanese anime industry, all involved Korean music, Korean financing, and Korean labor, with *God of High School* even directed by a Korean living in Japan. *Why Raeliana Ended Up at the Duke's Mansion* (2023) and *Solo Leveling* (2023), similar Japanese animated efforts based on webtoons, show further attempts will continue as long as webtoons remain alluring as source material. Concurrently, Studio Mir produced *Lookism* (2022), the first time a Korean studio had animated a popular webtoon, albeit produced and distributed by Netflix. Korean children's entertainment brand Pinkfong's infamous YouTube earworm *Baby Shark* (2015) was massively profitable and showed the potential for Korean children's animation on internet platforms. And throughout this whole period, despite initial fears of a post-bubble collapse the outsourcing industry successfully transitioned from 2D to 3D

GC animation and continues to maintain its longstanding relationships with American and Japanese animation companies. In the era of digital cinema, video games, and VR, Korean animation will become a key element of all media production and the future of the Korean economy.

This was emphasized in a humorous meeting between former president Moon Jae-in and “president of children” Pororo (affectionately called Po-tong-ryeong, a pun in Korean combining “Pororo” and the word for president) in 2017, in which an AI robot Prorot was called upon to lead the “people-centered fourth industrial revolution” (Sohn 2017; Jong 2023) [Fig. 1]. Pororo, an animated penguin from the Korean children’s show *Pororo the Little Penguin* [pporongpporong ppororo] (2003), is one of the few globally successful Korean animations, with parent studio OCON posting global sales of 13.3 billion won in 2016 and an estimated value of Pororo IP at 400 billion to 500 billion won (Park 2017).



[Figure 1 – “President” Pororo meets South Korean president Moon Jae-in]

Interestingly, Pororo is not only the children’s president of South Korea but also “half-North Korean” (Park 2011). Animated jointly with North Korea’s SEK studio during the “sunshine” period of cooperation between North and South Korea, Pororo showed a path forward for a post-dictatorship, post-crisis, and post-cold war peninsular Korean economy: the incorporation of North Korea’s cheap and sophisticated labor force into South Korean production.

Why would such a monumental economic and political task be asked of an animated penguin child? Animation, perhaps more than any other medium, is ontologically composed of human labor. The animator’s hand creates from nothing animation’s “illusion of life” compared

to cinema's ontological link to photographic "representation of reality" (Wells 2013, 7; 15), illustrated by the "Hand of the Artist" motif in early animation (Crafton 1979) such as *The Enchanted Drawing* (1900), the first animated sequence recorded on film, and the highly influential *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914). But, as an industry that brings life to a "raw material made exclusively of human ideas" (Wells 2013, 7), animation was also compelled to automate that process. As a result, it has been at the forefront of technological innovation and larger reorganizations of capitalist production. Pixar invented new technologies to satisfactorily realize an imagined world, starting with its usage of RenderMan for *Toy Story* (1995), "the first software product to be awarded an Oscar" (Geaghan-Breiner and Nigh 2021) which "revolutionized photorealistic rendering" (Goodrich 2024), continuing a trend of animation's repeated revolutions in technology such as Ub Iwerks inventing the multiplane camera in 1933 out of parts from an old Chevrolet automobile to create depth of field in animation (Telotte 2006, 16), the use of Xerox for *101 Dalmations* (1961) to automate the inking process (Frank 2019, 112), and "Fizt", the simulator engine that automated the movement of Sully's hairs in *Monsters, Inc* (2001) in reaction to physical forces like "gravity, wind, or snow" to a degree impossible by individual animators (Geaghan-Breiner and Nigh 2021). As Hannah Frank points out, from the very beginning cel animation was "predicated on the principles of scientific management" and the basic division between creative and manual labor within the animation production process "married the Taylorist emphasis on efficiency and standardization to the Fordist model of mechanization of the labor process." (Frank 2014, 3).

Alan Cholodenko points out that this contradiction between animation as a "giving life" and "imparting motion" is imminent to the term itself, etymologically derived from both the Latin "animare" (give breath to) and "anima" (soul) (Cholodenko 1991, 15). But rather than a

transhistorical essence of the term, Doland Crafton warns that this dual usage derives from concrete changes in the production, marketing, and consumption of animation as the result of concrete “evolving constructions of audiences, of the uses of and access to spectacle, the drifting sites of entertainment from personal amusement to public spectacle” (Crafton 2011, 105) i.e., the development of industrial capitalism. Crafton’s main point is to warn against an ontological claims about animation that “[valorize] technological change as synonymous with progress” (94).^x Situated historically, animation co-evolved with what Gilles Deleuze named the “industrial art” of cinema (1986, 156), animation only “gradually differentiated itself” (Crafton 2011, 106) as art was subject to capitalism’s simultaneous tendency towards market fragmentation and specialization and centralization and concentration of capital (Wayne 2003, 99).

Animation was industrial art on a global scale. It was one of the first industries to have labor tasks fragmented on a global scale, maximizing labor arbitrage as early as Jay Ward Productions outsourcing of *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle and Friends* (1959-1964) to Mexico (Sito 2006, 252), a process fully globalized by the 1970s (256). Animation is not only manufactured like a car or a smartphone, it pioneered many of the features that became the global car and smartphone manufacturing processes. Hanna-Barbera sent black-and-white animation cels (short for celluloid, transparent sheets on which drawings are made) to Korea to be colored and re-exported to America in 1969 (Hwang 1998, 182), long before Hyundai Cars or Samsung phones developed out of similar export-oriented joint-ventures. Already in 1968, all labor tasks on Japanese-Korean “co-produced” animated television shows *Ogon Bat* (1967) and *Humanoid Monster Bem* (1968) were actually done in Korea (Choo 2014, 147), an anticipation of the outsourcing of the entire manufacturing process to the Third World.

Animation replicated “the separation of hand and brain” which Harry Braverman called “the most decisive single step in the division of labor taken by the capitalist mode of production” (Frank 2019, 121). Following the historical tendency of capitalism towards a “spatial fix” (Harvey 2001) this separation became divided into the brain of the first world and the hand of the third. Korean animation, characterized by what Joon Yang Kim calls the “cerebral/manual” division of labor tasks (2014, 91), was a historical foundation of the monopolization of pre- and post- production “creative” tasks like IP creation, scripts, storyboards, character design, and distribution by the first world while “labor” product tasks like key-frames (the drawings that begin and end a smooth transition), in-between frames (the frames that fill the movement between key-frames), and inking/painting (filling the cel with black and colors) were increasingly done entirely in the Third World. This division in the animation value chain could just as easily describe the system of global manufacturing under late capitalism in general. For that reason alone, the history of Korean animation is worth studying as an essential part of that system’s development. This dissertation will hopefully engage in that discussion, tracing the system of capitalist globalization in the earliest development of East Asian manufacturing global value chains under the Japanese Empire to its full maturation under late capitalism and China as the “workshop of the world.”

But Korean animation is more interesting than that. It is, after all, far less successful than Hyundai cars or Samsung smartphones, let alone popular Hallyu exports. Was Korean animation surpassed by these neo-developmentalists fusions of export-oriented manufacturing and state support, which successfully navigated the transition to neoliberalism (Chung 2019)? This dissertation will argue the opposite: because Korean animation came so early to global outsourcing, its collapse prefigured the crisis of the capitalist world system today, popularly

called “deglobalization.”^{xi} If the main struggle today is over the terms of value distribution within global manufacturing between the U.S. and China and its main weapon is semiconductors, the immediate question is how far China can go in competing with American research and development and more generally managerial supervision of labor. Can a Third World country move up from labor tasks to creative tasks, what Xi Jinping calls China’s switch to “high-quality development” (*Xinhua* 2024)? Or does the nature of imperialism, which Lenin described as “division of nations into oppressor and oppressed” (2003) based on the centralization of finance capital leading to monopoly power in the oppressor nations (2005), make this impossible? The story of Korean development is clearly at the center of these issues, both because of Korean centrality to global semiconductor manufacturing and Korean economic development as a model to be emulated. Korean animation, overwhelmed by American and Japanese duopoly capitalism, presents a general theoretical concept of the nature of imperialism and the fundamental limits of production within global capitalism to transcend it. Given the image of wealth South Korea spectacularly presents in other Korean popular culture exports, the failure of animation is perhaps more instructive than Hallyu’s “success.”

There is a final element of Korean animation that this dissertation will explore. Animation is not just an industrial commodity; it is an art form. Animated works are both indexes of a manufacturing process and an aesthetic reflection of that process in all its contradictions. Art, in trying to present a coherent concept, necessarily contains a utopian attempt to resolve the contradictions of its creation (Jameson 1982). The history of Korean animation is also a series of works that this dissertation selects which reflect aesthetically on the contradictions of Korean animation’s global history. To paraphrase Austrian film director Michael Hanake, Korean animation is 8 (and sometimes 12) lies per second at the service of

truth, or at the service of the attempt to find the truth (Porton 2005). This dissertation will argue that the failure of Korean animated works to resolve the fundamental contradictions of capitalist globalization is a productive failure, an objective, unresolvable failure reflected accurately.

The World in Crisis

Something has happened to capitalism. In the wake of the COVID crisis, globalization retracted for the first time in the history of late capitalism. Or at least it attempted to. As John Bellamy Foster and Intan Suwanti explained (2020)

Key to understanding both the complexity and chaos of the present crisis is the fact that no CEO of a multinational corporation anywhere has a complete map of the firm's commodity chain. Usually, the financial centers and procurement officers in corporations know their first-tier suppliers, but not their second-tier (that is, the suppliers of their suppliers), much less the third- or even fourth-tier suppliers. As Elisabeth Braw writes in Foreign Policy, "Michael Essig, a professor of supply management at the Bundeswehr University of Munich calculated that a multinational company such as Volkswagen has 5,000 suppliers (the so-called tier-one suppliers), each with an average of 250 tier-two suppliers. That means that the company actually has 1.25 million suppliers—the vast majority of whom it doesn't know."

In animation, this is literally true. It was recently discovered by trawling through the North Korean internet at random that North Korea's SEK studio was working on multiple prime time animated shows, including Amazon Prime's *Invincible* (2021-), Max's *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* (2024) and multiple Japanese anime [fig. 2] (Williams 2024).



114 转头前面部分直接按照原画来修，原画造型比较准确

114 고개를 돌리고 앞부분을 직접 원화대로 고치니 원화의 조형이 비교적 정확하다

[Figure 2 – An animation cel for an unnamed show for Japanese anime studio Ekachi Epilka with notes in Chinese and Korean telling animators to improve the shape of the head]

This is most likely a fraction of the work done in North Korea given its arbitrary discovery. Remarkably, this work is done despite US Treasury sanctions, implemented in 2021 and in a targeted manner in 2022 which forbid working with SEK in any capacity (U.S. Treasury 2022). North Korean outsourcing is a realization of what Hyun Ok Park calls the Korean peninsula’s “capitalist unconscious”, one of the few industries where North and South are truly “unified” in the same transnational manufacturing system (Park 2015, 1). Perhaps in Korean animation more than anything else we can discuss a product of the Korean nation rather than presume South Korea as its representative.

But this crisis of capitalist globalization centers Korea more abstractly. In an interview with a Korean scholar Park Nak-chung, Fredric Jameson once said that South Korea is unique in being “first, second, and Third World simultaneously” (Jameson and Paik 1996, 364). Jameson was speaking in 1989, when Korea was in the midst of massive democratic and proletarian resistance to the recently overthrown military dictatorship, society was reevaluating its cold war political legacy, and wages for the first time were matching the immense development of Korea’s economy to an advanced level. Since that time, Korea has continued to develop into a “first world” country, and though the legacy of the military dictatorship and cold war division continue to linger, they retreat into the background of Hallyu’s spectacular image. But in animation, this remains an instructive construction. AKOM Productions, for example, began its outsourcing work on the American animated sitcom *The Simpsons* in the same year as Jameson’s interview, and continues to the present day, remaining in the “Third World” position of labor-intensive production. Possibly because of AKOM’s CEO Nelson Shin’s work on the North-South coproduced animated film *Empress Chung* (2005), AKOM was able to outsource much of *The Simpsons Movie* (2007) to North Korea, drawing its “second world” socialist neighbor into global manufacturing (Kao 2018). Shin himself has a long history of work on famous media brands, from his work on the lightsabers in *Star Wars* (1977) to directing the cult classic animated film *The Transformers: The Movie* (1986). Though the film was unsuccessful at the time of its release, it has become a cultural touchstone for a generation of Transformers fans, especially the death of Optimus Prime which is remembered as a rare moment of maturity in the toy-based animations of the 1980s (Pirrello 2021). True fans learn to their surprise that this nostalgic work from their childhood is actually Korean animation, if we push against the limits of the common sense, ideological use of the term.

Korea, and Korean animation in particular, is a microcosm of capitalism globalization. There is world of distance between the American taking a selfie with a smartphone and the migrant laborer in China who assembled it (and the African laborer who mined the materials for that matter). In Korea during the peak of the animation industry, it was all happening in the same building. Take *Wonderful Days* (2003), the subject of chapter four. It used the latest Sony camera from *Star Wars: Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002) and American VFX technology later used for James Cameron's groundbreaking 3D film *Avatar* (2009) to develop "multi-type layer animation," what it hoped would be a uniquely Korean animation style. To do so, it rapidly assembled a group of workers and companies from the outsourcing industry into a new Korean studio to do the film's hand drawn 2D animation, modeled on Japanese anime, and miniatures based on Korean cultural elements made by Korean hands. It situated characters modeled on Hollywood actors in 3D backgrounds using images of Seoul's slums as reference and a combined a setting of post-industrial ecological catastrophe with contemporaneous images of Korea proletarian struggle on the streets. Unlike *The Simpsons*, which has its cerebral/manual production tasks dispersed across the globe, *Wonderful Days* took a foundation of Korean animation's labor-intensive past and the political struggles that came with it, created an image that combined Korean culture with the most successful global cultural elements acquired through outsourcing, and attempted to produce a single work that would be globally successful and technologically world-class. First, second, and Third World mixed and bled into each other, reflected not just in the production of the film but also in its aesthetic features. This total mobilization of Korean animation's industrial legacy was in the service of becoming first world and leaving the second and third behind, and consequently confronted the structures of capitalist imperialism that necessitate animation's global division of labor. As a result, *Wonderful Days*

became Korean animation's greatest financial and critical failure, demoralizing Korean feature-length, adult-oriented animation for a decade and to this day tempering the industry's ambitions.

But perhaps in this failure there is an element of success, metaphorically at least. More than half of the world's population now owns a smartphone (GSMA 2023),^{xii} even if the manufacturing process remains hierarchical on a global scale. This symptomatizes a general capitalist crisis, trapped in a world system that cannot accommodate Third World economic development while that development is imperiled by its dependent relationship to global capitalism. Despite a developmental "miracle," as in animation Korea has failed to transition away from dependence on manufacturing and remains in a semi-peripheral, semi-dependent position. Take Samsung's position vis-à-vis Apple: simultaneously its greatest competitor and one of its largest suppliers, for a time it became the largest smartphone manufacturer in the world in terms of volume. But it never managed to match Apple's profitability, accruing just 17% of the market's total profit to Apple's 66% in 2019 (Koetsier 2019), and the rise of Chinese low and mid-tier manufacturers like Huawei and Oppo have eaten into Samsung's dominance in the mid to low tier market (Bradshaw 2024).^{xiii} In 2023, Apple became the world's largest smartphone manufacturer by volume, regaining the position it had lost to Samsung in 2010.^{xiv}

Similar is Samsung's long-standing relationship with Qualcomm, the second largest chip designer in the world by revenue (Shilov 2024).^{xv} After attempting to break its decades-long dependence on Qualcomm's Snapdragon chip for the high-end market with the indigenously manufactured Exynos system on a chip, it slowly pulled back from these efforts in the 2020s. The Galaxy S23 series (2023) was released entirely with Qualcomm chips and for the S24 series (2024), it resumed using Samsung chips only for "mid and entry-level devices" (Kamel 2023) while using Qualcomm chips for high end phones. Samsung's experiment with AI on the S24

Ultra will only make Qualcomm’s high-performance chips more necessary. On the other hand, Samsung doubled down on its semi-dependent position to fight the Chinese challenge under American leadership, investing \$230 billion in a semiconductor manufacturing (fab) cluster in Korea (Liu, Seo and Bae, 2023) and \$44 billion in a Texas fab, an area where it is the only competition to Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturing semi-peripheral dominance (Sohn 2024). Though the spatial features of monopoly capitalism are increasingly scrambled following political squabbles, the fundamental division between the U.S. and Korea is only reinforced: the competition of market-leader Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) and challenger Samsung for fab production favors the completely “fables” production (chip design that outsources manufacturing) of Qualcomm (Baek 2020)^{xvi}.

Morris Chang, the founder of TSMC and innovator of fables manufacturing, explained the nature of this semi-monopolistic production process. Despite TSMC’s near-monopoly on semiconductor manufacturing, a remarkably complicated technological process at the cutting edge of the laws of physics, Chang “promised never to design chips, only to build them. TSMC didn’t compete with its customers; it succeeded if they did” (Miller 2022, 168). Behind Chang’s honeyed words, post-2016 American sanctions on Chinese semiconductor manufacturing, which explicitly cut the Chinese equivalents of Samsung (Huawei) and TSMC (SMIC) from advanced technologies, reveal the system of discipline that threatens anyone who seeks to challenge American dominance at the top of the semiconductor value chain. In its structural similarity to semiconductors, this dissertation argues that animation’s cerebral/manual dichotomy is a general late capitalist condition^{xvii} with East Asian development at its core.

“Korean Animation” As a Problematic

Discussing *The Simpsons* and *The Transformers: The Movie* as a form of Korean animation provokes an inevitable question: what does it mean to call something Korean? As the global division of labor gives more and more labor tasks to the Third World, it becomes harder to describe anything clearly as “American” or “Korean,” whether discussing a phone, a car, or a work of animation. Art and culture, essential elements of constructing modern peoples and nations (Gellner 1996), have become untethered in space. Nickelodeon’s *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and Gracie Films’s *The Simpsons* are commonly thought of as American cartoons, despite most of the work being done by Korea’s Studio Mir and Studio AKOM respectively. Despite its North-South coproduction, AKOM’s *Empress Chung* has become North Korean, at least according to the South Korean government which makes accessing it a political issue. Even domestically produced and consumed animation, though more straightforwardly “Korean,” nevertheless came out of the accumulated experience of the outsourcing industry. Even *Hong Gildong*, Korea’s first animated feature-length film, whose creator studied under a Korean animator who had worked in Japan during the war and made an animation stand based on what he saw at an American military base. As chapter two discusses, what makes Korea such an interesting object of study is that under conditions of “colonial modernity” (Shin and Robinson 1999) and “compressed modernity” (Chang 1999), Korean modernity has always been an unstable entity. Just as the formation of the Korean nation took place under the influence of different colonial and neocolonial powers, mixing the local, national, and global in the development of Korea, so too is Korean animation an unstable entity, constantly struggling within the globally animated commodity to assert itself.

While the state of the field as well as the limits of critique necessitate prioritizing “Koreanness” in Korean animation, it is that very concept which the capitalist world market

undermines. In an era of global manufacturing, it is a kind of convenient fiction, which breaks down every time we delve deeply into an animated work.

The same is true of animation as a medium. The expansion of digital production to every media form shows that the concept of animation has expanded beyond mere moving drawings and the threat of VR to truth itself makes the question of animation one of the most pressing ontological issues today. The struggle for the necessary computing power of a Qualcomm or Nvidia chip for AI in the Galaxy S24 is also a question of animation as the production of the “illusion of life,” the famous description by Disney animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston (1995) and a prophetic description for the illusion of consciousness in a large language model or the illusion of reality in AI produced video. Korean animation has something to teach us about this as well, since it was always at the forefront of technology and automation. Japanese anime has somewhat successfully resisted the tendency towards computer animation, using computers and 3D rendering in the service of a “limited” animation aesthetic. Korean animation on the other hand is closely tied to techno-nationalism, in which the cutting edge of technology stands for national accomplishment. *Taegeuk Bboy Wwhite Eeagle* (1979) [Taegeuk sonyeon huindoksuri], the world’s first 3D animation feature which “required the audience to wear special blue and red cellophane glasses,” advertised this accomplishment as a “completely three-dimensional full-length animation film that only our country’s children will get to see for the first time in the world” (Choo 2014, 155-156). More recently, K/DA’s 2018 “augmented reality” k-pop idol performance as *League of Legends* characters opened the door to fully-AI idols (Kwon and Watson 2023). Lee Soo-man, chairman of K-pop agency SM entertainment, called this development the “fourth industrial revolution” (Lee 2020), and SM and KAIST (Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology) subsequently signed a memorandum of

understanding on “metaverse research” (Dong 2021). If the digital threatens to turn all media into a “particular branch” of animation as Lev Manovich predicted (Manovich 1995), Korean animation is notable for situating the ontology of the animated image on the terrain of nations and cultures.

Korean animation has pushed the definition of what animation is to its technological limits. While this dissertation will prioritize animated works characterized by drawings in film and television given movement by hand or computer for the sake of coherence, it will push against those limits through the works themselves which, in their nationalist ambition, went beyond medium and media.

The State of the Field

There is a single book-length treatment of the history of Korean animation available in English: the Korean Culture and Information Service’s (KCIS) *K-Animation: Befriending Children All Over the World* (Kim 2013). Though empirically informative and visually pleasing, at an analytic level the work is unfortunately a work of government propaganda, with chapter titles like “Animated Features That Swept International Film Festivals,” “Heroes of K-Animation: Popular characters,” and “Into the Hearts of Children Worldwide in the 21st Century.” This optimistic, borderline delusional tone is a response to pessimistic Korean works from those in the industry such as *There is No Korean Animation* [Hanguk aenimeisyeoneun eopda] (Moon 1998), and the act of translating the work seems to be an attempt to at least convince foreign readers that Korean animation is an “animation powerhouse,” according to one chapter title, given the Korean government has failed to convince Koreans.

In Korean, more academic book-length treatments of the history of Korean animation exist. The most comprehensive is Heo In-uk's *A History of Korean Animation* [Han'guk Aenimeisyon Yonghwasa] (2002), which not only gives a comprehensive history of animation until the early 2000s but contains a list of major Korean news reports and academic theses on the subject. A few earlier works cover similar territory in a single chapter (Han 1995, Choe 1995, Hwang 1998) and a couple of works update the history to the late-2000s (No and Yang 2010) and TV animation to the late-2010s (Hwang 2018). Besides this, some MA theses in Korean^{xviii} attempted to go over Korean animation history in a scholarly manner, but overall, these works all go over the same factual history and either lack a theoretical component or subordinate Korean animation to Western or Japanese animation theories^{xix}.

Four PhD dissertations in English attempt to engage critically with animation history: Kie Un Yu's study of the history of Korean animation as a form of cultural "glocalization" (239, 1999a), Jae-Woong Kwon's study of the digitization of Korean animation (2006), Ae-Ri Yoon's ethnographic study of Korean animators and the construction of an "in-between identity" (2010, 124), and Joonkoo Lee's economic study of the global value chains in animation production (2011) that gives empirical rigor to the "cultural semi-peripheral" position of Korean animators (Yu 1999a 233). However, none was turned into a book, nor do they posit a theory of Korean animation as such, instead remaining within the theoretical apparatus given by the empiricist research methodology.

Yu (1999b; 2001a) and Yoon (2009) did publish book chapters in English covering material from their theses, the former publishing a second chapter with John A. Lent who also translated a short interview with Shin Dong-hyun, the famous animator of Korea's first feature length animated film *Hong Gildong* (1967) in the same book (Lent and Yu 2001b). Lee (2019)

also published an essay summarizing his dissertation and expanding the work of Yoon and Malecki (2010) on the globalization of animation production. The most productive essays based on new research are by Kukhee Choo (2014) and Joon Yang Kim (2006, 2014), the latter's 2014 essay on the "cerebral/manual dichotomy" in Korean animation the best attempt to theorize Korean animation as an aesthetic form. *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal* has published a few studies of individual works: "post-human" themes in Korean sci-fi animation *Wonder Kitty* (Ahn 2017), patriarchal ideology in *Pororo* (Lee and Choi 2018) and the socio-political context of *Robot Taekwon V* (Lee 2020), complementing Aaron Han Joon Magnan-Park's study of the film's "techno-nationalism" (2011), but these scattered efforts have not come together in a singular work nor even a conference publication.

In Korean, the main journals for Korean animation are "*Cartoon & Animation Studies*" [manhwa aenimeisyeon yeongu] (1997-) and "*The Korean Journal of Animation*" [aenimeisyeon yeongu] (2005-), though a smattering of articles appear in other related journals. However, there is no clear distinction between business analysis and cultural studies, with articles in these journals using both quantitative and qualitative methods to study the industry, history, or specific animations. As hinted at by the KCIS's book, there is also no distinction between nationalist advocacy and academic disinterest, and the main empirical source for these works are annual government white papers published since the 1990s on cultural industries including animation (Lee 2011, 18)^{xx}.

Overall, the field remains deeply underdeveloped. Lacking a central theoretical concept or stable group of scholars, English works on Korean animation pop up randomly, whereas works in Korean are politicized and reliant on the whims of the government and industry. After a period of investment and global interest in the late 1990s-early 2000s, academic interest has

receded, and the field is threatened with being completely forgotten as adjacent media forms such as webtoons, video games, and digital effects receive academic and corporate interest. Korean cinema and music have had countless publications, and even webtoons have received a book length treatment in English academia (Yecies and Shim 2021), despite being only a decade old as a medium.

But this failure is perhaps also a secret success. If successful, Bong Joon-ho's film will cause an academic goldrush towards Korean animation, perhaps at last giving it a proper place in Hallyu as K-animation. But as this introduction has argued, this is a form of fetishism, which rediscovers the "K" nation and culture as the center of analysis. This dissertation is in the rare position of performing an extended study of an object that is not even clearly identifiable in the circulation of global commodities. We must, to quote Marx in *Capital*, follow Korean animation "into the hidden abode of production" and see where it leads (1976, 279-280).

That path will reveal not just a fascinating history of a forgotten artform but something about the world system of capitalist imperialism from the point of view of Korea.

Outline

The next chapter begins with defining the first Korean animation and the ideological presuppositions of this attempt, propelled forward by the history of Korea's forging of a national identity and national culture in the wake of colonization, war, division, occupation, and post-war economic stagnation. Beginning from Joseon-era artist An Jungsik's attempt to fuse Korean tradition with modernity in his painting *Spring Dawn at Mount Baegak* (1915), I employ Gayatri Spivak's expansion of Jaques Derrida to theorize Korean animation as always-already effaced. Expanding beyond painting to animation, this chapter explains the aesthetic of cel layering as a

way to think about the aesthetics of the Korean nation, people, state(s), and culture within a system of global commodity production. This chapter then analyzes what is typically considered South Korea's first feature-length animated film, Shin Dong-hyun's *The Story of Hong Gildong* (1967). *Hong Gildong* has a bitter origin story worthy of Korea's own self-image as a nation of *han*, and the arc of history from *Hong Gildong* to its 1995 remake *Returned Hero Hong Gildong* allegorizes Korea's own historical teleological self-image of suffering and redemption. Finally, it compares the film with Shin Dong-hyun's animated short in the live action film *The General's Moustache* (1968), a work of abstract expressionism reflecting Korea's self-image of modernity. Though *Hong Gildong* came first, it was lost for decades and only discovered in 2003 in a Japanese archive. Though the restoration took place on explicitly anti-Japanese, nationalist terms, looked at more deeply *Hong Gildong* reflects the unstable origin of Korean animation, which had what Deleuze called "virtual" historical possibilities (1966) before settling on the path of techno-nationalist state capitalist developmentalism.

Chapter three picks up at the height of techno-nationalism to discuss the rise of Korean animation under the Park Chung-hee dictatorship, built on the necessary but disavowed industrial dependency on Japan. Beginning at the peak of convergence between Japanese and Korean animation with 1976's *Robot Taekwon V*, it theorizes a fundamental divergence between Japanese "anime" and Korean animation, with the "hyperbolic nationalism" (Choo 2014) of *Fly, Space Battleship Geobukseon* (1979) being left behind by *Space Battleship Yamato* (1974), the Japanese animation it was responding to. Japanese anime, which was foundational to the new relationship to commodity production and consumption known as "otakudom," could not be copied by the Korean developmental state, and instead the assassination of Park Chung-hee in the same year spelled the end of Korean animation's import-substitution of Japanese science

fiction animation, abandoned by the Chun Doo-hwan dictatorship and exhausted by neoliberalism.

Chapter four jumps ahead to the production of *Wonderful Days* (2003), the culmination of Korean animation's domestic development. This chapter theorizes the nature of capitalist imperialism today as "monopoly capitalism," using Sam King's theorization of monopoly not as a lack of competition but as hypercompetitive system for control of the top of the global value chain. The chapter then discusses how South Korea's economic development problematizes King's Manichean division of the world into oppressor and oppressed nations, introducing his own discussion of Samsung into "semi-monopoly capitalism," which ultimately reaffirms the fundamental impossibility of non-monopoly capitalism joining the monopoly imperialists. *Wonderful Days* combined the whole legacy of Korean animation into what it called "multi-layer type animation," a new aesthetic which combined 2D, 3D, and miniatures. The film, which had funding from both the government as a form of "semi-manufacturing" and Samsung's VC new VC fund, represented a final transition from the older state-chaebol cronyism to the new system of globally-oriented chaebols. Aesthetically, the film combines its paths of development into incongruent visuals, settings, and characters, which are resolved at the narrative level through a retreat to a mimicry of American and Japanese post-industrial ecological consciousness, particularly the work of Studio Ghibli which had left Korean animation behind in chapter three. Its failure represents both the limits of Korean animation's ambitions to match America and Japan and the objective failure of the Korean economy to "deindustrialize."

Chapter five resumes the history of Korean animation from the long death agony of the developmental state under the dictatorship of Chun Do-hwan to the democratic period's cultural flourishing in the 1990s. Beginning with the proto-postcolonialism of *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors*

(1945), Japan's first feature length animation, it discusses how the Japanese Empire always maintained the contradiction between racially restrictive hierarchy and a pan-Asian anti-colonialism which took the form of developing light industry in Korea, Taiwan, and eventually heavy industry in both and Manchuria. *Momotaro*, which had Korean involvement, represented in animated form a harmonious, anti-Western Empire just as it was collapsing. Nevertheless, the work done on it by Yong Hwan-kim, Korea's first manhwa artist and teacher of Shin Dong-hyun, director of *Hong Gildong*, was foundational to Korean animation. It then moves ahead to the creation of Korean neoliberalism, now without Japan at its center, through the rise and fall of Japanese outsourcing and then the rise of Korea and Taiwan as the center of a global animation production system after the defeat of the American animators' union. Caught between competing American and Japanese value chains (Lee 2011), this chapter looks at the utopian moment of the early 1990s, when the hyper-violent *Blue Seagull* successfully realized the Chun 3s policy (Sex, Sports, and Screen), which had already been set in motion by the baseball animations and ads for the Olympics of the 1980s, and massive free flows of government funding and unfettered corporate finance led to a series of animations that were supposed to complete the forgotten history of Korean animation and create its future, particularly *The Return of Hong Gildong* (1995) which saw Shin Dong-hyun ostensibly return to directing after a decade of working in outsourcing but was de-facto a Japanese production that he subsequently disavowed. This chapter then turns to the American value chain and the peak of "Korean" animation in an American production: *Avatar the Last Airbender* (2005-2008) and *Avatar: The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014). Tracing how the search for "authenticity" in the Asian setting led the American co-creators to give more and more creative tasks to Studio Mir, the Korean animation studio that emerged from the ruins of *Wonderful Days's* Tin House Studio, it analyzes the two-part origin

story *Beginnings, Part 1* and *Part 2* where something approaching Korean animation appears. It then analyzes why the plot, visuals, and production could go no further towards Koreanness and the subsequent ignominious end of the show, released directly to the internet.

Chapter six tells the story of North Korean animation and the concept of socialist animation with its own parallel global history and developmental path. Beginning with the long struggle to create a “Juche” animation, in the image of Stalin-era socialist realism but forced to claim national particularity in the face of ideological struggle between the USSR and China, this chapter traces how North Korean animation developed its own aesthetic justification which, when economic crisis set in during the 1980s, allowed it to become a global commodity in the way film could not. The chapter then looks at the production and aesthetics of *Princess Chung* (2005), a North-South coproduction by Nelson Shin, the CEO of *The Simpsons* animation studio AKOM. Considered a “lost media” online, the film can actually be found in the South Korean national library in the section with sensitive political materials from the North. Contrasting this political conception with the film itself, which “Disney-ifies” the pansori story “The Tale of Simchong,” this chapter analyzes how the film navigates the political demands of North and South Korea even as they were converging on a common model of capitalist production for global manufacturers, undermining the Cold War political fictions that constitute both nations’ nationalisms.

Chapter seven discusses one of Korea’s more “successful” paths to animation: webtoons. This chapter first discusses the collaboration between filmmaker Yeon Sang-ho and manhwa artist Choi Gyu-seok on *Love is Protein* (2008) and *The King of Pigs* (2011). Analyzing Yeon’s critique of Korean society as increasingly detached from the contemporaneous political movement of manhwa and then webtoon artists, it analyzes the visual traces of his subsequent

abandonment of animation for live action works which recast his past animated films as Korean techno-nationalist works, subordinated to the “platform imperialism” (Jin 2015) of American streaming services. It then looks at the coproduction of anime based on Korean webcomics by the Sony-owned American streaming service Crunchyroll, Japanese anime studios, and Korean web portal Naver. The most interesting of these co-productions was *The God of High School* (2020), which had a Korean director, a Korean-American VFX producer, K-pop songs, Korean traditional cultural elements, and diegetic advertisements for Naver Webtoon. The show, which subordinated Japanese animators to the brutal labor conditions expected by the Korean director, allegorizes the rise of Naver’s Line as a Korean domestic monopoly capitalist with increasing dominance of the Japanese market. However, rather than the triumph of Korean transnational monopoly capitalism over the Japanese national economy, it traces the convergence of superexploitation in Japanese anime production and Korean webtoon production for the benefit of Sony’s and Netflix’s global platform imperialism.

Finally, chapter eight concludes with a discussion of *The Simpsons*. Going from jokes making fun of Korean animation outsourcing as slave-like to the Simpsons family visiting Seoul to experience Korean culture and Hallyu, it asks why animation has nevertheless remained the butt of jokes. Summarizing the conclusions of the dissertation, it looks at a glimpse of another possibility: a brief image in an episode of *Split Screen* (1999-2001), an American documentary show which visits AKOM studios to learn the truth about Korean animation. If Korea is the model of the impossibility to transcend imperialism through capitalist development, the corollary effect implied in chapter seven is the absolute expansion of Korean labor conditions globally, including in the first world, disguised by the market power of the Third World to influence global culture. In *Split Screen*’s image, one can see the love of animation that motivates a Korean

colorist in the studio while the supervisors and CEO fantasize about the labor discipline of the Korean workers and imagine a global proletarian subjectivity made possible by late capitalist globalization.

ⁱ Major directors like Bong Joon-ho, Im Kwon-taek, Park Chan-wook, Hong Sang-soo, and Lee Chang-dong have won awards at Berlin, Cannes, Venice, Rotterdam, and Academy Awards since the mid-1990s, with even more success expected after *Parasite*'s Palm D'or win at Cannes (2020) and at the Academy Awards (2020).

ⁱⁱ "According to data released by Luminate, 90.4 billion K-pop songs were streamed globally...the accumulated number of K-pop songs that were streamed globally between January and October 2023 has increased by 42 percent compared to the same period in 2022."

ⁱⁱⁱ According to The Circle Chart "South Korea Physical Album Sales Hit a Record 115 Million in 2023"

^{iv} More than 6 million attended k-pop concerts globally in 2019; over 2.8 million in 2022 during the pandemic and 49 million watched BTS's free 2022 concert in Busan; 2.75 million people nationwide during the first half of 2023 in Japan alone, surpassing the 2019 record.

^v "More than 60% of [Netflix] customers watched a Korean show last year" leading to a "\$1 billion a year" investment from the company after the success of *Squid Game* (2021) and the proliferation of Korean content across streaming platforms.

^{vi} According to KOCCA's 2022 content industry statistics, games had an export revenue of 8,721,588,000 USD, nearly 10 times the revenue of music's 912,205,000 USD, the next largest export.

^{vii} "The amount of K-food exports in 2023 exceeded 16 trillion won (\$12.1 billion), up 2.6 percent from the previous year;" Busan getting a 2023 spotlight by Michelin Guide; and K- food cited as a major tourist draw in 2023 according to the Seoul Tourism Organization.

^{viii} "Luxury jeweller Tiffany & Co. named Blackpink's Rosé and BTS' Jimin as representatives, Burberry tapped three members from the freshly launched NewJeans group, BigBang's Taeyang was announced as ambassador for Givenchy, and China-born K-Pop star Jackson Wang joined Louis Vuitton. Meanwhile, in the K-drama world, Song HyeKyo represents Fendi, LeeMinHo is the ambassador for Louis Vuitton, and Ji ChangWook was selected as Calvin Klein's first Korean global model."

^{ix} Korean was the sixth most popular language according to Duolingo's 2023 Global Language Report; according to the Modern Language Association, "from 2009 to 2016, enrollment in Korean language classes at U.S. colleges and universities surged by 78%."

^x Chapter two discusses the teleology of Deleuze's own thought which causes him to dismiss animation outright and, by extension, the Third World.

^{xi} Some examples are the World Economic Forum's report "Deglobalisation: what you need to know" (Keller and Marold 2023) and the May 11th, 2024 issue of *The Economist* "The New Economic Order" which shows the world fractured into economic blocs on the front cover (Sester 2024).

^{xii} GSMA's 2023 analysis put the number at 4.3 billion smartphone owners, or 54% of the global population.

^{xiii} Behind Apple and Samsung are a deluge of interchangeable Chinese companies: "Samsung...reported a 13.6 per cent fall in shipments last year, as Huawei regained share in China and cheaper Android handset makers posted stronger growth. In particular, Chinese manufacturer Transsion — whose brands Tecno, Infinix and itel have made it Africa's dominant smartphone company — grew 30.8 per cent last year, putting it in the top five behind Xiaomi and Oppo."

^{xiv} Though Apple again lost this position in 2024, this was only because of Chinese protection of its domestic market (Ray 2024), a pyrrhic victory for Samsung given the existential challenge of Chinese industrialization to Korean manufacturing. In 2024, Samsung's smartphone shipments were down around 0.7% year-on-year" whereas Xiaomi "saw a major 33.8% growth" and Transsion "saw its first-quarter shipments nearly double from 15.4 million in 2023 to 28.5 million this year." Huawei as well saw "net profit leapt 564% to 19.65 billion yuan (\$2.71 billion) in the first quarter [of 2024]" (Goh 2024). Neither China nor Korea have challenged Apple's profits. As the *Forbes* article notes: "measured by revenues and profits, Apple has long been the top

smartphone maker thanks to the iPhone’s dominance at the high end of the market. But last year was the first in which it also led by volume” (Ray 2024).

^{xv} Qualcomm is only behind the American company Nvidia, which surpassed it in 2023 based on the potential of the market for AI chips.

^{xvi} Or, as an article from 2024 noted about the race to 3nm manufacturing: “Success in this competitive landscape hinges on meeting the demands of major clients such as NVIDIA, Qualcomm, AMD, and others, while swiftly enhancing yields” (Hwang and Lee 2024).

^{xvii} Related high-tech industries show the same pattern, such as Korean dominance of the DRAM and NAND memory chip industry but relative weakness in high value-added SOCs (system on a chip) or the explicit mediating role of Foxconn in the manufacturing process of Apple devices.

^{xviii} No 1995; Yoon 1995 were the first in a series of Korean theses studying “chronic problems within the distribution and production systems” (Kwon 2006)

^{xix} For example, Paul Wells’s *Understanding Animation* (1998) and Cahiers Du Cinema’s *Le Cinema D’Animation* (Genin 2003) have been translated into Korean though neither mentions Korean animation. From Korean authors, most works during the animation bubble of the late 1990s-early 2000s studied American or Japanese animation either in relation to Korean animation’s lack of success or their effect on the Korean market rather than Korean animation itself (Kwon 2006, 9-11).

^{xx} Animators themselves have written books on their own experiences, such as a work about the production of the 1995 film *Armageddon* (Kim 1997) as well as works by AKOM CEO Nelson Shin (1999; 2006; 2015). As for North Korean animation, some articles and books do exist in the South. Most notable are encyclopedias of works by Lee and Kim (2005) and Jeon (2014) and Ju-ok Hong’s *The Early History of North Korean Animation 1955-1980 [Bukan aenimeisyeon 1955-1980]* (2020), which provides the most comprehensive history and will presumably be followed up with a post-1980 sequel. Besides the constrictions of research on North Korea in the South, theory is limited to tracing the influence of political events on North Korean cultural production.

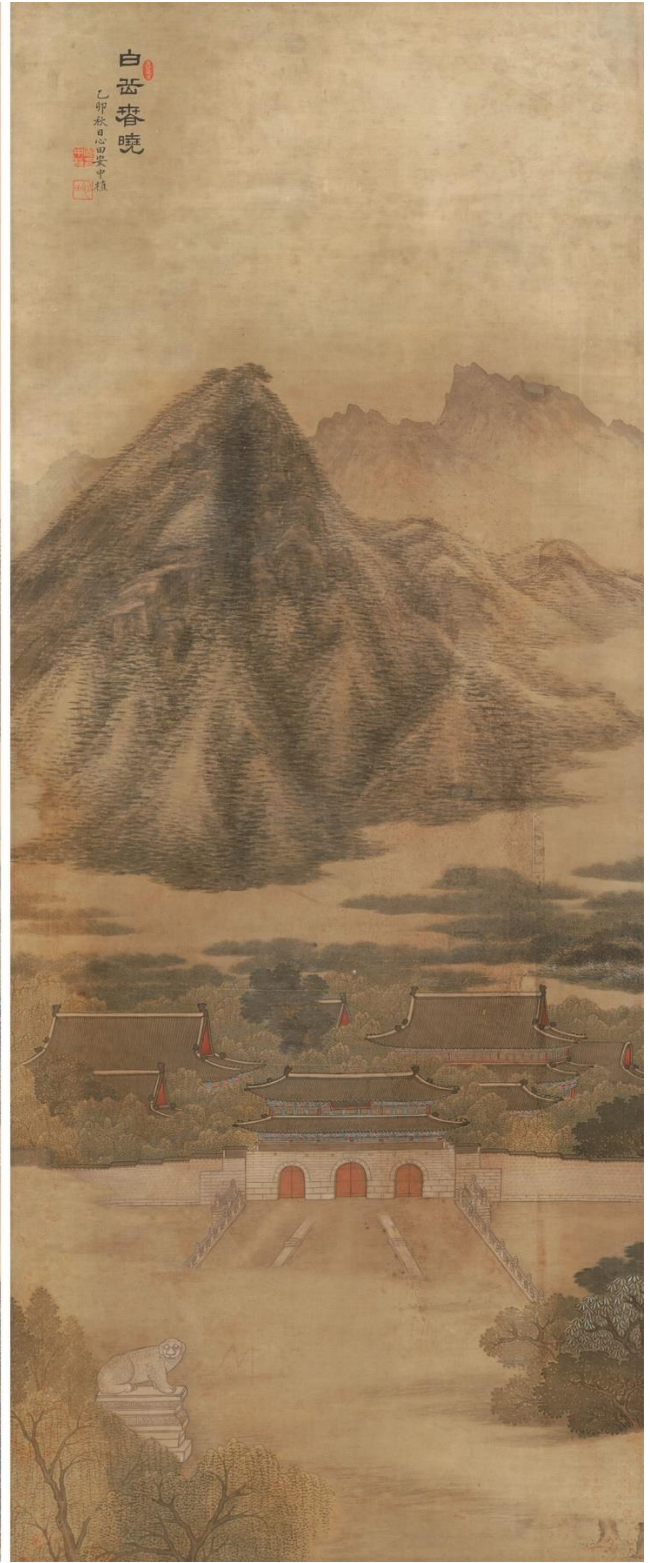
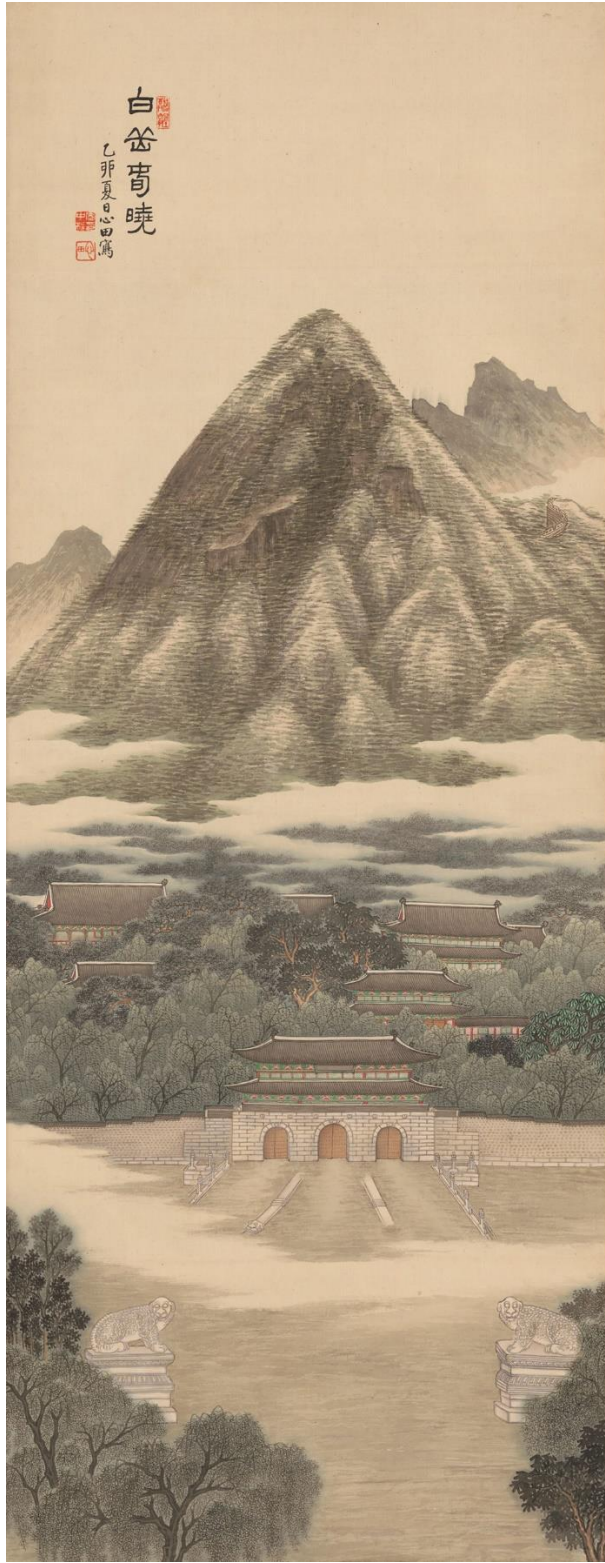
Chapter Two

The Effaced Origins of Korean Animation

The Stillbirth of Korean Modernity

An Jung-sik's 1915 paintings of *Spring Dawn at Mt. Baegak* currently resides in the National Museum of Korea in Seoul. It is the most recently created painting on display and indexes the final moment in the transition from pre-modern to modern Korean art that determines which works reside in the national museum and which reside in Seoul's modern and contemporary art museum (MMCA). This transition is not just between historical periods but from culture to art-as-such, with the former museum covering Korean history and culture going back to the 6000 year old Bangudae cave engravings while the latter displays art in its contemporary aesthetic sense.

Both versions of the painting, a "summer" and a "fall" version, depict the same scene [fig. 3]. Gyeongbok Palace, the royal palace of the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897), stands in front of mount Baegak, Seoul's main mountain in the North. Gwanghwamun, the main gate of the palace, is at the center of the painting, leading out to Yukjo Street, the street of six ministries and "spine of Korean political power" (Lee 2019, 54) that connected Gwanghwamun to the rest of Seoul. At the bottom of the painting two sculptures of haetae lurk amongst trees, mythical unicorn-lion figures believed to ward against fire and thus commonly used in architecture but also a symbol of law and justice.



[Figure 3 - Spring Dawn at Mt. Baegak: Spring and Fall Version]

Notably, neither version of the painting takes place in Spring. “Spring Dawn” in the title instead refers to a poem of the same name by Meng Haoran (689-740) of the Chinese Tang Dynasty, which begins with the line “in spring, one sleeps, unaware of dawn” and continues later: “I heard the sound of rain and wind last night/ how many flowers fell again.” Like Rip Van Winkle who slept through the American revolution to find his portrait of King George has been replaced by George Washington, An has awoken to a nightmare of Japanese occupation and the Korean nation has slept through a storm of history.

The painting feels melancholy, with the normally bustling Yukjo street completely empty except for a haunting mist. Rather than a vision of the majestic palace behind Gwanghwamun gate, Gyeongbok Palace is lost in the trees and completely overshadowed by Mount Baegak, which is much further away from the palace than An depicts. An was painting from memory: the Japanese colonial government had made plans to demolish the palace in 1910 and by 1912 had begun to raze buildings to make space for the western style governor-general building. A birthday celebration for the recently deceased Meiji Emperor was held on palace grounds in 1913 and by 1915, the Japanese governor-general of Korea decided to hold the Joseon Product Exhibition, an event specifically designed to contrast old Korean to new Japanese architecture as well as the industrial, agricultural, and scientific achievements of Japan in comparison to Joseon Korea. To host the one million visitors, the government swept away one hundred and twenty-three structures inside the palace, destroyed major buildings, and blocked from view nearly all others, replacing them with eighteen Western-style temporary exhibition halls (Henry 2016, 97-98). Though An would not live to see it, in 1926 the Japanese eventually took apart Gwanghwamun gate, moved it, and put the planned governor-general building in its place, which stayed there until as late as 1996.

The painting is not just a lament for the past greatness of Korea and a veiled anti-colonial statement. Many Korean artists would make similar statements in their work at the turn of the 20th century. What distinguishes An's work is that the form of the painting itself contains its ideological content and, by extension, the objective historical limits of Korean modernity in art. Mount Baegak is not only depicted as a towering presence over the palace, representing the Black Tortoise-Serpent guardian deity that was supposed to protect Korea. It is portrayed in a traditional court painting style, using the "true-view" style of the late Joseon period (Lee 2020, 409). "Mi dots" create the texture of the mountain, brushwork created by Mi Fu and Mi Youren of the Chinese Northern Song dynasty. Traditional painting materials are used on silk and the painting is meant to be hung as a scroll vertically in the traditional style. Mingi Kang, comparing An's *A Cart by Maple Forest* (1913) to a landscape painting of a decade later, points to the largest difference between An's work and what would follow: "there is no annotation in the blank space at the top of the painting. Thus, the work epitomizes the transition from conceptual landscapes meant to express the refinement of the literati to realist landscapes based on close observation and actual sketches of nature" and, without An's signature in calligraphy, "demonstrates the seismic shift in the perception of painting and calligraphy" (2021, 40-42).

In opposition to the true-view style of the background, the foreground is one of the first to experiment with western one-point perspective, particularly in the fall version (Kim 2016, 148). Not only is the spatial representation of Gwanghwamun and its surroundings geometrically accurate, An most likely worked off a photograph to reconstruct the scene given the changes it had already undergone by 1915 (149).

An not only attempted to combine Japanese-mediated western modernity and Korean tradition in *Spring Dawn at Mt. Baegak*, he lived it. The last official court painter of the Joseon dynasty, he had studied under Jang Seung-eop (Owon), one of the three great painters of the late Joseon (whose own tragic encounter with the collapse of the Joseon dynasty and Japanese colonialism was made famous in Im Kwon-taek's 2002 film *Painted Fire*) before going to China and then Japan where he encountered modern art styles. From then on An led a double life. For the newly declared Korean Empire, which ended 500 years of the Joseon dynasty, he became "the primary portraitist of the royal court, then the Tongjin County Magistrate, and finally as the Yangcheon County Magistrate" (Kang 2021, 48). Simultaneously, he would open Gyeongmukdang in his own personal residence in 1901, the center for modern ink-washing painting which would spawn many of Korea's famous early modern artists. The center itself would combine traditional methods of education and a modern emphasis on observation and representing the natural world realistically and would serve as a gathering place for cross-class intellectuals rather than the cloistered world of Joseon-era court-painters (43).

After the abolition of the Korean Empire by Japanese annexation in 1910 and the abolition of the Royal Academy of Painting in 1911, An would continue to be thrust into the world of modern art. Adrift without royal sponsorship, he would join the faculty of the Art Association of Calligraphy and Painting (Seohwa misulhoe), opened in 1912 and modeled on his education model at Gyeongmukdang (43). This last vestige of the old system was left behind by Ah, who went on to co-found the Calligraphy and Painting Association (Seohwa hyeophoe), Korea's first modern art group, which he served as the first president. The group planned for Korea's first modern art exhibit in the spring of 1919 but this was indefinitely postponed by the March 1st uprising against Japanese colonialism which most of the founders of the Association

were involved in. Brutally suppressed, An would face torture by the Japanese police for his suspected role and would die soon after (Kim 2024). The Calligraphy and Painting Association would hold its first exhibit in 1921 until being disbanded in 1937 (Lee 2020, 409), but the “cultural turn” of Japanese policy after the March 1st movement would see Japanese competition in the Choson Art Exhibition, founded in 1922 to counter the Korean association. Under Japanese colonialism, the late An’s group had no chance, and a carrot and stick approach turned the Japanese sponsored art exhibition into “a gateway to success” for Korean artists and the transmission belt of Western art to Korea: “Japanese Academism (a kind of Neo-Classical Impressionism), dominated and eventually resulted in Korean Academism” (417), displacing the ink-paintings of the past. Korea would not get a formal art school until after 1945, and as the Choson art exhibition became increasingly conservative, Korean artists would turn even more towards Western styles like expressionism and abstraction to deal with “deplorable national conditions” under colonialism (Woo and Pyun 2021, 6), the Korean war (Kim 2022, 31), and eventually a Korean indigenous form of expressionism, Dansaekhwa, under the repressive conditions of the Park dictatorship (Kee 2013).

An's life contains all the contradictions of “colonial modernity” in which “the merger of colonialism and modernity created a condition of ambiguity and contingency for existing identities” (Shin and Robinson 1999, 14) beyond the simple binaries of nationalism (3). On the one hand, he has become a symbol of nationalism and modernity, not just for his efforts in establishing modern painting but his work for books and children’s magazines in which he portrayed Korea as a fierce tiger resisting imperialism (Kim 2024). His 1919 photograph in the Mael Shinbo Newspaper wearing a suit and tie shows him as a clear subject of modernity (Hong 2021). On the other hand, he was a supporter of the failed Gapsin coup, a coup attempt against

the government for modern reforms supported by Japan, learned modern art through his travels in Japan and China (Hong 2024), and cultivated a personal relationship with Japanese artists Shimizu Toun after the colonization of Korea (Kang 2014). An himself would come under attack after his death by young nationalists for being “too conservative” and “lacking vitality” suited to modernity and Korea’s precarious position in it (Kim 2005, 22) and merely a copy of Chinese art, accused of being a symptom of Korea’s slavish aping of Chinese culture and failure to modernize (Choe 2017, 172).

An's reputation recovered after the Korean war, and a major 1974 study of Korean art in South Korea called him a “bridge between Joseon and modernity,” with later scholarship divided between those who emphasize his traditional qualities and those who emphasize his importance to modernization (Hong 2021), both meant to serve South Korean nationalism. For the hundredth anniversary of both the March 1st movement and An’s death, an exhibit at the National Museum of Korea celebrated “The Art of Resistance and Seclusion” with An among Korean artists who “made an effort to maintain our culture and national identity through their artwork” (Yim 2019).

In the current postmodern era, in which Korean art has become a global commodity and an important signifier of Korea’s post-dictatorship cultural openness and economic globalization, globally-oriented artists and academics are reevaluating the nationalist judgements of Korean art’s past and An has come under reevaluation as an artist worth studying in his own right rather than within nationalist historiography (Choe 2016). Following Robinson and Shim’s “colonial modernity” (1999), *Interpreting Modernism in Korean Art* (Pyun and Woo 2022), an anthology of English language scholarship on Korean art, begins from the perspective of Korean art history as one of “multiple modernities” in which “within the specific situation of its colonization, Korea

simply enacted its own modernity, distinguished by regional, cultural, economic, and institutional differences” opposed to “a unilateral story of ethnic nationalism” (Woo and Pyun 2022, 11-12). But to justify this multiplicity, it quotes a 1930s Korean author (Iminsaeng) who stresses something different: “while modernism in other countries is pathological, modernism in colonial Korea is inevitably deformed.” This deformation is driven by material oppression: “Listen to how loudly the stomachs of Korean modern boys and girls are growling, as compared to their foreign counterparts” (11). While the nationalist oppression of the colonial era has been replaced with the horizontal multiplicities of global multiculturalism, this is premised on turning a concern with the hierarchical logic of imperialism with “cracks and fissures” in the project of “development” (11). As Fredric Jameson points out, “alternative modernities” for every culture arise out of a shift in capitalism itself, in which neoliberalism turns regional cultural “modernities” into mediators for the fundamental meaning of modernity: “a worldwide capitalism itself” (Jameson 2002, 12).

The new Korean art historians are right about something critical. The old nationalist historiography is no longer suitable for the world of late capitalism and Korea no longer confronts the global marketplace from the perspective of a “time lag” (Woo and Pyun 2022, 11). As a commodity, Korean art and culture are circulated in the world of global capitalist imperialism fully formed. An’s painting shows that was always the case. As the first work of Korean modernism, it already predicted its failure and dissolution into postmodernism, where the past, present and future, lay on top of each other as disjointed layers. Rather than Korean modernity as too late, perhaps it was too early. An’s painting appears like the first sign of a “hauntology” at the end of history, where Korean modernity is always-already deformed.

A better term for An's painting is perhaps "compressed modernity," which Chang Kyung-sup describes as "the phenomena of intense competition, collision, disjuncting, articulation, and compounding among traditional, modern and postmodern elements within a compact socio-historical context" (2010, 6). There is much overlap with Jameson's historical point in chapter one. But, to use Chang liberally, we should take the term "compression" literally. An's painting compresses the past, present, and future in a single frame without the hierarchy of historical teleology. The past covers everything in a fog but is inaccessible, blocked by the presentness of the photographic. But this is no more accessible than the ink-paintings of the background, an image of what Roland Barthes called "a punctum" without "a studium" (Barthes 2010). A photographic memory of something in the past, dead by virtue of its preservation in time, but without an original photograph to index historical reality. The present in *Spring Dawn at Mt. Baegak* is photographic modernity-as-such, trying and failing to concretize what was already destroyed.

Why begin a dissertation about Korean animation with a discussion of a painting? Aesthetically, there is something particularly animatic about An's painting. The layering of historical moments resembles the layering of animation cels, which Thomas Lamarre calls the "multiplanar image" (2009, xxiii) that defines the movement of "animatism" (6). The Korean ink-painting background with a foreground of western modernity is an aesthetic feature of Korean animation we will see many times, especially in the first Korean animated feature-length film *Hong Gildong* (1967). But before we get to that, there is a more fundamental point. If cinematism is movement in time across images, what Deleuze called the "movement-image" (1986), then animatism is "the space within images that becomes spread across frames" (Lamarre 2009, xxv). Animation, by virtue of its flat compositing, captures simultaneity in an aesthetically

productive way. See, for example, Satoshi Kon's layering of time in a single image in *Millenium Actress* [Fig. 4]. In the film, an old actress is invited to film a retrospective about her life. The films she has starred in are interwoven with her actual life story, where she tried to help a political dissident against the Japanese Empire only for him to disappear, presumed dead. Explaining that she became an actress to find that dissident, the story goes through her life, ending with her realization that the search itself made life worth living. On her deathbed, she is portrayed as the star of a science fiction film, shooting off into space as an astronaut. In this scene, the past (the kimono wearing actress and the Japanese Empire) is one layer, the present is another (the film's director pulling the rickshaw and the cinematographer filming the scene), and the future is another (the actress being pulled through history into her final realization).



[Figure 4 – Past, Present, and Future Coexist in *Millenium Actress*'s Layered Cels]

As Lamarre stresses, what defines animetism is that no one layer is prioritized but each moves horizontally with its own autonomy. Kon's film-within-a-film plays with linear time, instead freely moving back and forth, with a train moving in one direction in the background as the Meiji revolution occurs and the Japanese Empire marches in the opposite direction. The scene ends with the director, overcome with emotion at the actress's story and falling behind the car with the camera on it, flinging her into the past as a young girl on a bicycle. Animation, fracturing and mixing time, is in this sense closer to painting, hence Lev Manovich calling cinema "a series of paintings" in the digital age when every frame can be freely manipulated, or "a particular branch of painting -- painting in time" (1995).

If animation has an explosive relationship to linear time, it also fractures space in the same way. Animation's "movement on and between surfaces...flatten and "relativize" movement in the world," creating a depthless world of surfaces and affects, what Lamarre points out is "a quintessentially postmodern situation" (Lamarre 2009, 7; 107). While Lamarre correctly pushes against theories of "superflat" which reify Japanese cultural essentialism and alternate modernity for a theory of postmodern capitalist universality with room for particularity (113), he does not extend this sense of postmodern spatiality to the capitalist world system. Only briefly mentioned in *The Anime Machine*, the spatial freedom of a work like Satoshi Kon's nevertheless presumes a unified Japanese product even while supposing a universal postmodern condition. The freedom of animation cel layering disguises the "outsourcing of labor-intensive tasks to Korean or Chinese shops" (Lamarre 2009, xviii), a perspective that has disappeared entirely from Lamarre's follow-up work *The Anime Ecology* (2018) where the hierarchy of animation production has shifted to the harmony of each country's most successful export: "Japanese transmedia formations [draw on] Disney animations, Hong Kong action films, and Taiwanese

and Korean television dramas” (114). Though animation moves in a different way than cinema, it still moves, and in doing so erases the labor of outsourcing in the naturalism of key-frames determining in-between frames and designs and storyboards determining what is possible in backgrounds and stories. *Spring Dawn at Mt. Baegak* is in a sense the limit of Korean animation.

In its stillness, it haunts the aesthetic products of Korea with the failure of colonial and postcolonial modernity. The work is not merely a juxtaposition of past and present in a single frame but culture and art, at once a product of history and aesthetic reflection of it. Simultaneously a perfected form of Chinese and Korean ink-painting and the aesthetic reflection on history and time of An Jung-sik’s painterly eye, it belongs neither in the Korean history museum with crowns of the Shilla dynasty and royal portraits nor with the MMCA’s modern art, with the autonomy of artists and aesthetic movements.

Animation and Postmodernity

Gilles Deleuze refers to cinema as an “industrial art” because its production is determined by its automatic movement that sweeps along the viewer and touches “the nervous and cerebral system directly” (1986, 156). Cinema’s autonomous domination over the viewer makes it the modern art par excellence, and animation as “cartoon film” (1986, 6), a mere subtype of cinema’s movement-image.

This initial shock eventually becomes cliché, the initial dialectical power of the montage absorbed by commercial cinema and the eye of the consumer. In the period of cinema’s “time-image,” or a period of self-reflexivity and self-criticism, its internalized relation with money defines it (Deleuze 1989, 77) as cinema shifts “from monopoly to multinational capitalism”

(Beller 2012, 19). Along with this structural shift in capitalism, “the people are missing” (Deleuze 1989, 219) as cinema’s subjects. Instead of a proletarian subject with universal interests, postindustrial capitalism creates a multiplicity of interests and instead of Third World nationalisms that has an unmediated revolutionary consciousness, an infinite number of minority cultures differentiate themselves in the global marketplace. In Deleuze’s work with Guattari, this situation creates “the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation” (1983, 18), a “micropolitics” for a new subjectivity (Busk 2001).

Deleuze is not the only thinker of postmodern political subjectivity and one does not need a theory of cinema to arrive there. What makes his work interesting is, in evaluating the path of cinema, “Deleuze remained essentially a modernist” (Jameson 2002, 203). Although the audience of cinema mutates, the same cannot be said of directors, who remain the auter philosophers of movies. When this approach no longer works in the age of dominant production companies, Deleuze ends his two-volume work by predicting the death of cinema itself to be replaced in postindustrial capitalism by the “information image” that, being composed of infinite narratives without a center, loses the “will to art” (Deleuze 1986, 266). While animation was experiencing its 90s golden age through American television cartoons and Japanese anime, Godard claimed that “cinema is dead” (Witt 1999, 331). If animation was subordinate to cinematic modernity, the death of cinema came with the “televisual mutation” (335). More interestingly is the essential relationship between cinema and “national cinemas” on a “quest for a national self-image, one which engenders a revolution in film language” (333).

Whereas Deleuze begins his study of cinema by dismissing animation, by the end animation has engulfed cinema. Though not addressed as such, cinema in the age of the “time image” has become “no longer that of the association or attraction of images. What counts is on the contrary the interstice between images, between two images” (Deleuze 1986, 179). This is nearly identical to the definition of animation given by Canadian animator Norman McLaren: “what happens between each frame is more important than what happens on each frame” (Lamarre 2009, xxiv). If cinema is tied to the nation, the invisible, transnational labor of in-between frames implies something else entirely.

Deleuze’s last chapters on Japanese film are similarly concerned with a different spatial relation in the films of Ozu, Kurosawa, and Mizoguchi and different movements within “Japanese tologoly” of lateral movements” within a “flattened image” (Deleuze 1986, 188) within the larger aesthetic established by ukyo-e and Chinese ink paintings as a “prefiguration of cinema” (188). This analysis seems to anticipate similar concerns of Japanese anime, articulated by Takashi Murakami as “superflat” in which “society, customs, art, culture: all are extremely two-dimensional. It is particularly apparent in the arts that this sensibility has been flowing steadily beneath the surface of Japanese history” (Murakami 2000). That is, not only is animation replacing cinema’s image of depth with the flatness of late capitalism’s schizophrenic multiplicity of images, but capitalism with “Asian values” is doing it better than the West, a “techno-orientalism” (Lamarre 2009, 89) that threatens the very possibility of critical thought.

Animation as postmodernism, in going beyond capitalist modernity, also threatens the return to a primordial Asian despotism untainted by it, a common fear articulated for example by Slavoj Zizek that China is a fundamental rupture of the relationship of capitalism to “political

democracy” and formal freedom (Zizek 2007). As with Deleuze’s concern with flatness, this is even a concern of Japanese scholars themselves, such as Hiroki Azuma’s claim that anime fans (otaku) are “database animals” incapable of critique in the modern sense (Azuma 2009) or that otakudom reflects a psychic developmental stage prior to the symbolic order and adulthood (Saito 2013), foundational works of anime studies that defended anime and otaku from much worse accusations from the Japanese media. As Thomas Lamarre diagnoses in *superflat’s* return to ukyo-e in the postmodern, “by eliminating the moving image, Murakami effectively eliminates questions about modernity...[becoming] yet another discourse on Japanese uniqueness (Nihonjinron), which celebrates Japan as always already postmodern” (2009, 112; 114) founded on Japan as an “innocent victim” of Western modernity rather than a historical actor with its own modernity and articulation of racism and Empire (117).

It is strange to think of Deleuze, the inspiration for Negri and Hardt’s *Empire* as one of the first attempts to theorize political subjectivity vis-à-vis globalization, as a bitter cynic and borderline Orientalist when faced with late capitalism and new media. As I implied, perhaps the reflections on animation at the very beginning of *Cinema 1* have led to irreversible consequences by the end of *Cinema 2*. More fundamentally, the arrival of Asian labor to global capitalism has shaken the foundation of subjectivity itself, whether the philosopher-director or the critical spectator. This is the thread Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak picks up to critique the problems of Deleuze’s conclusions as immanent to his philosophical project.

Thinking Non-Origins

In speaking of the shift from classical montage to the self-reflexive time-image as the shift from C -> M -> C’ to M -> C -> M^{xxi} as “equivalence [to] impossible equivalence or

tricked, dissymmetrical exchange” (Deleuze 1986, 78), Deleuze takes the abstractions of “simple commodity production” and “commodity production in general” (Chevalier 1983) as real historical stages that correspond to Fordism and post-Fordism.^{xxii} The historical accuracy and theoretical coherence of this understanding of the development of capitalism aside, Deleuze’s more basic point is again that at some time cinematic modernism corresponded to an “equivalent” capitalism^{xxiii} whereas postmodern cinema corresponds to self-reflexivity and non-equivalence, an application of Deleuze’s larger philosophical claims to the realm of cinema.

The difficulty in this maneuver and the historical teleology of Deleuze’s *Cinema* books more generally is that the so-called equivalence of simple commodity production obfuscates the primitive accumulation at the origin of capitalism while non-equivalence does the same to the global division of labor which supports the seeming autonomy of money capital in the First World. This “crude evolutionary model” of simple commodity production has been subject to scathing critique by postcolonial and Marxist scholars of dependency alike for ignoring the necessary real subsumption of the colonial economy to the so-called generalized commodity production in the First World (Chevalier 1983, 168). In the realm of philosophy, it is not that the working class and national subject are missing; rather, these are the maneuvers of the first world intellectual (Spivak 1994, 67) that are universalized and imposed on the Third World worker (and peasant). Given Spivak and “postcolonialism” more generally are commonly thought of as concerned primarily with culture, it is worth quoting the clear concern with global capitalism and imperialism that begins the work:

[Deleuze’s] invocation of the workers’ struggle is baleful in its very innocence; it is incapable of dealing with global capitalism: the subject-production of worker and unemployed within nation-state ideologies in its Center; the increasing subtraction of the working class in the Periphery from the realization of surplus value and thus from

'humanistic' training in consumerism; and the large-scale presence of para-capitalist labor as well as the heterogeneous structural status of agriculture in the Periphery. Ignoring the international division of labor; rendering 'Asia' (and on occasion 'Africa') transparent (unless the subject is ostensibly the 'Third World'); reestablishing the legal subject of socialized capital - these are problems as common to much poststructuralist as to structuralist theory (67).

Just as Deleuze's philosophy erases the Third World worker in order to situate liberation in the subjective desire of the First World intellectual and post-industrial alienated subject more broadly, Deleuze's concept of cinema erases the collective labor of cinematic production for the vision of the *auter* as philosopher. Animation and the implications of globalized production must be banished for the critical subject of the cinema to survive^{xxiv}.

In turning away from poststructuralist concepts of representation, Spivak instead uses Derrida to think about how we can speak about a subjectivity that is always-already divided, complicating the initial answer to "can the subaltern speak?" as "no". In her introduction to *Of Grammatology*, she attempts to represent this split subject with a crossed-out word: "This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is -inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)" (Derrida 1976, xiv). For Spivak, Derrida uses this unpleasant notation to represent both that the subject is missing but is still present (prior to Being's presuppositions) and that the term must be critiqued without abandoning its real power as an index of reality. If the subaltern cannot speak, they can speak by drawing attention to the impossibility of speech in the language of the colonizer even while using it.

The difficulty of Spivak's (or Derrida's) formulation is that crossing out the word is not a total negation but an acknowledgement that overcoming this situation is impossible so long as the conditions that generate the contradiction continue to exist. So long as commodity fetishism exists as a "real abstraction," i.e. an abstract reflection of the real production process (De Angelis

1996), drawing attention to lack is the only possibility of drawing attention to the fetishism of the system of capitalist production while still remaining in its objective relations.

Nevertheless, it is an essential maneuver to understand Korean animation. If the problem of the movement-image is its movement, disguising the labor of each cel in the illusion of motion, the obvious solution is to stop that motion. That is exactly what Hannah Frank does in her work *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons* (2019). Starting from a similar problematic, attempting to uncover the “the traces of occluded labor” of “lower-paid workers such as “inkers” and “in-betweeners,” often women” (xii), she goes frame by frame in animated works to find “the mistakes, glitches, and peripheral details” (xii). Echoing Korea’s exclusion from “creative” tasks, she even finds “marginal figures, jokes, flourishes of creativity, and even hints at blasphemy” (xii) in the manual labor of in-between frames.

Frank’s work is unprecedented in methodology and ambition and is one of the few works that treats animation as an industrial process. It takes a Derridean method of looking in animation for “reveal traces of the humans and technology that produced them” (52). It is therefore an extremely productive failure. Treating animation as a photographic medium, Frank admits that “it is not always easy, and it’s sometimes impossible, to sort out what has been produced graphically (and then reproduced photographically) and what has been produced by the camera—that is, photographically” (46). Whereas cinema can get around this by its indexical relationship to an image of reality, this is impossible in animation where everything is created ex-nihilo (67). Frank instead gets around the problem by leaving meaning open to interpretation: “Rather than worry that we cannot ever know what it is that we are looking at, we delight in the masquerade. Forensic investigation becomes a game” (47). But these traces “these examples

never succeed in fully “breaking” the spell of the cartoon’s world. Rather, they are tiny intrusions that divert our gaze for a split-second, if that—pinpricks in an otherwise vacuum-sealed world” (52).

This game may be sufficient for the work done in the Disney studio, but it is insufficient for understanding Korean animation since Korea actually exists even if the traces of its animation do not. The works Frank studies are all domestically produced early animations (1920s-1950s) and her method hits its limit with limited animation and Korean animation. Pointing out that colorizing early Betty Boop was “undertaken at a studio in Korea, where technicians went frame by frame through 35mm prints, extracting the foreground elements of the still image” (76), Frank admits that “I have not, in all my viewing, found anything that I can recognize as a deliberate mistake on the part of, say, the inkers or painters.” Comparing the creative possibilities of American limited animation and the work of Koreans, she concludes that “the colorized Popeye shorts are unsuccessful because the work performed is ad hoc, with no sense of the film as a whole: the technicians’ only task was to colorize as efficiently as possible, and in their frame-by-frame reviewing of the cartoon at hand they neglected to see the forest for the trees. The aesthetic consequences of this method are unintended; they are imperfections, mistakes, disturbances, and anomalies...” (78).

This work, which is otherwise so sensitive to the oppressed and exploited, ends up reproducing a reduction of Korean labor to passive, uncreative, and robotic. How could this happen? Despite the limits of Deleuze, he is correct that animation moves. A still frame is not a movie and animation is not painting. This is not merely a matter of “[draining] it of its narrative content” (146) but, to Deleuze’s point, removing it from the circulation of capital itself.

Similarly, as Thomas Lamarre points out, limited animation distinguishes the movement of animetism and separates it from the earlier cinematism of Disney's "full animation" of "movement into depth" (Lamarre 2009, 19). Theories which privilege full animation, even in order to find traces of labor in them, end up reproducing an orientalist hostility to Japanese anime (for example mockery of the limited mouth movements of *Mach GoGoGo*, known as *Speed Racer* in America, as characteristic of how Asian people speak English) and, to Lamarre's point, precisely what makes animation not cinema.

If Deleuze's fetishism of capitalist production is insufficient to global imperialism, Frank's fetishism of labor as directly accessible through halting the reproduction of capital ends up at the same endpoint. Neither can account for the objective erasure of Korean animation in motion. The only solution is to follow Spivak to the realm of the non-subjectivity of invisible, subaltern labor and center Korean animation's barred non-being. This may seem hopeless but in fact the opposite is the case. *Spring Dawn at Mt. Baegak* is forever trapped in the past and An Jung-sik failed to escape the "hauntology" of Korea's absent modernity, "time-out-of-joint" (Derrida 2006). But capitalism is always in motion, and it brings Korea into the world. This is the limit of Derrida and Spivak that the implications of Korean animation surpass.

Postcolonialism, at least in this original formulation, usefully points to the global division of labor as the key to deconstruction. But Spivak's essay is best known for the analysis of *sati*, or widow self-immolation, in India. Despite anticipating in many ways Hindutva fascism and the usage of poststructuralism and postcolonial by fascists, the essay is ultimately a mediation on the past: a woman Spivak knew, an old practice that persists into the present, the history of different conquests of India. It is an intervention against a teleological history of the first world

transplanted onto the third and a defense of India's pastness in the present and future. This mediation on pastness and a kind of semi-feudalism seems to offer little for understanding East Asia's "Sinofuturism" (Conn and De Seta 2021). As Spivak points out in *Other Asias*: "there is no China here" because "China is changing so radically" (2007, 12) and that "[Koreanist] Charles Armstrong wanted no part of postcolonial theory" because "the case of East Asia was...significantly different" given its history of industrialization through Japanese and then American imperialism (7). Spivak is perhaps too self-critical and moderates these statements with observations that there is useful postcolonial work done on East Asia. But she is surely aware of the "blind spot" in Derrida towards China which is "symptomatic of Western critical theory's more general practice of marginalizing and fetishizing China" (Rojas 2021, 90) and East Asia generally, including the bizarre cover of Spivak's translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* which for two decades featured supposed Chinese writing and an ink drawing, only to turn out to be a Japanese work by Tanaka Nikka who died in 1845 (92).

Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, despite touching on the nature of global commodity production and the meaning of cheap outsourcing labor for the political concepts of modernity for the post-Soviet world (Derrida 2006, 101-102), is largely a reflection on philosophy and, given the prominence of Hamlet, also a reflection on the ghosts of the past. The discussion of globalization comes not in a discussion of political economy but international law, with a rather embarrassing defense of the "responsibility to protect" as a progressive aspect of post-socialist politics (105). More relevant is the total absence of discussion of the "socialist" countries that still exist and the only mention of China being a quote reflecting on its past politics (Rojas 2021, 89). Whether socialist or not, it is clear that the role of the Chinese communist party has been

essential in creating “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” a genuine specter of Marx haunting the world today.

As this dissertation will argue, China’s futurism is really an echo of Korea’s past, albeit on a grand scale. In animation this was not only an outsourcing model to be followed but the direct investment of Korean companies in Chinese animation outsourcing pushing Koreans higher in the outsourcing global value chain. The Korean developmental model became the model for the entire world. Not just post-socialist China, but so-called export-oriented industrialization in every country, from Bangladesh to Mexico, and even attempts to replicate “special economic zones” in the first world as part of “reindustrialization” and “nearshoring” of manufacturing.

The future may be imagined as a techno-orientalist nightmare, but it is again imaginable, anticipated by Fredric Jameson’s mediation on Rem Koolhaas’s architecture in 2003 that “the fact is that traditional, or perhaps we might better say modernist, urbanism is at a dead end. Discussions about American traffic patterns or zoning—even political debates about homelessness and gentrification, or real-estate tax policy—pale into insignificance when we consider the immense expansion of what used to be called cities in the Third World.”

Korean animation is not visible in the objective process of global labor abstraction no matter how many frames of *The Simpsons* one isolates. But Korean animation is being brought out by the real process of capitalist globalization of manufacturing, gaining mastery over more and more of the labor process. As we shall see, that was always the case. Takashi Murakami is right about one thing. If Japan was always-already postmodern, that is because the Japanese Empire was always-already postcolonial. Colonial modernity and compressed modernity arose

because Japan's contradictory project of East Asian co-prosperity and genocidal, racist violence led to a simultaneous industrialization and repression of that industrialization throughout the Empire. Put another way, it was the first systematic attempt at the transnational outsourcing of manufacturing^{xxv}. The same is true of American neocolonialism, which simultaneously industrialized Korea vicariously through Japan and continually pushed against these efforts with protectionism and assertion of its power in the most productive monopoly industries, creating the skeletal model of global labor arbitrage and technology transfer to the "developmental state." Korean animation is not a story of absence or Being but a becoming, a struggle for existence in every historical epoch pushing the limits of the capitalist world system to exist and being beaten back. It began with the struggle over the very concept of Korean animation's origin.

The Origin of Korean Animation and Hong Gildong

If *Spring Dawn at Mt. Baegak* illustrates the ambiguities of Korean nationalism and the lateness of the colonized to history, the search for an origin in both film and animation is constituted by banishing those ambiguities and finding a work that can stand for the self-mythologizing of the Korean nation. As Dong Hoon Kim says about colonial-era Korean film, "film historians have placed their endeavours on discovering the elements that could constitute a connection between the film culture in the colonial period and postcolonial cinema in order to create a seamless cinematic tradition while" (Kim 2017, 2-3). Besides the absences and politically motivated narratives this generates, the biggest problem is simply that "the cinema of colonial Korea was not a national cinema" (2) given its inextricable connections to Japanese cultural productions. For example, North and South Korea argue over which film should be considered Korea's first. South Korea has officially designated since 1962 *Urijok Kuto* [Loyal

Vengeance] (1919) as Korea's first film because it was mostly produced by Koreans and had a mostly Korean cast. However, the cinematographer and editor were Japanese and the genre was an import from Japan, a hybrid genre between film and live action stage drama, and can barely be called a film. Out of the three best candidates, it is the least "tainted by Japanese hands" (3), the primary motivation over the form itself. North Korea is more honest about its intentions, claiming that 1923's *Wolhau Maengseo* [The Vow Made under the Moon] is the first because despite being produced by the Japanese governor-general, it had a sufficiently nationalist message to overcome the influence of Japaneseness (4).

Given that "no film from the colonial period was completely free from Japanese intervention in one way or another" (4), historical focus is often on *Arirang* (1926) as the first truly Korean film. Despite being lost, Koreans learn about the film in school because of its high production value, commercial success, and most importantly political critique of Japanese colonialism. *Arirang*'s director Na Woon-gyu had been arrested for participating in the March 1st independence movement from 1921-1923 before beginning his career as director, writer, and actor in cinema. In the post-colonial historiography, Na was able to take his politics and channel them into Korean cinema. Getting *Arirang* through Japanese censors, film audiences emotionally sang 'Arirang,' an unofficial anthem of the nation during colonial rule, during showings (65). Despite working with the Japanese and surviving under the harsher terms of Japanese rule in the 1930s, Na died in 1937 at the age of 34 from poor health aggravated by his time in prison, retroactively turning him into a martyr for a truly Korean national cinema. Na is even made to serve as a "realist" filmmaker who represented Korea's real conditions of oppression, despite his own understanding of his films as heavily influenced by Hollywood and German expressionism (76).

The origins of Korean animation are equally ambiguous. As early as 1928, the Korean press introduced foreign animation to domestic audiences (No 2010, 12) and in 1933, an article by Choi Yong-soo in *Shin Dong-a*, a monthly magazine of the *Dong-a Ilbo*, showed that the concept of animation was already known to domestic audiences as well as screenings of foreign animated works (Ho 2002, 15-16). The first record of a Korean animation is in 1936, in which the *Joseon Ilbo* mentioned the production of *Gaegum* [Dog Dream] (Giammarco 2005). Two Korean artists, Yong-Wun Kim and Seok-Ki Im, were recorded as developing “Joseon’s ‘talkie’ manhwa” at their Seoul-based studio Jeongrim Movie Co., but only produced 400 feet of film, or about three and a half minutes of running time (Ho 2002, 16-17; Kim 2006, 63; KCIS 2014, 34). After the independence of Korea and the division of the two Koreas, two commercials were produced in the South in 1956: an advertisement for “OB Shinalko” (an alcohol-free beer) and a “Lucky Toothpaste” commercial two months later, both by Mun Dal-bu, who completed the entire production by himself. HLKZ-TV, started also in 1956, was South Korea’s first television station and Mun its art director, but these commercials were primarily shown in movie theaters during South Korea’s “golden age” of cinema (Cho 2014, 146-147). These commercials, shot cel by cel with a still camera because there were no animation stands in South Korea, led to Shin Dong-hun’s beloved commercial for Jinro Soju in 1960 and for Jinro-paradise in 1962, shot at 24 frames per second and used pre-recorded voiceovers to match sound to mouth movements.

Film and animation in the colonial era are complicated by Japan’s simultaneous policy of genocidal racism *and* “strategy of disavowing racism and including despised populations within their national communities” (Fujitani 2011, 7) which had already become state policy after the March 1st movement and the “cultural turn” in Japanese colonialist policy towards Korea, increasingly integrating Koreans into production, distribution, and consumption. As Joon Yang

Kim points out, Koreans had been watching Japanese animated films during the colonial era as early as 1924's *Yubin-no Tabi* [Postal Travel], commissioned by the colonial governor-general's office, and throughout the period including *Mamore, Tetsuro* [Protect the Railroad] (1937) both "instructional" animations (Clements 2017, 40-41) and *Norakuro* [Stray Black Dog Soldier] (1931) for entertainment (Kim 2006, 64). Most importantly, *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors*, Japan's first feature length animation had Koreans working on it, including Young Hwan-kim who worked on the film under director Mitsuyo Seo (Kim 2006, 65) and went on to start his own studio in Seoul after the war, Kim Yong-Hwan Cartoon Movie Production Company (Heo 2002, 18).

The counterpart in animation to *Arirang*'s function for nationalism is Shin Dong-hun's *The Story of Hong Gildong* (1967), Korea's "first" animated feature length film^{xxvi}. Shin makes for a good representative of Korean nationalism and the "han" of historical suffering. Shin was born in North Korea in 1927 and was a prisoner of both the Americans and North Koreans during the Korean war (Lent and Yu 2001b, 101-102). Shin had no training in animation but was wildly successful with the aforementioned Jinro Soju commercial, which led to envisioning *Hong Gildong* based on a comic (manhwa) created and drawn by Shin's brother Shin Dong-woo. Its creation was an exercise in perseverance, frustration, and poverty. The rainy season caused cels to stick together. The small staff lacked any knowledge of the animation process. Without enough cels, Shin scavenged from the American military base, taking thrown away expired wide film used in air surveillance, washing the cels with chemicals, and reusing them. Shin even lacked a multi-layer animation camera, copying designs on the American military base and making a camera by hand.

As Shin describes:

“We would make 10 minutes of animation, not like it, throw it away, and do it again and again until we got it right.”

“As for special effects, I taught myself. One of my many hobbies is astronomy. I applied techniques used by astronomers to get the double exposure effect. We improvised everything, even the way to get shadow effect through the concept of accumulation of light.”

“We had no color, no cels, and we could not import from Japan as there were restrictions” (102).

Nevertheless, the film was wildly successful: After two days, the film sold 45,982 tickets; after three days 63,297; on the fourth day, the number was nearly 100,000 and by the sixth day, the figure stood at about 120,000 (Giammarco 2006). “One ad claimed...Korea joins America, France, Germany and Japan as one of only five nations of the world capable of making animated pictures!” (Giammarco 2006).

After the success of *Hong Gildong*, Shin and his brother began working on a sequel, *Hobiwa and Chadolbawi* (1968). Seki Productions, the importer of Disney films into Korea, had produced *Hong Gildong* at the cost of 20 million won, an astronomical sum at the time. Seki foregrounded this fact, with the poster proclaiming the stacked animation cels were “150 times longer than the height of Namsan Mountain” and that the film “cost 54 million won -- as much as ten other Korean films!” (Giammarco 2006). Seki intended to get future returns and, after a bitter dispute over Shin’s desire to center side characters in the sequel (Heo 2002, 46), the two sides split, resulting in Seki creating its own film *General Hong Gildong* in 1969, Korea’s first

animation export (to Taiwan). Seki explicitly and bitterly targeted Shin's work, advertising its own film as "the 'true' sequel" and "far more interesting than the original" (Giammarco 2006). But despite a few more films coming out in the wake of *Hong Gildong*, Seki's business-focused market dominance led to diminishing returns, and competition from black-and-white television, foreign imports, and vacillating government policy brought the first golden age of Korean animation to a close. Nevertheless, a few subsequent works index important historical moments in Korean animation. *Golden Iron Man* (1968), directed by Park Yong-il, was Korea's first science fiction feature length animation and was successful enough to be exported to Japan in the same year. Despite this success, the power of television was growing, and *Golden Iron Man* went out of its way to distinguish its cinematic achievements from the Japanese-Korean television co-production *Golden Bat* (1968) (Choo 2014, 147), which had combined the first four episodes as a movie for theaters. Posters of *Golden Iron Man* proclaimed "Not A Television Cartoon! It's A Real Cartoon Movie!" and the film was promoted as a social event with vacation packages and movie posters given away to audiences (Giammarco 2006). Besides this science fiction giant robot film which, anticipated the coming period of Korean animation characterized by *Robot Taekwon V* (1976)^{xxvii}, *Prince Hodong And The Princess Of Nakrang* (1971), directed by Yong Yu-su of Seki productions, was the last based on a Korean traditional folktale of the period. It was unsuccessful domestically and Yong Yu-su/Seki would give animation two more tries: 1971's *Tetsuwan Atom* and 1972's *Great Monster War*, both based on Japanese sources rather than domestic creations (Osamu Tezuka's *Mighty Atom* for the former and influences of both *Ultraman* and *Godzilla* for the latter). With even these failing and the political situation much more unstable in the wake of the Yushin Constitution (1972), between 1973-1975 no domestic productions were created.

One does not need to allegorize that the end of the golden age coincided with the squabbling between Seki's greed and Shin Dong-hun's creative vision. Shin has done it already. He styled himself a Korean Osamu Tezuka, wearing Tezuka's famous beret everywhere and narrated his life in the style of Tezuka's own difficulties: "Mine is a sad story...I lost big money as I don't have business ability. I'm suitable to be an artist, not a business tycoon like some of my juniors" (Lent and Yu 2001, 103). Starting in 1974, Shin would abandon original productions and start Universal Art Company with Jeong Byung-kwon, a CF ("commercial film," a "Konglish" term for television advertising) director who had also done work for government propaganda departments. If Shin elevated being a bad businessman to moral righteousness, Jeong had his own story to elevate business acumen to the level of heroism. At the time, cultural imports from Japan were banned and exported media was subject to strict criticism. Despite South Korean government efforts to subcontract for Japanese companies, Jeong was rejected by the KCIA when he tried to take a film he had produced to Tatsunoko Production, a Japanese animation studio, because there was no precedent. Jeong, not to be dissuaded, took a thick book, cut out the middle, put the film in, and sent it to Japan which approved of the contract (Jeong 2019). For Jeong the result was economic growth, good jobs, and Korean technological upgrading. But for Shin and the origins of Korean animation, this was a dark age, not only because of the taint of Japanese cultural influence but because of Korea's subordinate role in subcontracting to Japanese and increasingly American companies.

Universal Art would go bankrupt in 1980 because, according to Shin, his "junior partner was a swindler" (Lent and Yu 2001, 103). For Jeong, domestic competition proved too much, and despite promising himself he would transition to domestic productions after five years, the company was shut down along with many other first wave outsourcing companies in the face of

mounting debt. The difference between these two perspectives is the difference between two historical paths. Which would come to stand for the nation?

Nation and Ideology

Once Vladimir Lenin declared that cinema was “the most important” of arts, to be directed at “the life of peoples of all countries” (2003), cinema became a late but essential tool of colonial nationalism and national formation. Just as print had served to unite the creole elite and emergent bourgeoisie of early mercantile capitalism in a national concept (Anderson 2006), cinema would serve to instill national feeling in the proletariat and peasant masses, fusing national liberation and propaganda for the industrial age.

On the one hand, colonial era cinematic nationalism would expand into an entire world of postcolonial national cinemas in the face of global Hollywood (Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller 2012, 5) with Lenin’s initial dictum growing into both second and Third World “[sharing] the same field of political and cultural struggle” in literature and cinema (Djagalov 2020, 4). On the other hand, Soviet “modernity” and “the developmentalist model the USSR offered to the Third World” (Djagalov 2020, 240) could be removed from any ideological association and even serve fundamentally antagonistic “developmentalist” regimes, in Korea what Steven Chung calls the “enlightenment film modality” (2014, 169).

Korean nationalism aspired to use animation in the same manner and in some ways, animation completes the nationalist history of cinema. Part of the motivation for *Hong Gildong* was the relative lack of censorship for animated films in comparison to live-action cinema. During the early military dictatorship, just as Korean cinema was processing the “masculinist

nationalism [of] the name of the father” (Kim 2004, 16-17) under Park Chung-hee’s paternal “care” through cinematic censorship, identification with childishness allowed animation to escape the father’s gaze and address adult concerns. In comparison to the increasing centralization and censorship of film production, represented by the prosecution of director of the golden age film *Obaltan* [The Stray Bullet] (1961) Yu Hyun-mok over a period of 18 months from 1965 over both anti-communist and obscenity laws (Yecies and Shim 2015, 54), the DIY production of *Hong Gildong* and its potentially class conscious message seemed to present an alternative. At minimum, animation would maintain its arm’s length relationship to state developmentalism and censorship through outsourcing, notably a relationship South and North Korean animation share^{xxviii}.

However, Yu’s later involvement in the anti-communist animated film *Robot Taekwon V* (1976) as producer^{xxix}, the peak of Park Chung-hee’s vision of anti-communist state developmentalism in animation, show the relationship was more complicated. Though the Korean state would later to disavow animation as “one of the six evils of Korean society” (Lent and Yu 2001a, 91-92), some of the first Korean animations were produced by the Korean government as “cultural films” (*munhwa-yeonghwa*) shown before movies, such as 1959’s *Let’s Catch Rats*, 1961’s *A Bright and Liveable Country With My One Vote*, and 1964’s *Let’s Not Be Fooled Again*. The term was imported by Japan from the German term “Kulturfilm” in 1926 through a translation by the *Dong-a Ilbo* (kfilm) and became official government policy of South Korea in 1948 with the creation of the National Film Production Center as a public information bureau in the Department of Public Affairs. Though ostensibly for education, all manner of films were characterizes as cultural films, from the Drama Film *Paldo-gangsan* [Six Daughters] (1967) which showed off the economic advancements of South Korea through a family

melodrama setting (the surprisingly popular film was probably sponsored by Park Chung-hee for the 1967 election and was itself very close to the 1942 film *Gaedae-hwanhui* [Virtues of Harmony] that showed of economic development in Manchuko) to *Hong Gildong* which was purely for entertainment. The definition itself changed from the Japanese colonial period, the Syngman Rhee era, and the Park Chung Hee era, settling on a definition of “films that center on the recording of facts” but in practice usually propaganda for the state. Animated films would continue to skirt this line between entertainment and cultural education as they navigated cultural censorship and the ironies of a system where media “for children” was less restricted than media for adults. Regardless, the term served as an excuse for government funding of animation, a task already begun under Syngman Rhee. 1959’s *Let’s Catch Rats* was the first of about twenty or so films, varying in length from 1-4 minutes, using not only cel animation but also puppet and paper animation (Kim 2015).

A few features stand out about these films. First, many of them follow the UPA (United Progressive Artists) style of animation. Particularly notable is 1963’s *I Am Water* (na-neun mul-i-ya), a black and white film that combines live action and abstract animation composed of simple geometric shapes representing leaves, raindrops turning into stick-figure children and engulfing each other, and an axe on legs autonomously chopping down trees. UPA was famous for its radically modern aesthetics and leftist politics (hence the name, although by this time UPA itself had become associated with advertising rather than the anti-capitalist critique that arose out of the 1941 Disney strike) but had no trouble serving the anti-communist, modernizing ideology of the Park regime, an aesthetic ambiguity that would remain in North and South Korea’s “enlightenment modality” in animation^{xxx}. Additionally, the UPA aesthetic was associated with American animation and American animation such as Disney’s *Peter Pan* (1953 but released in

Korea in 1957 and so popular it was rereleased in 1965, 1970, and as late as 1993), the Fleischer Brothers' *Gulliver's Travels* (1939 but released in Korea in 1961), and the KBS TV broadcast of *Dennis the Menace* in 1964 were hugely influential on early Korean animation. Having access to animation technology and being the primary ideological and structural support of South Korea's new anti-communist ideology, the US and US military occupation forces brought with them the influence of American animation. *I Am Water* for example was shown on the American Forces Korean Network, a tv station famous, ironically, for a lack of censorship in comparison to Korean local broadcasts (Kim 2021, 38) and all these films were produced in close collaboration with the US Operating Mission to Korea (Kim 2015, 11). The first Japanese animated film to be shown in the post-colonial period, *Shonen Sarutobi Sasuke* (1959 but released in Korea in 1966), was the exception that proved the rule, as not only was its Japanese origin hidden from Korean audiences, but it was released in the English dubbed version as *Magic Boy* and subtitled into Korean (Giammarco 2005).

Secondly, they would start the careers of Korea's most famous animators including Shin Dong-hyun's *With My One Vote, A Country That's Good To Live In and Bright* (1960), Nelson Shin's *Let's Live Within Our Means* (1964), and multiple films by Park Yong-il who would go on to direct 1968's *The Monkey King* (also called *Princess Seonghwa of Shilla and The Monkey King*). Among Park's works for the Department of Public Affairs was *Ant and The Grasshopper* (1961) with Jeon Do-bin and Han Song-hak based on the Aesop's fable. A beautiful five-minute-long animation in full color, it told a moral tale rather than being political propaganda but still got government funding. Although the actual number of films was small, the industrial policy of working through the government for funding remained. For example, Shin Dong-hyun and Nelson Shin's cultural films combined private production and government contracts (Kim 2015,

12), the only way to get the capital and technology necessary. Even with US military support, producing animation was painstaking effort with little chance of financial reward. *Ant and The Grasshopper* was produced on a measly budget of 80,000 won (around 6,400,000 won today or 6,400 USD) with director Jeong Do-bin assisting whenever he could get off military service. There was a single “professional-quality camera” which was “not even authentic but a remodeled version” (Kim 2013, 35) and took two full days to shoot one minute of film (Ho 2002, 26). Most absurdly, in making the film, only 240 cells could be drawn, creating around 10 seconds of film. The cells were then washed off, dried, and the next 240 frames drawn, taking a process of 4 months, most of the work done at night as the equipment was unavailable during the day (26-27).

Hong Gil-dong and The Nation

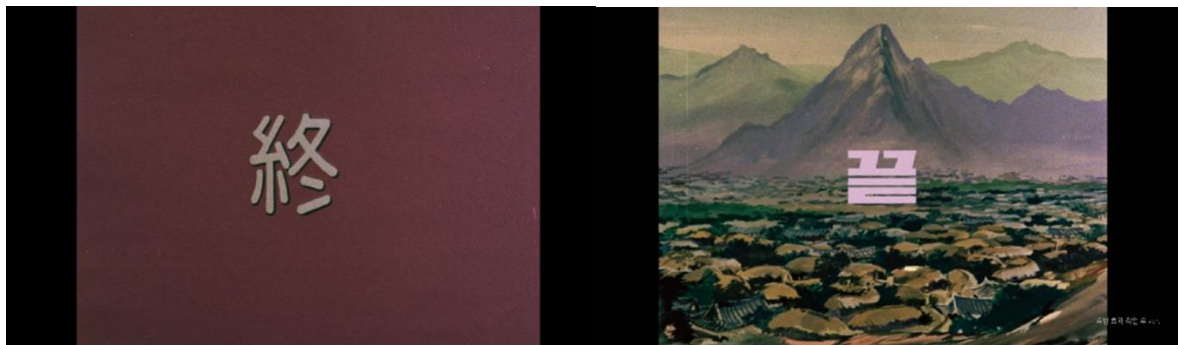
If the origins of Korean animation are multiple and indeterminate, the Park regime was determined to impose a singular developmentalist nationalism. Part of this process was “anti-corruption” targeted at, among other things the US backed cultural films of the previous period. This was as much designed to centralize ideological control with the Korean military dictatorship as to eliminate the dismal, petty-production of *Ant and The Grasshopper* and *Hong Gildong*. Shin Dong-hun’s scrappy vision had no place in this world. After exiting on the fringes of the industry in outsourcing, Shin quit animation in 1980, traveling as a landscape painter and writing books on classical music. *Hong Gildong* would be lost for decades.

With the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979, the redemption of Shin began. In the 1980s “post-trauma” in which Korean nationalism sought “the replacement of a father-figure and the implementation of a social structure alternative to capitalist relations” (Kim 2004, 17), Chun Doo-hwan would quickly implement a new military dictatorship. Though seemingly continuing

the ideological censorship of the previous period, with the new Children's Protection Policy of 1980 criticizing "science fiction animation as 'empty and meaningless illusion' for children" (Lent and Yu 2001a, 91-92), this was equally aimed at the ideological vision of Park Chung-hee. Chun sought to distance himself from Park and allowed "for the production and consumption of publications and television programs critical of the Park era" (Moon 2009, 2), with government funding for animation in relation to the opening of the Korean Baseball League (1983), the Asian Games (1986) and Olympics (1988) as well as television animation for the tourists coming for these events (Lent and Yu 2001a, 92)^{xxxii}. More fundamentally, while the father figure and the capitalist system remained, animation's global connections were increasingly attractive to a liberalizing Korean economic system, a tendency that would continue beyond the Chun dictatorship.

Shin Dong-hun returned to South Korea in 1983. He was made honorary chairman of Dai Won Animation Company, headed by a former assistant, who would reward him with the chance to produce a daily children's animation series independently. This would lead to Shin eventually directing an episode of children's cartoon *Dooly the Little Dinosaur* (1987-1988). Though even it faced initial criticism from the government, on rebroadcast in the 1990s it became hugely popular and beloved, situating Shin Dong-hun again at the center of Korean animation. Shin Dong-woo passed away in 1994 and a reboot of the classic film, *Returned Hero Hong Gil-Dong* was slated to be released in 1995 with Shin Dong-hun as director, subsidized by a newly democratic government that wanted to establish a Korean animation suited to the new emphasis on cultural exports as a part of globalization.

Shin was awarded an Achievement Award at the Seoul International Cartoon Animation Festival (SICAF) in 2001, and in 2008, *The Story of Hong Gildong* (1967), which had been lost, was discovered in 2008 when two prints were discovered in Osaka, Japan. In a final bow on the story, both surviving prints were dubbed in Japanese and had Japanese credit sequences. The original soundtrack had survived in the Korean government film archive and so the film was redubbed back into Korean, with the Korean government painstakingly restoring the film frame-by-frame and removing all Japanese elements [Fig. 5]. A 4k digital remaster was released in June of 2022 which referred to *Hobiwa and Chadolbawi* (1968) as the authentic sequel, legitimizing Shin’s creative vision over Seki production’s greed as the final triumph of Korea’s democratic impulse over Japanese neocolonialism and the military dictatorship it enabled. All of Shin’s “han” suffering was finally given due credit by a nation that had itself suffered historical injustice.



[Figure 5 – The Japanese Credits and the Restored Korean Credits in *Hong Gildong*]

The problems with this narrative are well known. Shigeyasu Yamauchi, a Japanese director in charge of storyboards for *Returned Hero Hong Gil-Dong*, was the true director, and Shin Dong-hun had basically no involvement and disavowed the film. The Korean government could purge Japaneseness from the film itself, but it could not do the same for the industry which

remained dependent on Japanese animation and global outsourcing. This is a theme we will return to throughout this dissertation. But more interestingly, *Hong Gildong* as a film is poorly suited to the task. The nationalism surrounding the discovery of the film was a sequel to the rediscovery of *Robot Taekwon V* in 2003 in a warehouse of the Korean Film Council. Its release in 2005 and wide release in 2007 was accompanied by explicit reference to the film's Park-era anti-communist and techno-nationalist politics, now used for democratic Korea. A giant statue of Robot Taekwon V was built next to the National Assembly, which also bestowed it the General Public Culture and Media Grand Prize in 2005 and it became the United Nations Refugee Agency's Goodwill Ambassador in South Korea (Magnan-Park 2011, 111). An advertisement even appeared on South Korean television in 2005, "Robot Taekwon V, the Dokdo Island Guard," in which invading Japanese pirates are beaten back from invading Dokdo island, a region of territorial dispute between Korea and Japan, by the robot's taekwondo moves (112). *Hong Gildong* came out too early and was discovered too late to serve this function. As we shall now see, at an aesthetic level, *Hong Gildong* contains traces of all the ambiguities and contradictions of the origins of Korean animation.

Hong Gildong's Aesthetic Contradictions

The story of Hong Gil-dong is one of the most influential premodern prose stories in both Koreas and arguably the most political. Sometimes called the "Robin Hood" of Korea, the name "Hong Gil-dong" is used as a placeholder name like "John Doe" for Americans, implying its universality for the Korean people. Koreans learn two things about the story in school: that it was the first work written in Hangul, the Korean alphabet, and that it was written by dissident Joseon intellectual Heo Gyun.

The first claim ties the story to Korean nationalism. *Hangul*, created by Joseon Korea's greatest monarch King Sejong the Great (1397 – 1450), represents the peak of Korean premodern accomplishment for Korean nationalism. The script was invented so that common people could read and Koreans could have a script better suited to their own language but, at least according to the nationalist story, was rejected by the decadent bureaucracy who were afraid of what mass literacy and independence from China would mean for their own class position. The script only came into common use after the collapse of the dynasty, nearly 500 years later, through the efforts of nationalist activists and theorists of Korean modernization, considered founders of the nation on both sides of the DMZ.

The second claim ties the story to social revolution. If Sejong was the peak of Joseon prosperity, Heo Gyun lived during its nadir. Born in 1569, the Joseon dynasty was riven by factions and the monarch weakened, making Korea totally unprepared for the Japanese invasion of 1592 (Imjin War). The other icon of Korean nationalism, admiral Yi Sun-sin, became the icon of the era by defeating the Japanese despite being outnumbered and being repeatedly persecuted by his own government out of jealousy and factional squabbles. Heo Gyun's persecution stands for Yi Sun-sin's and both stand for the decadence of the post-Imjin ruling aristocracy against the nationalist spirit of the popular masses. As Minsoo Kang points out, the popular interpretation of the novel as "radical social criticism" (Kang 2018, 30) comes from Kim Taejun's 1933 study of Korean literary fiction, which is explicitly nationalist in purpose and established Hong Gildong as representing the thoughts and feelings of the common people of Joseon according to a social realist concept of the novel (28-30).

Though there are many different versions, the basic story is of Hong Gildong, the child of the aristocratic Hong family on his father's side. After Hong's father has an auspicious dream and is rejected by his wife, Hong is born of a low-born maid. Hong's father makes her a concubine, and Chorang, another of his concubines, tries to have the young Hong isolated and eventually killed out of jealousy. The real source of conflict, however, is that Hong as the second-born son of a concubine has no chance to socially advance and is not even allowed to call his father "father." Fleeing his home after an attempt on his life by Chorang he uses his extraordinary strength, intelligence, and magical powers to join and then lead a gang of common outlaws, which he names the "Hwalbindang," or league who help those who are impoverished. He declares that only the wealth of corrupt aristocrats will be taken by the bandits rather than the common people.

Despite Hong's outlaw life, he believes in the inherent goodness of Joseon society. He does not kill Chorang, despite her attempt on his life, because she is his father's favorite concubine. The king, putting a bounty on his capture, eventually discovers Hong's parentage and threatens his father and scholar official half-brother if they do not bring Hong in. Hong thus surrenders to his half-brother but escapes again with magic. The king, stumped, is given an offer by Hong to leave Joseon if he is pardoned and made into a minister of military affairs. Hong is ambushed by jealous officials on his appointment and tells the king that he only wanted to serve Joseon but was unable to and, though driven to commit criminal acts as a result, tried to act righteously by only punishing the corrupt. Rewarded with his father finally allowing him to call him "father," Hong flies off, the king wondering what such an extraordinary person could have achieved for the country if not for his parentage.

In the final part, Hong goes on various magical adventures and chooses an island to settle his gang thanks to a gift of rice from the king of Joseon. Hong returns to Joseon once more after a vision of his father's death, too late to see him alive but allowed to choose the grave site by his half-brother, for which he chooses his island. He establishes a family dynasty and invades the neighboring island and establishes his kingdom there, sending an envoy of thanks to the king of Joseon for his help throughout the story and eventually buries his mother and stepmother on his island. The story ends with Hong Gildong abdicating the throne, moving to a mountain to practice the ways of the immortal spirits, and ascending with his wife to the realm of higher being.

Though Yi Myeongseon's initial claim that it had been the first work written in hangul in a probable misinterpretation (Kang 2018, 30) and even the authorship is "at best, questionable" (31), this story was too irresistible and became established widely as fact. On a common foundation of nationalism, both the military dictatorship and the democratic opposition to that dictatorship found use in the story of Hong Gildong and the larger story of Joseon-era decadence. For the left, it was a story of a people's revolution against an unjust class system and a tale of the establishment of a utopian society on Hong's island. For the right, it is a story of Hong Gildong working for the sake of the king, his father, and the true spirit of Korean culture they represent. The Korean right, particularly as formed under Park Chung-hee, cast its criticism of both the Syngman Rhee period and the brief democracy that followed in similarly historical terms. Yi Sun-sin became important to the Park regime, with Park styling himself as a martial hero saving the nation from decadence and corruption (Moon 2009).

Different portrayals of the story across history, as well as which version of the story is used, have emphasized different aspects in North and South Korea, before, during and after the colonial era, and across mediums. Shin Dong-woo's manhwa-version of *Hong Gildong* takes a middle path between a radical and conservative interpretation (Kang 2018, 132). Though it portrays the Hwalbindang redistributing wealth, Hong Gildong is still concerned about the propriety of his actions, largely through the actions of his sidekick Chadolbawi, whose excesses Hong Gildong moderates and chastises.

Hong's sidekick is entirely an invention of Shin Dong-woo's comics that Shin Dong-hun's animated film simplifies. The film, with a script by Shin Dong-woo, mostly follows the first part of the story when Hong Gildong is kicked out of his parents' house through the evil concubine's conspiracy. After that, Hong goes on various adventures, saving from an evil magistrate a woman's father and implicitly becoming her love interest, rescuing a tiger cub whose mother saves him later, encountering bats and dancing skeletons in a cave which turn out to be leaves, training with a mountain sage and learning to fly a cloud, becomes the leader of the peasant army, and finally confronts the minister of defense, who frames Hong Gil-dong's parents and has them scheduled for execution in order to lure Hong into a trap. In the finale, Hong and the minister fight on clouds and Hong defeats him and reunites with his family, who ask for his forgiveness in the way they treated him. Hong dismisses this, saying he acted as he did because he is his father's son, and they reunite as a family.

The largest change in the works of the Shin brothers is the invention of various side characters, minor adventures, a clear villain, and a love interest, all of which completely diverge from the first part of the original story when Hong Gildong leaves home. These elements are the

result of the medium: the seriality of comics and the potential for sequels to the animated film as well as the supposed desires of the audience of children. As the defeat of the minister and family reunion replace the confrontation with the king, he does not appear and the only time the nation is mentioned is at the beginning of the film, when Hong's father is warned that he must abandon his son for his legitimate family and his nation, something he only does begrudgingly and is revealed to have been a trick by the jealous concubine Chorang.

The film's replacement of both the Confucian reformism of its earliest version and the radical social criticism of the early modern period with the Korean people under the care of a paternal figure and martial sacrifice as its institution of stability conforms to its contemporary condition of production under Park Chung-hee. The film ends with a martial song and Hong's military followers looking directly at the camera with pride and discipline [Fig. 6].



[Figure 6 – The Hwalbindang end the film as loyal soldiers]

Aesthetically, however, the film is far more indeterminate. Unlike the simple backgrounds of the comic, the animated film has beautiful watercolor paintings as backgrounds. Designed to look like traditional Korean ink paintings, in many scenes they loom over the characters and look more like a Jeong Seon painting with tiny fishermen and farmers than a modern film with a protagonist at the center [Fig. 7]. The film also experiments with an expressionist but distinctly Korean style such as in the opening background [Fig. 8]



Figure 7 – The background overwhelms Hong Gildong climbing a mountain



[Figure 8 – Korean impressionistic ink painting as the village background]

In the foreground, characters often appear as cutouts, moving without reference to physics or backgrounds. Budgetary limitations meant that fight scenes consist of repeated cels using minimal frames and crude movements. A scene in which Hong Gil-dong fights off a line of enemies portrays them waiting in line, being flung into the air one after the other by Hong's sword [Fig. 9].



[Figure 9 – Characters go flying like cutouts when struck by Hong Gildong]

In the final fight on top of clouds, characters appear as cutouts, moving in relation to each other without reference to any spatiality or clear physics, an animatic freedom Thomas Lamarre (2009, 38) points to in Hayao Miyazaki's *Castle In the Sky* (*Tenkū no Shiro Rapyuta* – 1986). But unlike the simple backgrounds of Japanese limited animation, such as the repetitive lines or plain backgrounds that Marc Steinberg references in theorizing *Astro Boy* (Tetsuwan Atomu -1963)'s “graphically immobile dynamism” (Steinberg 2012, 75-76), *Hong Gildong* reuses the rich ink-painting style backgrounds. With the emphasis on the action and emotions of the characters, this often creates a size contrast between foreground and background and distorts the size of both [fig. 10].



[Figure 10 – Hong dramatically flying towards the screen with distorted proportions]

Not only does this contrast between background and foreground emphasize physical action and embodied emotion over spatial reality or fluid motion, it combines together different styles of animation in a single frame. In one scene, Chadolbawi runs away from horsemen, floating in the air and kicking up dust in a style reminiscent of Looney Tunes. He chops down a tree, hitting both a horse and rider chasing him, who are crushed with cartoon violence and exaggerated, cartoonish faces. But unlike the simple, geometric backgrounds of a Road Runner cartoon, heavily influenced by the UPA style that was carried over by animators like Chuck Jones, Paul Julian, and Tex Avery, *Hong Gildong* retains its traditional, painted backgrounds [fig. 11].



[Figure 11 – Looney Tunes physical comedy with lush Korean backgrounds]

This contrast is not just within frames but in the style of the film itself. One of the most notable scenes is a side adventure when Hong and Chadolbawi get lost in a cave overnight. They see skeletons who get up and start dancing to traditional Korean drums [fig. 12]. The skeletons yelp and their heads fly off. When they reattach, the skeletons start jiving to psychedelic rock music (a rendition of Korean folk song “Arirang”), not only contemporary at the time of the film but politically dangerous, as rock artists soon became targets of the Park regime. For example, Shin Jung-hyeon, the most famous rock artist of the era, released his debut album a year after Hong Gildong’s release. Asked by the president to write a song in praise of the regime in 1972, Shin refused and instead wrote a song in praising the natural beauty of Korea, for which he became a target of political persecution. Eventually, many rock artists including Shin were

arrested with marijuana use as the pretext, although police had previously cut his long hair forcefully and seized his guitars (Kim and Shin 2010).



[Figure 12 – Dancing skeletons in a pre-Hays code American animation style]

The scene is reminiscent of the Fleischer cartoons of the early 1930s, such as the famous “Betty Boop” cartoon *Minnie the Moocher* (1932) and “Bimbo” cartoon *Swing You Sinners!* (1930), themselves soon censored by the Hays Code for their sexuality, race-infused jazz and swing, and dark, critical themes. Most notably, it recreates Disney’s 1929 “Silly Symphony” *The Skeleton Dance*, one of Disney’s most successful animations prior to the naturalism of *Snow White* (1937) and the marketability of Mickey Mouse. Disney’s “Silly Symphonies” were avant-garde at their time, unifying music and moving image at a time when that was still a new technological possibility. Through animation, they unified sound and moving image as “precursors of a new art-music form,” bringing into being the “great primitive” or “great child”

that fascinated Sergei Eisenstein and which for Walter Benjamin “reinvent the equilibrium between humanity and the apparatus” (Leslie 2002, 104-105). Unlike cinema which increasingly “brought about vulgarization and enchantment through sound” according to German-Austrian composer Hans Eisler and Theodore Adorno (1940), early animation used sound to illustrate a utopian world of technologized nature in which humanity, nature, and machines all coexist and intermingle with a “curious tempo” and “rhythm” (86).

This brief scene is the closest *Hong Gildong* comes to an American avant-garde aesthetic and a transnational postcolonialism in the image of black American jazz and swing dancing, a potential historical path for Korean animation that did not follow the path of nationalism and cinematic realism based on Disney’s *Snow White* (1937) and its huge influence in both wartime Japan and the Soviet Union^{xxxii}. But even the avant-garde had no room for Korean animation. Commenting on *the Silly Symphonies*, Sergei Eisenstein was “disturbed” by “their stylistic rupture between the foreground, with its brilliantly moving figures, and the background, childishly and weakly drawn.” Especially in *The Skeleton Dance*, “the background is naturalistically shaded, dead, and ‘extremely ugly’” (248). Eisenstein may have envisioned film as a “collective effort” but at an aesthetic level, critique came from “unity of parts and style” (225). *Hong Gildong* does the opposite: it emphasizes its backgrounds and turns its characters into tiny figures lost in a painting or massive cutouts that move without physical logic and warp the perspective.

Korean cultural elements sometimes come to the foreground. An early scene portrays a traditional Korean court dance [fig. 13] is reminiscent of the Wan Brothers’ famous Chinese animation *Havoc in Heaven* (1964) or the beautiful ink painting animated short *Feeling from*

Mountain and Water (1988) an effort of post-cultural revolution Chinese animation to try to find a Chinese animation style based on Chinese “culture” rather than global socialism.



[Figure 13 – Korean dancers with abstract figures in the background]

The film never comes together in a single style, at various times traditional, contemporary, Disney, Looney Tunes, Japanese, American, Korean. Comedy, melodrama, realism, horror, action in a feature-length story and short side-adventures all coexist in a way that is no longer comprehensible for contemporary viewing audiences. Realism, squash and stretch, limited animation, lush backgrounds, all come together in the same film and even the same frame. With the ambition to make a Korean Toei as the “Disney of the East” in the full-animation of films like *The White Snake Enchantress* (Hakujaden - 1959), “the first Japanese cartoon to successfully imitate the characteristics of a Disney movie in terms of length, look, sound and style” (Clements 2013, 99), but fettered by the technical and monetary limitations of

Osamu Tezuka's UPA-influenced *Tales from a Certain Street Corner* (Aru Machikado no Monogatari – 1962) and the limited animation revolution of *Astro Boy* (Tetsuwan Atomu – 1963), *Hong Gildong* produces something new: a Korean animation that foregrounds its limitations, with all the strangeness and contradiction that results.

Conclusion

There are two existential questions I have so far avoided in discussing the origins of Korean animation. If North Korea pretends that South Korean culture and by extension Korean culture does not exist, there is an equally fundamental void in South Korea's concept of the North. Most South Korean studies of Korean animation either skip over the opening of the April 26 Children's Film Studio in 1957 and the release of *Amazing Peach* and *Golden Axe and Iron Axe*, both in 1960 (Jeon 2014, 42) or substitute "Korea" for "South Korea" both to avoid the complicated question of "pop" culture in the North (Kim 2014, 8) and to establish early that South Korea is representative of the whole Korean people and nation for the sake of a coherent thesis. Part of the problem is that animation is not a singular aesthetic but a variety of practices which are united by a much broader concept of movement. North Korea does not have a singular work like Kim Jong-il's *On the Art of the Cinema* (2001) and in fact has a very different history of socialist animation, with a much stronger early emphasis on puppet animation learned through Czech influence (Moon and Hong 2016; Moon and Hong 2010). Though South Korea also had important puppet works that do not fit neatly into national history such as 1967's *Hungboo and Nolboo* which came out the same year as *Hong Gildong*, these did not generate a nationalist narrative. North Korea's state animation studio would be renamed the Puppet Animation Film

Research Institute from 1957-1959, showing the emphasis on puppetry that was lacking in the South and was minimized in the self-history of both states^{xxxiii}.

On the other hand, late inclusions that contribute to nationalist history stretch the concept of Korean beyond repair, such as Kim In Tae's *Hangul* (1967), produced by Canada's National Film Board with famous animator Norman McLaren (who had earlier done 1952's *Neighbors* in the context of the Korean War), meant to teach the Korean alphabet to global audiences (Kim 2006, 71). Though it is rarely considered in Korean nationalist historiography, such global products are increasingly considered Korean as the economics of diasporic human capital and FDI incentivize South Korea to emphasize the "Koreanness" of films like Erick Oh's Oscar Nominated short film *Opera* (2020) and the work of Jin Kim for Walt Disney Animation Studio (1995-). Nevertheless, these diasporic connections were essential to Korean animation's post-dictatorship national development, as "Korean" animators serve as nodes in global animation production and the connecting strands of the success of Hallyu within "Asian-American" culture and global Asianness in relation to global Americanness.

As Fredric Jameson implies, nationalist historiography therefore makes for an easy target as global capitalism disassembles many of its functions. Dong Hoon Kim presents a possible solution to solve the "problem" of Korean colonial cinema. Rethinking it as "Joseon cinema" a "geo-cultural notion, denoting a locally specific film culture within the imperial territory" (2017, 6) that encompasses all aspects of film production, consumption, and distribution as well as the different populations within the region that traversed the territory of Korea. Beyond this restatement of the colonial modernity thesis, Joseon cinema goes further: filmmakers "engaged in constant mediation between their attempts to develop cinematic aesthetics that reflected

something uniquely Korean and to factor in Joseon's colonial identity." As I have argued, Korean animation exists in the gaps and ruptures of globalized capitalist production. It is often impossible to speak of it at all without indulging in a naïve fetishism of the production process, as if stopping the motion of the film will uncover the Korean hands that went into it. This chapter has read *Hong Gildong* as resisting nationalist historiography and being open to a multiplicity of readings and historical possibilities. But even with all the problems of "Korean animation" as a concept, it was still an "attempt" at a Korean animation to use Dong Hoon Kim's term.

Hong Gildong is a historical anachronism, only viewable far after its conditions of production became unimaginable with advances in animation technology and Korean economic development. But the film was an anachronism in its own time, unsure not only of its own style but the development path of Korea. It still contained the last elements of the American period of economic development under military rule and formal democracy, as well as traces of a Korean economic development independent of foreign sponsors and domination. The washed American military animation cels; the copied animation stand and camera; the vestiges of Disney and Looney Tunes would be some of the last traces of the American cultural boom that emanated from military camptowns and global American culture before Park's strict crackdown on cultural imports and anything that could be seen as subversive, which was quite a lot during the global 60s. But it is not American either, as it is radically distinct from the American comic book animations that would follow like *Black Star and Golden Bat* (1979) and *Fly, Wonder Princess* (1978), based on Batman and Wonder Woman respectively as well as the rotoscoping of early Fleischer and Disney cartoons.

The aesthetic that characterizes the film as a whole is the contrast between Korean background and transnational foreground, in the sense that its character animation borrowing from all the origins of Korean animation and speaks through the global technologies of animation production. It simulates a movement into depth, not through the Disney method of naturalism, but the depth of history itself, where mountains are not meant to be understood through the perspective of geometric realism but the weight of prehistory itself, as in the looming mountains of the *Painting of the Sun, Moon and the Five Peaks* [Irworobongdo], the landscape painting that was always behind the royal throne during the Joseon dynasty.

Hong Gildong is something like *Spring Dawn at Mt. Baegak* in motion, with looming mountains determining the limits of Korean modernity in animation. Does that mean it too is a hauntological image of the past, a Korean animation flung far into the future, now uploaded in full by the Korean Film Archive on YouTube in High Definition with English subtitles as a mere curiosity? Or is it, as an image in motion, a virtuality not realized but still immanent to the present? *Hong Gildong* as a story has at least resonated through the ages. Analyzing An Gyeong's famous "Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land" [*Mongyudowondo*] (1447), in which mountains looming in the right background of the scroll represent the land of the immortals as "a symbol of utopia in the Joseon Dynasty," Hyeonju Seo points out that unlike the painting which "represents the dream of the ruling class, the social utopia the Tale of Hong Gildong...speaks for the oppressed class (Son 2013, 4). Unlike these paintings which cannot escape the weight of the past, Hong Gildong gains freedom through flying on a cloud and, as in figure 6, briefly overwhelms the screen and the background mountains before the martial politics of the period take over and the film ends. *Hong Gildong's* relationship to history and itself is still

undecided. It speaks to a struggle, rooted in the origins of Korean animation and Koreanness itself, that will recur again and again.

^{xxi} These formulas come from Marx's *Capital* Vol. 1, where C= commodity, M = money, and C' = a new commodity after the process of production. The shift to money begetting more money indicates the rise of capital as an autonomous force and the "general formula" of fully realized capitalist reproduction (Marx 1976). But Deleuze's point is closer to a theory of post-Fordism or financialization, where money for the sake of money has come to dominate manufacturing in the post-war period.

^{xxii} For Ernest Mandel (1999), "late capitalism" begins with the long wave of 1948-1966 and begins to decline thereafter, beginning earlier in the U.S. (1940) and already showing signs of collapse by the early 1960s in Europe. While it is difficult to parse the exact dates of Deleuze's historical epochs or why he chooses them, Deleuze also chooses the post-war period as the epoch of the time-image. The specific references to the shift to M-C-M' are to Wim Wender's *The State of Things* (1982), Bresson's *Money* (1983), and Godard's *Passion* (1982), all films reacting to the rise of neoliberalism in Western Europe. He calls this the "crystal image," the pure form of the time-image's self-reflexivity.

^{xxiii} Deleuze is probably also influenced by Lenin's theorization of a "competitive" stage of capitalism that preceded the "financial" monopoly stage. This dissertation tries to make this theory coherently respond to postcolonial critique in chapter four.

^{xxiv} Cinematic modernism's hostility to animation is not limited to Deleuze or even the West. Hayao Miyazaki famously distances himself from the term "anime" and calls his work "films" [eiga] (Gan 2009, 36), a reaction to among other things a relation between Japanese animation and Korean and Chinese labor analyzed in chapter three.

^{xxv} I discuss this more deeply in Chapter five.

^{xxvi} That Korea's "first" animation was as late as 1967 shows its failure to stand in for the nation and serve it as a national industry as the rest of the chapter discusses

^{xxvii} The subject of the Chapter three

^{xxviii} Discussed in chapter six.

^{xxix} And eventual apologia for the regime during the democratic period (Yecies and Shim 2015, 59)

^{xxx} It would also become popular in the Soviet Union after "destalinization" of animation as discussed in chapter six

^{xxxi} As detailed in chapter five.

^{xxxii} Both of these claims will be covered in depth in other chapters

^{xxxiii} Chapter six discuss the equally problematic origins of North Korean animation

Chapter Three:

The Limits of Japanese Developmentalism

The most recognizable Korean feature length animation in South Korea is the 1976 film *Robot Taewkon V*. The film, a state-backed, unapologetic appropriation of the Japanese animation *Mazinger Z* (1972-1974), turned the Japanese giant robot into a fighter for the developmental vision of Park Chung-hee's military dictatorship. Wearing the helm of the famous admiral Yi Sun-sin and doing the Korean martial art of taekwondo, *Robot Taekwon V* comes from a time when Japanese culture was banned in South Korea and South Korean nationalism was still in the process of formation. That nationalism was rooted in a time of modernist technological utopianism, when South Korea experienced rapid economic development and moving up the value chain of industrial complexity, the famous "miracle of the Han" river which turned South Korea from a country with a per-capita income equivalent to Ghana in 1957 (Kim 2015, 1334) to surpassing Japan in real GDP per-capita in 2018 (Katz 2022). Accompanying this recent economic landmark is the explosive global spread of Korean popular culture, rivaling and often surpassing the success of Japanese popular culture and a seeming triumph of Korean economic and cultural development against its former colonial master.

But belying this success is animation, where Japan remains globally predominant and *Robot Taekwon V*, rather than starting a successful Korean animation industry, was the high point of an industry that is basically unknown even in South Korea outside of a few shows for children. Even *Robot Taekwon V* is mostly remembered for the political events surrounding its discovery and restoration rather than a beloved film.

Robot Taekwon V did not fail to produce an industry in its wake for lack of trying: it had six sequels *Robot Taekwon V: Space Mission* (1976), *Robot Taekwon V: Underwater Rangers* (1977), *Robot Taekwon V vs. Golden Wings Showdown* (1978), *Super Taekwon V* (1981), *84 Taekwon V* (1984), and *Robot Taekwon V 90* (1990), further “Taekwondo-based action” animation like 1977’s *Taekwon Dongja Maruchi Arachi* (Kim 2013, 43) and giant robot sci-fi films like *Golden Wing 1.2.3.* [hwang-geum-nal-gae - 1978], *Robot King* [lo-bo-teu king – 1981], and *Super Metal Robot Solar 123* [cho hab-geum lo-bo-teu ssol-la 1, 2, 3 - 1982]. All of these followed *Robot Taekwon V*’s production formula of taking a Japanese animation and Koreanizing it without attribution.

Despite all these efforts, by the 1980s outsourcing had become dominant in the Korean animation industry, extending through the 1990s to the infamous crash of the early 2000s. This is commonly attributed to the failure of the state’s “contradictory approach to animation,” combining a “suppressive cultural policy” with an exception to the ban on Japanese cultural imports for animation (Lee 2011, 213-214) creating the worst of both worlds. While significant, this chapter will argue for a more fundamental cause: structural changes in the world economy itself that made the success of *Robot Taekwon V* impossible to replicate. If *Robot Taekwon V* represents the peak of industrial convergence with the Japanese developmental state, *Fly! Spaceship Geobuksan* (1979), an unofficial sequel to *Robot Taekwon V* that appropriates the Japanese anime *Space Battleship Yamato* (1974-1975), represents a critical moment of divergence, in which the Japanese economy shifted to a “post-industrial, late capitalist, consumer society” (Stevens 2010, 199-200) which Korea could not follow.

The Japanese Era of Industrial Development

Colonial occupation engendered a hostile relationship between the two Koreas and Japan. However, South Korea depended on the United States military for its existence as a nation-state and the ideology of anti-communism. With Japan in ruins as well compared to the unprecedented economic might of the U.S., it was therefore not immediately obvious that South Korea would come to rely on Japan for its industrial development. The Syngman Rhee regime had emerged from the Korean war reliant on U.S. aid to support a system of import-substitution. But this had only created a system of cronyism and corruption. Favored businesses were granted import licenses in an otherwise protected market to buy goods at the official market-exchange rate; these businesses could then resell those goods domestically for a great profit; that profit was invested into state coffers for political favors; the cycle repeated. All the instruments of economic policy – “allocation of foreign exchange, bank credit, import licenses, and the distribution of state-owned enterprises” – were used to sustain political support for the regime (Haggard, Kim and Moon 1991, 853). At one point in the late 1950s, US aid financed nearly 80% of imports (Noland 2012, 23), creating a vicious circle of political to economic dependency.

Initially, even high-tech sectors such as Korea’s semiconductor industry began with American investment, from the first investment by Komi, a small company that invested in transistor/diode production facilities in 1965, to the much larger Fairchild investment that followed a year later in 1966. The Fairchild investment was significant, not only in its size but the conditions it required: complete ownership of the facility and unfettered access to the Korean market for products manufactured in Korea. Despite the Korean government’s increasing nationalism in economic matters, it accepted, primarily to earn foreign exchange rather than its more typical goals of technology and skill transfer that came with the joint-ventures and

protectionist internal market policies that were characteristic of Park Chung-hee's developmental state (Mathews and Cho 2007, 112).

Fairchild's investment could not possibly generate technology transfer to Korea given its onerous conditions. Such agreements were necessary in the first place because the U.S. had suspended all aid to Korea in 1962 and the new Park regime had to look for more indirect sources of capital to fund the first 5-year plan (1961-1965) (Castley 1997, 85).

Despite the apocalyptic potential of the withdrawal of US aid for such a system, Park Chung-hee's new military regime was not all that different. Rhee had already begun experimenting with a bureaucratic Economic Development Council insulated from politics in 1958 who would go on to develop a Three-Year Plan for economic development. The democratic republic that followed would go further, developing a Five-year plan through the Ministry of Reconstruction and attempt to reform the bureaucracy, developing a ministry that would "combine planning powers with control over the budget and inflows of foreign capital" (Haggard, Kim and Moon 1991, 856), though the military coup would take over before such plans could be realized. Park Chung-hee would take all this and systematize it, but after an initial period of political radicalism in which the heads of the major conglomerates (chaebol) that had grown during the crony capitalism of the Rhee period were arrested for "illicit wealth accumulation," Park would come to a new agreement with capitalist interests. A system of political taxes, government favoritism, preferential loans and politically controlled import-substitution tied the conglomerates to the new government's developmental goals. The centralization of the bureaucracy, the increased power of the executive, the temporary reprieve from cronyism networks in transition from one regime to another created some potential for

economic growth, but all of these were minor variations on the import-substitution regime of the previous period and were common throughout the Third World. Instead, the key to development was the rise of exports, which gave the government the opportunity to incentivize productive rather than rent seeking investment through policy, a source of hard currency, and an alternative to the anemic internal market, all fatal flaws for other import-substitution regimes.

The US served as a market for exports, but this required commodities that could be exported in the first place, for which US aid was of little value. As Robert Castley points out, US aid “contributed towards the foundation for future economic development but did not provide the spark... [because] the US insisted on nonproject aid (to purchase consumer goods, etc.) rather than project aid (capital equipment) which the Koreans preferred” (Castley 1997, 10; 114). US aid and increasingly investment, in the model of Fairchild, was often counterproductive, exposing the “dangers of aid dependency” (115) as it had done for a decade under the Rhee regime, since Korean industry could not learn from or compete with advanced American technology if Korea only served as a source of cheap labor.

The foundation of Korean economic growth therefore lay outside of Korea. Even with the level of central planning that many other Third World military dictatorships lacked, the contrast between the Korean government's plans and actual outcome is very marked (174) and “despite the very generous concessions given to foreigners in the 1960 Act and their subsequent amendments (in 1961-62), very little foreign investment materialized” (133). In fact, “when Park first took control of the state, he and his “revolutionary council” had no interest in developing any export industries in South Korea, much less ones based on manufactured goods...after the details of the First FYP were completed, ‘members of the revolutionary council initially deleted

(the section on exports), for they saw little hope for growth” (Lim 1998, 473). Since Korean manufacturing was heavily dependent on imports of raw materials, without American aid there appeared to be no hope for developing export-oriented manufacturing even though it was American aid that had kept Korea in a state of dependency in the first place.

Korea’s initial developments in export-oriented manufacturing were unanticipated by the state: the first five year-plan targeted only \$10 million in total manufactured exports for the last year of the Plan (1966), a target surpassed alone by Korea’s wig industry at \$10.6 million (Lim 1998, 474), and the state continued to play “a reactive...facilitating role” in which it “demonstrated little genuine entrepreneurial capacity” (474). Instead, the key was the “1965 Normalization Treaty with Japan” in which “in the critical years of 1965-68, Japan was the main source of export credits” (Castley 1997, 124, 133). What Korea had that Suharto, Marcos, Kittikachorn, and various military juntas of both the left and the right throughout the Third World lacked was the possibility of following Japanese economic development on its path of industrial upgrading, a process that had already begun under the Japanese Empire (Cumings 1984). Whereas the US had avoided promoting industrial development in the Third World for fear of a “boomerang effect” of simulating competition, Japan promoted industrial growth in its former longstanding colonies in a way that created a complementary division of labor between Japan and Korea rather than competition, the famous “flying geese model” but in reverse with the export market developing before the domestic market (Castley 1997, 313).

Samsung serves as a good example of Korea’s dependence on Japan for economic development. Despite Samsung’s propagandistic origins as a small trading company for dried fish in 1938, its real success began after the Korean war when it was favored by the Rhee regime

in a variety of monopolistic industries granted by the government. It was a sugar importer and refiner, tire manufacturer, and textile mill, acquired either through Korean government “Special Foreign Currency Loans” and American “International Cooperation Administration” funds (Rhyu 2005 209; 225). Preferential access to ex-Japanese shares of major commercial banks, government loans, and a government ban on combed yarn products made Samsung the largest wool mill in Korea, all of which it paid back by providing “6.4 billion KW to political parties” (225-226).

But Samsung’s continued existence was tenuous in the wake of the Park coup, which seized 8 billion KW in illicit wealth from the company and threatened to arrest its CEO Lee Byung-chul on his return to the country from Japan. Even when the new system had settled, Lee faced smuggling charges in 1966 when “Samsung-owned Korea Fertilizer Co. was found to have illegally smuggled 55 tons of saccharine by disguising it as construction materials” (Sohn 2017). Lee avoided arrest and scrutiny for backdoor ties to the government by resigning, setting off a long history of Lee family-state corruption that threatened to turn Park into just another crony capitalist.

The cooperation of the Japanese rescued Samsung from being another Third World state monopoly of primary commodities. Lee, “often known as the 'Japanese Gentleman' because of his preference for things Japanese” modeled his chaebol on Japanese trading companies [sogo shosha] and formed joint ventures with large Japanese companies like IHI, NEC, Sanyo, Minolta, Mitsui, Toray, Toshiba for heavy industries including petro-chemicals and synthetic textiles (Castley 1997, 209), most notably Samsung electronics which was founded as a joint venture with Sanyo in 1969 (261) around the same time Fairchild and Motorola were using

Koreans as cheap, unskilled labor. As a result, Korean “exports of electronics parts (particularly integrated circuits), rose from \$5 million to \$34 million [from 1967-1969]...exports, which had accounted for less than 20 percent of total production in 1967, increased to 52 per cent by 1969” (256).

This system worked through Japan exporting low value-added, outdated technology to Korea that complemented Japanese industry in higher value-added production and exported high-value added finished products to the United States after their import back from Korea (266). After this initial stage, the United States began to attack Japanese exports on protectionist grounds and more finished products were exported from Korea to the U.S. that were not profitable to produce in Japan as well as to get around American trade restrictions. Japan and Korea thus developed a relation of complementary trade and mutual development as long as the U.S., as the export market for both, remained as the third point in this “triangular trade” system (65; 185-188).

As a result, in the 1970s electronics industry Korea exported mostly parts and components whereas Japan exported mostly finished products and “by 1974 Japan accounted for 84 per cent of the technology supplied to the Korean electronics industry” (267). By 1975, “the Japanese share of all joint ventures in...parts and components...was as high as 91 per cent” (260). Samsung developed off the back of Japanese technology, Japanese investment, Japanese readymade trade networks with the U.S., and Japanese production chains which fit Korea into a complementary, lower value role.

The government also built on the Japanese origins of the economy to stimulate Samsung’s development. In 1969 Korea passed the Electronics Industry Promotion Law, closely

modeled on the Japanese equivalent of 1957, and set up an electronics “free export zone” at the port city of Masan (Mathews and Cho 2007, 113), so close to Japan that it had once been used by the Yuan dynasty as a starting point for its attempted invasion of the country. This investment zone attracted three Japanese semiconductor firms - Toko, Sanyo and Sanken – to establish plants there by 1973 (113). The Korean electronics industry was grouped together under the Korea Electronics Industry Cooperative, modeled on Japan’s Electronic Industries Association founded in 1948, part of a larger industrial organization based on Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) which Chalmers Johnson’s foundational study saw as the central element of the Japanese development state (Johnson 1982). The government’s full commitment to heavy and chemical industries in 1973 was also modeled on a Japanese strategy of a decade earlier (Mathews and Cho 2007, 115) and was entirely reliant on Japanese investment. This was most infamously proven by the World Bank’s refusal to fund Pohang Steel Corporation as “a premature proposition without economic feasibility” (Amsden 1989, 291), only for Japan to step in and help turn it into one of the largest steel manufacturers in the world. Even Park Chung-hee’s Yushin constitution (1972-1979) used the same character as the Japanese Meiji restoration (Im 2013, 238) and built off Park’s experiences as a collaborator with the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (Moon and Jun 2013, 122), especially the military-backed Showa Steel Works that “rivalled or surpassed anything to be found in Japan itself” (Eckert 2016, 232).

Nevertheless, though the creation of POSCO seems to vindicate the judgement of Park against the World Bank, that the latter was asked in the first place despite the complete dependence of the Korean economy on Japan showed Korea was not as eager a partner of Japan as Castley’s “virtuous circle” (Castley 1997, 317) claims. In fact, in 1972, the same year as the

Yushin self-coup, Korean conglomerate Goldstar had attempted to launch a joint venture with American multinational National Semiconductor to produce transistors, only for the project to be abandoned because the technology gap was still too great (Mathews and Cho 2007, 116). In the early 1980s, the telecom sector was reorganized, and the major North American telecom companies (ITT, AT&T, Nortel) were made to enter joint ventures with Korean firms (117). Seemingly having caught up with Japanese heavy industry, Korea's turn to America was only possible because of the continued leverage of Japanese economy's ascendancy as a threat to American manufacturing. This turn would be far less successful and first Japan and then Korea experienced economic bubbles that burst in nationally traumatic crises. To understand why one model led to growth and the other to crisis, animation serves as a useful case study. Korean animation not only followed the Japanese model as an industry, it aesthetically represented Korean developmental goals, justifications, and ultimately limits.

Korean Animation in the 1970s

After the collapse of post-*Hong Gildong* (1967) Korean animation, the industry left behind the eclectic and multinational influences of Shin Dong-hun's scrappy production and started to retreat into the safety of copying Japanese animation. For example, the initial release of Yong Yu-su's *Lightning Atom* in 1971 followed the release of the Osamu Tezuka's *Tetsuwan Atomu* in 1970 for South Korean audiences. Though based on the Japanese animation, the Korean version's aesthetic is more influenced by American cartoons and Disney animation as reflected in the initial poster for the film (Choo 2014, 150). However, because of the immense popularity of *Tetsuwan Atomu* and the relative failure of the Korean version, Yong Yu-su's film was rereleased in 1975 as *Return of Lightning Atom* with the poster changed to look identical to

Tetsuwan Atomu and even the pronunciation of “Ah-t-ohm” changed to sound like the Japanese character (150).

Limited in his control over fundamental economic forces, by 1974 Park Chung-hee had implemented a near-total complete political dictatorship and intervened in the nation’s culture according to his whims. Though the rerelease of *Lightning Atom* brought it closer to Japanese animation, it also added elements of Korean nationalism, such as the addition of a close-up to a radio labeled “ROK” halfway through the film (150). This seeming contradiction echoed the ideology of South Korea itself. The normalization of relations with Japan in 1965, necessary for South Korean economic development, was done undemocratically, as the Park regime determined the amount of money owed for colonial occupation and channeled them into industrial development. Historical disputes were subsequently considered resolved and, without an official apology, led to Korean-Japanese relations being politically “frozen” since 1965 while economic relations grew into a “close partnership” (Lee 2013, 430) and accusations of Park’s “pro-Japanese tendencies (ch’inil)” to the present (432). Regardless of Park’s personal sympathies for Japan, Park’s switch from “panil (anti-Japan)” to “kukil (beat Japan)” (432) as a nationalist ideology merely shifted the framework for viewing Japan as an antagonist without eliminating its animating anti-colonial impulse.

The contradiction of the Park regime’s separation of Japanese economic development and nationalist, anti-Japanese politics was acutely expressed in animation, which is simultaneously an industry and a culture. *Tetsuwan Atomu* resolved it by hiding its Japanese origin. Not just a disguise of its Japanese production, more fundamentally the techno-nationalist ideology of the Park regime disguised the fact that it too was borrowed from Japan and followed in its wake as

closely as the steel industry. *Tetsuwan Atomu* inspired character “Rocket Boy” to advertise “battery products of Honam Electronic Corporation in the 1970s” (Koh 2013, 136). While elements of the original were lost, such as the Japanese anti-war and anti-nuclear message, whereas others were gained, such as the use of red and blue for heroes and villains within Korean political anti-communism, the overall techno-utopian nationalism followed “in the footsteps of Japan” (156, 161), where *Tetsuwan Atomu* had served a similar function in rapidly industrializing 1960s Japan.

The “belatedness” of the release of *Tetsuwan Atomu* in Korea corresponded to the “period of intense modernization and industrialization” (159) and, by extension, the delayed cultural transfer corresponds to the delayed technology transfer from Japan to Korea. *Tetsuwan Atomu*, which had been shown initially on black-and-white TVs in Japan, could now be watched on black-and-white TVs in Korea. This technology was constructed through imported Japanese technology, investment, and expertise. But it also occurred as Japan upgraded to color televisions and relocating “more labor-intensive basic electronics to offshore sites” (Castley 1997, 264). In fact, despite the rapid growth of Korean color tv manufacturing for export, color television remained illegal domestically until 1980 (Lim 2016, 20; 88). In the same year, *New Mighty Atom* (1980) was being broadcast in Japan in full color, now widespread among Japanese households.

Along with this shift to color came a shift in ideology. Osamu Tezuka, allured into creating a remake of the original series for a new audience, wanted “more references to social problems such as racial and social discrimination, to ecological and technological issues, and to add depth to the show” (Shodt 2007, 160). Criticizing the original series as being misperceived as the story of “a ‘champion of justice,’ and become a “paean to a technological civilization,”

Tezuka blamed the production staff as well as the audience (160). He complained of “the warped expectations of [Japanese] viewers during an era of booming economic growth” for this technoutopian interpretation (160), although Tezuka was conducting an implicit self-criticism since the name “atom” derived from a time in which “Tezuka was influenced by this over-optimistic idea for the use of nuclear energy” and the theme of “peaceful uses of nuclear energy” as a theme in 1950s’ international relations (Takana 2010, 8) and to reflect this fact changed Atomu’s power source from a fission nuclear reactor to a more environmentally friendly fusion reactor (Shodt 2007, 131). Tezuka could have just as easily been complaining about the social context of *Return of Lightning Atom* and *Robot Taekwon V*, though in South Korea’s case cultural censorship was state policy rather than an implicit social norm.

Ultimately, Tezuka was unsatisfied with the result, considering the remake still too close to the original and the imagined, utopian version of the character from the television show rather than the manga. Despite critics at the time complaining of the remake as “heavy with overhanging doom” (Shodt 2007, 161), Tezuka complained that the production team had “created an Atom that was too much of a goody two-shoes” (162), and would go on to work on even more explicitly political works including *Astro Boy, Past and Present Stories* (1987) in which Atomu travels back in time to the Vietnam war to stop the American bombing campaign and save lives (Takana 2010, 12).

Despite the chronological nature of South Korea moving up the Japanese value chain and the teleological ideology that followed, it was also part of a contemporaneous capitalist world system. Korea was therefore not merely copying Japanese animation but commenting on it. Koreans it was Korean labor that created the Japanese color televisions they could not purchase

themselves, and Korean animators were working on Japanese animations that were still forbidden from being acknowledged as Japanese.

As Japan entered its bubble economy and techno-pessimism replaced the earlier utopianism in animated works such as Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984) and Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (1988), for the Korean hands who worked on them outsourcing was still a path to technical upgrading and industrial progress still a compelling ideology. Though these works became global icons of the new wave of "Japanimation," the coming revolution in Japanese animation was not yet clear^{xxxiv}. *Nausicaä*, the work that put studio Ghibli on the map as the preeminent producer of original Japanese animation, was outsourced to TopCraft, a studio which had done outsourcing work for the American studio Rankin/Bass on American productions of J.R.R Tolkien works (Greenall 2021). Both Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, the creative visionaries of Studio Ghibli, had worked at Toei animation in the 1960s at the same time it had "also worked on 'American' cartoon productions, often as uncredited or barely-credited subalterns" (Clements 2017, 105). There was no reason to think that Korea could not replicate this experience^{xxxv}.

To their work for Japanese animations, Koreans added an early version what Kyung Hyun Kim calls a "meme-etic" impulse of navigating "the dynamism and tension between industrialist forces and postindustrial identity" (Kim 2021, 199) An example of the Japanese animation *Gatchaman* (1979). The production of the show was subcontracted to Samjeong Productions and, finding success on Korean television, was copied as *Doksuri 5 hyeongjae* (1980) with the entire Korean staff of *Gatchaman*. Kukhee Choo argues that, motivated by nationalism, the Korean version had more care and attention to detail than the Japanese original

(Choo 2014, 156-157). Regardless of the Korean animators' motivations, Korean animators put a Korean twist on their copies of Japanese animations, both cultural and political. Choo calls this "hyperbolic nationalism," in which Korean animators played with "the fact that most Japanese robot anime were produced in Korea at the time" in order to undermine "the authenticity of these Japanese works" (153).

In a similar form of hyperbolic nationalism, *Robot Taekwon V* (1976) was very close to the Japanese *Mazinger Z* (1972-1974) but replaced the headgear of Mazinger Z with a helmet based on Admiral Yi Sun-sin and a Taekwondo fighting style. Despite retroactively standing for Korean nationalism and anti-colonialism, both Taekwondo and the martial image of Yi Sun-sin were "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm and Terence 1983) still in the process of being formed by president Park Chung-hee. In the image of the giant martial arts robot, Park was attempting to forge a South Korean nationalism based on a "technologized tae kwon do millennialism" in which techno-utopianism was fused with cultural nationalism and anti-communist military masculinity (Magnan-Park 2011, 111). Yi Sunsin, whose statue still greets visitors to Gwanghwamun (the main gate of the royal palace) in central Seoul, was selectively interpreted by the Park regime to stand for the new values of South Korean nationalism, with martial prowess replacing Confucian ethics and Yi cast as a victim of "effeminate literary tendencies" of the decadent Joseon aristocracy, an initially left-wing nationalist reevaluation appropriated by Park for his own martyr narrative (Park 2010, 10; 12-13). In a similar rewriting of history on the terms of martial masculinity, Taekwondo was named the national martial art by Park in 1971 against not only the various other martial arts competing with it but the ancient martial arts like Taekkyon it was based on (Magnan-Park 2011, 119-121; Lee 2020, 152).

Robot Taekwon V was therefore not just a reflection of the new cultural nationalism but part of its construction. The film was sponsored by the government after four years of essentially no output from the national animation industry (Kim 2013, 41) and still had difficulty finding funding. X-ray film was taken from hospitals, soaked in water, erased, and reused, and the oily surface caused water-based paint to slide off the dried cels and smudge on wet cels (Bae 2006). Nevertheless, the film was technically ambitious, using rotoscoping to film the taekwondo fighting scenes and innovating with merchandise, such as record sales of the hugely successful theme song, sequels, and tie-ins (Kim 2013, 42). The film was popular with audiences and profitable, creating a sci-fi animation boom that no longer had to scrap for cels and further films from its director Kim Cheon-gi, such as the first feature-length anti-communism animated film, *General Ttoli* (1978). The production of this film showed that animation had joined the other arts as a premier avenue for disseminating state ideology.

The film contributed to the “taekwondo boom” up to the present day, at least according to its director (Magnan-Park 2011, 121), and became a beloved icon of the era for children who, as adults in the neoliberal era, increasingly looked back on the economic growth and anti-communist political consensus of the Park era with nostalgia. But the film itself would not have as long a lifespan as the martial art it portrayed. Because of the weaknesses of the animation market, Director Kim fell into debt. Given the immense cost of reproducing the film, only a few copies were made, and it was lost for decades.

Fly! Spaceship Geobuksan

Noboru Ishiguro, the actual director of Osamu Tezuka’s *New Mighty Atom*, got the job because of his previous work as animation director for *Space Battleship Yamato* (1974-1975;

1977; 1979). *Yamato* would fundamentally change Japanese animation, leaving behind the techno-nationalism of the 1960s and give birth to what would become “anime.” As with *Lightning Atum* and *Robot Taekwon V*, Korea was entering a period of industrial-ideological correspondence just as Japan was leaving it.

Fly! Spaceship Geobuksan was released on July 26th, 1979 and by all appearances an even more nationalistic mimicry, this time of *Space Battleship Yamato*. The battleships of the Japanese show are replaced by turtle ships (geobuksan), famously used by Yi Sunsin to defeat the Japanese invasion, hence the film’s title [Fig. 14].



[Figure 14 – Geobuksan and Yamato]

A new Japanese animation produced a new Korean mimicry, now even more explicitly politicized. In a meta-commentary characteristic of the aforementioned “hyperbolic nationalism” of the era, the film begins with Robot Taekwon V being taken apart and the main characters objecting in melodramatic fashion. In the climactic battle, Yi Sunsin appears in space to inspire the main character to fight the enemy [fig. 15] and Robot Taekwon V reassembles itself and defeats the enemy with its familiar theme song playing in the background. A stereotypical communist evil general, who in this film happens to be a robot, is defeated afterwards, but the

climax is the now-familiar metaphor of Korea taking Japanese animation, adding elements of Korean history and politics, and using it to defeat Japan at its own game.



[Figure 15 – Yi Sunsin appears in space to inspire the fighters]

Robot Taekwon V has a similar nationalist message. In the wake of the 1974 assassination of Park’s wife by an ethnic Korean residing in Japan which “South Koreans held the Japanese government responsible” (Lee 2011, 454) and a combination of “Nixon’s unilaterally declared Guam Doctrine of 1969, political rapprochement with China in 1972, the U.S. House investigation into Pak Tong-sôn’s Korea lobby after 1974, and Carter’s policy to withdraw U.S. ground troops from South Korea in 1977” (Kim 2011, 17) and the fall of Saigon to communism in 1975, the film expressed the nadir of South Korea’s relations with both Japan and the United States under Park. The film portrays both the Japanese and American taekwondo fighters as evil and dishonest (Magnan-Park 2011, 122-124) and uses rotoscoping to give the fights realism and

action. But whereas *Robot Taekwon V* came at the peak of Park Chung-hee's developmental dictatorship, confident in its ability to overcome its neocolonial superiors, *Fly! Spaceship Geobuksan* came too late as a fundamental crisis was developing in the Korean industrial model that had, among other things, allowed the free use and appropriation of Japanese intellectual property while the United States turned a blind eye.

Robot Taekwon V introduces the robot being built in a factory [fig. 16], a science fiction portrayal of the steel industry that had been built only a few years prior from nothing. POSCO, or Pohang Steel Corporation, is a classic example of industrial transfer from Japan to Korea and their mutual rejection of the free market dogma of comparative advantage. As previously mentioned, the WTO refused to invest in the project. Pohang was a small harbor city, chosen for its closeness to Japan rather than historical suitability for steel production. Funded almost entirely by Japan and using Japanese technology and expertise, POSCO began production in 1973. By 1998, it had surpassed Nippon Steel to become the world's largest steel producer. And just as *Robot Taekwon V* would be subject to a plagiarism lawsuit in 2018 for copying Japanese intellectual property, so would POSCO, which was sued by Nippon Steel in 2012 for stealing technology. But while *Robot Taekwon V* won in a Korean court^{xxxvi}, POSCO settled the suit against it filed in the Tokyo District Court, paying a sum of 30 billion yen (Fujino and Yoshida 2018, 38).



[Figure 16 – Robot Taekwon V, the steel giant, under construction]

POSCO was willing to settle because Nippon Steel’s lawsuit came far too late for the Japanese industry. Nippon Steel came into existence in 1970 as a merger of two steel giants to form a monopolistic steel trust. By 1975 it had already surpassed U.S. Steel to become the world’s largest producer. But this rapid success was an illusion. In the same year, the company saw only “\$50 million profit on declining sales of \$7 billion, and by 1977 production was down to 32 million tons and nine of the company's 25 furnaces had been shut down” (Martin 2018). The oil shocks of 1973 and 1979 accelerated the decline of the Japanese steel industry and by the 1980s, employment and overall capacity dropped by almost half with losses reported in 1983 for the first time in decades. The company restructured in the 1980s and again in the 1990s after the bursting of the economic bubble, restoring profitability by moving away from the “smokestack” industry that had been taken over by Korea and diversifying into a variety of industries including

semiconductors and a theme park (Wiltshire 1991). But the real success for Japanese steel was repeating the Korean process in China, which rapidly grew to become the largest market for steel in the early 2000s and then the largest producer of steel by the late 2000s. Deng Xiaoping had visited a steelworks run by Nippon Steel in 1978 and Japan had in turn sent 320 of its staff to help construct Baoshan Iron and Steel, given guidance on design work and operational control, supplied principle plat and equipment, and extended credit of 300 billion yen (1.25 billion USD), saving the project (Hirata 1985). Given the size of the Chinese market and its technological backwardness, this promised a massive boon to Japanese steelmakers and the potential to outmaneuver the increasingly competitive Korean industry.

If Japan could no longer maintain its manufacturing industries, it could pit its former colonial subjects against each other in their attempts at industrialization. Funnily, the actual cause of Nippon Steel's lawsuit was POSCO suing one of its own employees for leaking steel technology to China, only to discover that the technology was originally from Nippon Steel. The Japanese company seized on POSCO's mistake, with the Koreans paying the fine quietly to maintain good relations with their "strategic partner" since 2000 (Fukao 2015). Korea, still reliant on industrial semi-dependency to Japan, found out that it had been outmaneuvered by both Japan and China, which went to Japan, copied Korea's path, and now dwarfs the steel production of both. In 2021, Nippon Steel sued Toyota for violating its patent in 2021 on "non-oriented electrical steel sheets," essential to EVs and named Toyota's partner Baoshan Iron & Steel Co. in the suit for supplying it (Kageyama 2021). On the one hand, this is evidence that China finds itself in the same position as Korea its own chronological delay, moving up the value chain and competing in higher value-added production. On the other hand, that Baosteel is not directly named unlike POSCO shows that China had made significantly less progress than Korea

in matching the larger developmental benefits of acquiring Japanese steel technology. At a fraction of Korea's GDP-per-capita and per-capita income, China's steel industry has already matured (Guoping, Ruohong and Wei 2022), facing low profits (Guoping and Jia 2024), overproduction (Kawase 2024), and the rise of Indian steel, which surpassed Japan in 2019 to become the second largest producer in the world (Behera 2019).

What remains of *Robot Taekwon V*, icon of Korea's steel industry? As chapter two discussed, the film's rediscovery and restoration came with an upsurge of nationalism including portraying the robot as the defender of Dokdo island. But it was also a chance for Korea to show off its 3D animation. The advertisement is computer animation and as Robot Taekwon V holds Dokdo in the palm of his hand, the camera rotates around him in a rendered digital 3D environment, a very different aesthetic from the hand-drawn 2D animation of the original. The ad itself is for e- Pyeonhansesang [e-comfortable life], a brand attached to apartment buildings made by DL E&C. Part of a 2000 rebranding of Daelim Industrial, a leading construction company of Park Chung-hee's drive to establish gas and petroleum industries in the middle east such as the 1974 REDEC-Daelim joint venture with Saudi Arabian businessman (and later fugitive) Ghaith Pharaon (Moon 1986, 623-624), the new name emphasized that branded apartments would prioritize high-speed internet connectivity, at the time not widespread in South Korea. *Robot Taekwon V*'s rediscovery represented the dream of a new, globalized Korean economy built on the foundation of the old industrial one. But its reliance on the old ideologies of nationalism, anti-communism, and anti-colonialism, showed it was no match for Japan's new, rapidly globalizing, "culturally odorless" product (Iwabuchi 2002): anime. Whereas the nationalism of "Robot Taekwon V: The Dokdo Island Guardian" was becoming increasingly

embarrassing even to Koreans (Kim 2013)^{xxxvii}, appreciating “Japanese-ness” became a grassroots effort of global anime fans themselves (Napier 2007).

Anime, a new form of affective commodity that spread globally from post-industrial Japan, fundamentally changing the nature of global capitalism in a way that Korean animation could not match. *Robot Taekwon V* could be a *Korean Mazinger Z* in the age of industrial nationalism but *Fly! Space Battleship Geobuksan* was left behind by *Space Battleship Yamato*.

Yamato and Japanese Divergence

Carolyn S. Stevens defines otaku consumer behavior as “a kind of specialized consumption, a hyper-consumption of a strongly branded product.” Faced with “consumer fatigue” and the sameness of infinite commodities and consumer choices, otakudom serves as “a powerful identity-constructing tool strategy to invigorate the self” and forge a “richly collective sociality...in the uniformity of the [postmodern] non-place” (2010, 208; 209; 210; 212). Already potentially having rescued the Japanese economy from “the mire during the 1990s recession” (200), the global potential of such specialized, affectively-charged consumption is obvious: if every commodity could inspire such powerful, collective, borderline “obsessive behavior” (211), not only could exchange-value be even further removed from use-value, vastly increasing the profits of post-industrial consumption, but this could extend across the globe as consumption becomes detached from space, especially in the age of the internet. If early otakudom was only held back in Japan and the United States by the prejudices of “creativity, attention to detail and pleasure in intimacy” misaligned towards cultural products “outside social norms (e.g. violence and sexual deviance) and/or general social phobias” (211), capitalism itself would do the work of

profaning all these once holy norms^{xxxviii}. *Yamato* would be at the center of this consumer revolution.

In 1982, Jim Kaposztas created the first anime music video (AMV) by hooking up two VCRs to each other and combining scenes from *Space Battleship Yamato* with The Beatles's *All You Need is Love* (Colbert 2023). In 1983, the first American animation convention was held: Yamatocon in Dallas, Texas. *Yamato* had been released in the United States as *Star Blazers*, which had been edited to remove Japanese culture and language, violence, and other elements that made it not "a good kid's property" as it had been marketed to American producers (Burns 1980). This was common for releases of Japanese animation in the United States in the 1980s, when the image of Japanese animation in the United States combined lingering racism around the simple animation and poor dubbing of *Speed Racer*, which had defined Japanese anime in the 1960s-1970s, and a still emerging techno-orientalist image of Japan as threatening to overtake American moral values through an amoral, alien, but more efficient capitalism (Morley and Robins 1995) as seen across media in the film *Blade Runner* (1982), the novel *Neuromancer* (1984), and the song *Mr. Roboto* (1983), all of which present Japanese culture as a "dehumanising 'robotic' society" (McLeod 2013, 261).

The emerging anime fandom, or otakudom, around *Yamato* rejected both pretensions. Mocking the attempts to make *Star Blazers* a children's show, Kaposztas edited together the most violent scenes of *Yamato*, creating a video which is almost entirely gunfire and explosions, and would cosplay as Captain Avatar from the show as an adult at conventions.

These new fans would equally reject the image of Japan as culturally incomprehensible and Japanese capitalism as robotic. For them, *Yamato* was exciting and creative. The poster for

the first American anime con advertised not only that *Star Blazers* was the “The English Version of Space Cruiser Yamato” but that “A ‘Space Cruiser Yamato’ movie...” would be shown in the “original Japanese!” Yamatocon advertised the first anime convention dealer’s room with, among other things to purchase, “original art,” an ambiguous way to say art based on intellectual property with no license [Fig. 17]



[Figure 17 – The first American anime convention proudly displays its Japaneseness]

Though American and Japanese media companies would fight this new concept of intellectual property at every step, Yamato was at the center of a fundamental shift in capitalism occurring in both countries, with fan practices like AMVs, anime conventions, and cosplay inverting the top-down model of media spectatorship and consumption.

Prior to the show, “TV manga” and “manga movie” were the common terms for Japanese animation even in Japan (Rusca 2016, 53), along with the association that they were for children. But *Yamato* exploded in popularity among adults, both in the form of sequels and as a “media mix” of associated goods (Otsuka 2016). Despite its initial failure among the intended children’s audience, or probably because of it, *Yamato* gave rise to fan clubs, doujinshi circles, and conventions, playing a part in Comiket’s founding a year later (1975), the publication of the magazine *Animage* starting in 1978 (Murakami 2001), and accelerating the new trend of “fan networking...beginning to interact with the management side of productions” (Rusca 2022, 38). In the wake of fan clubs that grew around it, the term “anime” became popular for a new phenomenon. As artist Takashi Murakami puts it, *Yamato* “changed the face of Japanese animation overnight (Murakami 2001).”

Japanese historian Tsugata Nobuyuki defined anime as Japanese animation with “foreign interest, transgression, visual cues, merchandising, and integration into a media mix (Clements 2017, 1). This odd mix of economic, cultural, and aesthetic features was more a retrospective feeling for the anime “he watched as a child” (1) that put him in the “first generation” of otaku that saw *Yamato* and *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979) as teens (Azuma 2009, 6) and reveals how totalizing this shift felt to those who lived it. Or, as Otsuka Eiji put it, “the animation called *Yamato* created a generational sensibility for the first time, and a “culture” rose to the surface, a generation that would later be called “otaku” (Otsuka 2016).

This feeling came together in a grassroots, fan-driven revolution in the cultural logic of capitalism. The early story and character depth of *Tetuan Atomu*, embracing rather than avoiding its limited animation, already served as a proto-aesthetic for anime, “a dynamically

immobile image” (Steinberg 2012) which not only moved through flat space in a new way but moved through commodities in a manner very different from the commodities of heavy industry defined by their use value. As Steinberg explains, *Atomu* character merchandising not only grew to new heights but *Atomu* stickers, found in boxes of chocolate, became more important than the “useful” commodity they were bundled with (Steinberg 2009). The chocolate was often discarded for the cheap stickers, which were plastered on everything and “animated it,” incorporating objects, walls, and people into the infinite world of *Tetsuwan Atomu* in the way *Atomu* himself moved through flat, minimalistic backgrounds.

The first true global “anime,” *Yamato*, took this much further. Great care was put into costumes, ship designs, music, and mature story elements, such care in fact that Otsuka Eiji considered the importance of the battleship *Yamato* and aesthetic elements of Japanese militarism indicative of an aesthetic attraction to fascism immanent to otakudom (Otsuka 2013). Regardless, while *Tetsuwan Atomu* had overcome limited animation to tell its own infinitely expansive story, *Yamato* used it for aesthetic purposes in the show itself. For artist Takashi Murakami, *Yamato* is the beginning of what he calls “superflat” aesthetics, in which “anime was born as a distinct form of expression” (Lamarre 2002, 335). As Thomas Lamarre points out, rather than a culturally Japanese product, anime’s flat aesthetic was born out of a mix of aesthetic, economic, and cultural features of post-industrial society of which the rapidly developed Japanese economy and society was a vanguard. By the bubble economy of the 1980s, Japan looked to “technical innovation, based on information technologies [as] the perceived solution to sustaining economic growth, for it would at once streamline production and enable a diversification of products for consumers” (337). This happened not only at the level of limited animation, which allowed for “technical innovation that reduced production costs” but at the

level of story elements, as “technical innovation and experimentation also became central to anime stories, and many stories deal with the passage towards a new order, pivoting on the rise of computers, robots, cyborgs, biotech” (337). The mature stories and aesthetic complexity Osamu Tezuka was looking for was enabled not only by a new global economic regime but a new transnational audience of “prosumers” who wanted complex elements to work with in their own spaces of play, an “otaku knowledge” which grappled with “the anime image as a production with multiple layers, as a field dense in information” (Lamarre 2009, 145).

The follow-up film *Space Cruiser Yamato* (1977) was made with foreign audiences in mind and released simultaneously in Japan and America with an English script and English voice actors. Though it would only have a limited theatrical run and accused of being a rip-off of *Star Wars* in the American media, despite *Yamato* the television series predating it by three years, it served as a vanguard of the deluge of Japanese anime and cultural products that would flood the United States in the 1980s. Unlike the flood of electronics, cars, and industrial products that undercut American products on price, efficiency, and quality, anime was developing through an early transnational horizontal affective consumption. When the Japanese industrial challenge was beaten back, thanks in part to the Korean alternative, otakudom only grew stronger and more lucrative, even with the Japanese media pathologizing it and the Japanese government having no interest in promoting it.

The peak of the first generation of otakudom came with Gainax’s productions for the Daikon III and IV Nihon Science Fiction Taikai conventions. Gainax, the studio behind otaku favorite *Evangelion* (1995-1996) and American otaku favorite *FLCL* (2000-2001)^{xxxix}, began as a group of animation students and otaku who got together to create an introduction to the

convention. On a shoestring budget, the group created an animated film for *Daikon III* which, in total disregard for intellectual property, used American music, various science fiction and anime characters, and Kaiju monsters. *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* appear alongside *Godzilla* in extremely information dense and rapid images that pointed to the high level of media literacy required to be an otaku.

Though the group were supposed to disband after, they instead created a follow-up animation with even more characters, even more aesthetic ambition, and even more disregard for IP. In creating a product by fans and for fans, the animators disregarded all concern for depth, both in story and in visuals, replacing it with “a distributive field in which movement into depth is replaced by density of information” (Lamarre 2009, 133). This disregard for aesthetic norms greatly accelerated the initial promise of *Tetsuwan Atomu*, as the illusion of cinematic depth that Japanese animators had inherited from Disney and the general aesthetic expectations of adult viewers used to movies was replaced by movement that generated an “exploded view of movement on the surface of the screen” that pushed “the dynamics of animetism to the limit” (133). Not only a reflection of the new computer age of hyperlinks in which “the flattening of multiplanar images produces an effect akin to multiple windows on a computer screen...with no window hierarchically deeper than any other, and each implying transversal links to others” (137) *Daikon IV* produced a new utopian “techno-scientific optimization” which approached “from a very different angle” than the “ballistic logics” of *Robot Taekwon V*'s developmentalist modernism (138). Instead, the limited, flat animation represented on screen the ability of otaku prosumers to navigate and enjoy the spatial logics of late capitalism (Azuma 2009, xviii).

If *Yamato* “marked the transition from giant robot superhero to more elaborate space operas in the late 1970s” (Mizuno 2007, 105), *Daikon III* and *IV*, “poised at a moment of technological transition, from the nation-centered military-industrial complex to transnational flows of information (Lamarre 2009, 139)”, completed what *Yamato* had started. In fact, Hideaki Anno, co-founder of Gainax, had worked closely with Hayao Miyazaki on *Nausicaä* in 1984 after completing the two *Daikon* animations. While Anno saw in Miyazaki a father figure and a great inspiration for Gainax, founded in the same year after *Nausicaä*’s completion, Miyazaki would show a much more ambiguous attitude towards Anno’s work, diagnosing *Evangelion* and by extension otakudom as a form of antisocial misanthropy and “unbearable,” with an implication that the generational gap between his leftist ANPO movement generation and the late capitalist consumerism of the economic boom generation was a fundamental gap in worldview (Miyazaki 2013).

As otakudom was being born at Japanese and American anime conventions and at studio Gainax, South Korea was exhausting the previous model of indigenizing Japanese heavy industry with diminishing returns. Each sequel to *Robot Taekwon V* made less at the box office and the techno-utopian imagery of *Robot Taekwon V* became increasingly remote from the social antagonisms of the Chun Doo-hwan military dictatorship and the emergent neoliberal world economy. The series final film *Robot Taekwon V 90* (1990) was made during the partial democratization under Chun’s handpicked presidential candidate Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993) and before the push for cultural production under the first genuinely democratic president Kim Yong-sam (1993-1998), an unstable moment reflected in the film itself. A majority live action with a few animated parts, the film even changed the beloved theme song, one of the few things

preserved once the film itself had been lost. Most fans were alienated and the semi-animated film lives on only as a reminder of the sorry state of Korean animation at the time^{xl}.

Fly! Spaceship Geobuksan reflects the moment when convergence with Japan became divergence, though its confidence shows this was unimaginable at the time. Park Chung-hee would be assassinated on October 26, 1979, exactly three months after the release of *Geobuksan*, and the global oil shock and American Volcker shock would inaugurate the new neoliberal world system that would slowly defeat the newly industrializing developmental regimes, even South Korea's export-oriented "miracle." In 1980, Korea quickly established a new military dictatorship after a brief experiment in democracy ended violently, cozying up again to the United States and the new, right wing Reagan administration. Chun Doo-hwan, a close confidante of Park going back to the 1961 coup, promised both a continuation of Park's anti-communist politics and further industrialization, continuing the heavy and chemical industrialization drive (HCI) of Park that focused on "petrochemicals, electronics, heavy engineering, shipbuilding, industrial machinery and non-ferrous metals" (Castley 1997, 92) all elements that went into the construction of giant robots. But as the global economy changed, so did the emphasis of the HCI drive, and rather than the predominance of steel, electronics would become Korea's most dynamic industry.

The Beginning of the End

The inclusion of electronics as a target industry of the HCI drive was already strange since it is very different than other HCI industries. Unlike steel or petrochemicals, electronics are a much more sophisticated product, heavily reliant on research and development, and only became emphasized by the state in the fourth five-year plan (1977-1981), the industrial plan Park

did not live to see through. In the face of “ever-increasing automation of assembly processes in the industrialized countries, and the transfer/relocation of production from Korea to other developing countries with cheaper wages, which had been taking place since 1973” (Kim 1996, 14), the government for the first time stressed “import substitution of key components and parts of electronics products” (14). However, unlike the state-led success of other HCI industries, “the actual effect of [government] promotion policy was believed to be little” (15) and “the Electronics Industry Association of Korea (EIAK) often criticized the inadequate state support and complained that the governmental subsidies and credits were very limited and hardly contributed to the actual development of the industry” (Kim and Kim 2006, 46).

Given the lack of state support for the chaebol system’s ambitions in electronics, “the first wafer-processing production capacity, which requires higher level of technology than simple assembly, was built in 1974 by a private company, Korea Semiconductor Inc” (46). This company was absorbed by Samsung to become Samsung Semiconductors in 1978, but only because Korea Semiconductors Inc. “suffered financial problems” (Kim 1996, 15) in a system that heavily favored vertically-integrated chaebols over independent entrepreneurship and innovation, the first sign that in the research driven electronics industry, the state-planning system was increasingly becoming a fetter rather than a boon (Kim and Kim 2006, 51-52). Whatever its plans for Samsung, the fourth five-year plan would be disrupted by the economic and political crisis of 1979-1980.

Just as the political differences between Rhee and Park disguise their continuities, the political continuities of Park and Chun confuse their differences. In the face of a massive currency accounts deficit, a global oil crisis, political pressure for global free trade in the wake of

the GATT “Tokyo Round” concluded in 1979, and pressure from American banks to open Korea to foreign investment (Kim and Kim 2006), Chun announced in his inaugural address that “economic liberalization was henceforth the aim of the new republic” (Woo and Cumings 1991, 191). Though state support for heavy industrialization continued, Chun also faced a changed domestic situation: the lack of political legitimacy of the new ruling regime, the chaebols becoming both too large to politically control and too large for state financial capabilities to support, the rise of shadow banking outside the state’s control, and the “Lewis turning point” in which the rural surplus labor supply had dried up.

Despite its ignominious beginning, the creation of Samsung Semiconductors seemed to be a success for the developmental state in the new neoliberal world. In 1981, the Ministry of Science and Technology expanded its contracting system, for the first time going beyond government-funded research institutions to “industrial research laboratories, colleges and universities, national and public research institutes, and individuals” (Woo 2020, 391) and in 1982 launched a special R&D program which prioritized semiconductors and focused on indigenous technological development (392). Though the development of 64K DRAMs in 1983 by Samsung is heroically attributed to the decisiveness of Lee Byung Chul, it was really only possible because of licensed technology from Micron, enabled by new government conditions for foreign investment. Samsung Semiconductor Institute, set up in 1983 in Silicon Valley with a branch office in Tokyo, allowed Korea to for the first time match the latest global standards in semiconductor technology (393).

These first efforts were still low on the value-chain. The “64Kb DRAM had already been mass-produced by Japanese and American companies” (394); this was the reason it was chosen

by Samsung in the first place (Kim 2006, 18-19) since Samsung believed it could not compete on the basis of technology with Japanese or American companies using the latest R&D. Despite growing independence in the new liberalizing Chun-era neo-developmental state, the chaebol continued to believe any Korean design would come too late in competition with Japan and the United States to be profitable, and a government consortium to develop a 4mb DRAM was pushed against their hesitancy (Yoo 2020, 394). The 4mb DRAM design, torn between choosing the “trench” system of the Japanese and the “stack” system, was unwilling to gamble on “revolution” vs. evolution” (394) and instead chose both, with the Silicon Valley team competing against the domestic team, and American and Japanese designs copied and engineers poached. But the final breakthrough came from the competition between the research teams within the Chaebol and in competition with each other rather than the government’s plan for sharing research and results (399; 402). Korea seemingly reached a world standard in the latest advanced HCI technology through independent, innovative corporations ready to confront the world market, albeit with a little push from the state, and for the first time, the chaebols reached “a level of R&D activity comparable to the entire Korean government” (408), graduating to multinational capitalist competition. Korea, through leveraging both Japanese and American technologies, was no longer reliant on riding the coattails of Japanese industrial downstreaming, and the new model survived the Chun dictatorship that had made it.

Though still lagging the most advanced technologies, Korea would be presented with a great opportunity to undercut Japan when the Reagan administration set a Semiconductor Trade Agreement with Japan in 1986 that set a minimum price for DRAM products, a huge benefit to Korean DRAMs against Japanese (Yoo 2020, 402). Korea took advantage of both rivals, importing the 64K DRAM and 256K DRAM technologies from the US firm, Micron

Technology, and 16K SRAM technology and 256K ROM technology from the Japanese firm, Sharp (Kim 1996, 19). Transitioning too fast cost Hyundai, which attempted to develop the more sophisticated SRAM technology to avoid direct competition with Japanese firms (21), showing there was still a world hierarchy in the value chain. But eventually Korean DRAMs would surpass the Japanese by 1998 (SMHJ 2011) and the Japanese market would crash in 1997 and abandon the technology, leaving only a single Japanese DRAM company Elpida, which went bankrupt in 2012 and was sold to American firm Micron (Sato and Ting-Fang 2024). By 2022, Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix alone controlled more than 70% of the global DRAM market and 50% of the NAND^{xli} flash memory chip market (Stangarone 2023).

However, as a RAND report pointed out, by a standard of “creativity” Korea has lagged. It noted that “Korean companies are usually good at mass production of standardized products such as memory chips . . . but are weak in making innovative products” and that “Korea does not possess the ‘depth of knowledge’ in either basic science or innovation enjoyed by America and Japan,” calling for a promotion of “more creative or innovative thinking” (Yoo 2020, 387). Behind this bourgeois ideological language is a grain of truth, seen in the market glut that made it unprofitable for Japan to continue: during the peak of DRAM production globalization, “the price / GB of DRAM [fell] at around 36% per year, for a factor of ten every 5.1 years and a doubling time of 1.5 years on average,” falling from around \$1,000,000 at the end of the 1980s to a mere few hundred dollars by the mid-2000s (Bergal 2020).

The other half of the favorable world market for Korean manufacturing was the deindustrialization of the United States and Japan, particularly the latter which saw a rapidly inflated yen in the wake of the 1985 Plaza Accords. Japan did not sit idly by as America attacked

its industrial base, and in fact had already been deindustrializing, abandoning manufacturing-as-such to Korea and China and embracing a role as an exporter of finance capital. Already by 1984, Japanese global FDI reached 17.8%, exceeding the US, and in the following bubble years took over East Asia: “total Japanese FDI worldwide between 1951 and 1986 amounted to some \$106 billion, the Asian portion of which was \$21.8 billion. This increased rapidly after 1986, “with an annual outflow amounting to \$48 billion,” and Japan’s manufacturing investment in Asia for the handful of years between 1986 and 1989 (at the height of the bubble) exceeding the total investment for the entire 1951-1985 period” (Chaung 2019, 210). No longer limited to the Asian Tigers of its former Empire, Japanese investment flowed into all Southeast Asia and mainland China. But this FDI outflow produced no new flying geese, as ASEAN failed to reproduce the Korean miracle and China’s development, to the extent that it moved up the value chain, combined both the “bamboo network” of Chinese transnational capital and the Korean path of “subcontracting for Japanese firms” (210). Built on the “influx of Japanese capital” (209), China eventually surpassed it as Japanese investment went into “relative decline” and American capital directly invested in Chinese manufacturing (210).

Korea as well turned to American technology and integrated into American global production networks and the weakened Japan would withdraw into a few key industries. But this decline should not be overstated, especially in the East Asian region. Even with all the success of Korea in the semiconductor industry, in certain key industries Korea remained as subordinate to Japan as ever. A revealing example is the 2019 dispute over chemicals used in semiconductor and display manufacturing between Japan and Korea. Japan, reacting to a Korean supreme court ruling demanding Japanese companies pay reparations to victims of forced labor, placed restrictions on exports of these chemicals. Korea, which is completely dependent on Japan for

these chemicals, pulled out the only weapon it had: politics. Widespread boycotts of Japanese goods electrified Korean society while businessmen and politicians sought exceptions and moderation while riding the wave of political outrage (Kirk 2019). Though a far cry from the complete dependence of Korea on the Japanese economy during its industrial development, Japan can still show who holds the keys to monopolistic processes in the electronics global value chain, and under a new conservative presidency with its gaze turned towards Chinese competition, the Korean government crawled back to Japan with an offer to pay the colonial-era reparations itself (Mackenzie and Yong 2023).

What makes semiconductors different than steel is that profits only come from intensive improvements in the research and design process and monopolistic control of these processes. The export of backwards technology no longer illuminated a path to industrial development at a lag of 5-10 years, instead it created a race to the bottom for “fables” companies in the U.S. and Japan which maintain the most advanced technologies and key intellectual properties. Korea, in gaining dominance over the mass-produced DRAM market, only created a global glut and a price collapse, and is now facing off a challenge from Chinese semiconductors. This is despite the immense technological complexity of DRAM memory chips; far more complexity than the steel or shipbuilding industries that drove the Korean economic miracle. That path is now closed, not because Korea abandoned it but because the U.S. and Japan changed the terrain.

In the world of otaku, who are as sophisticated in their proactive consumption as buyers of the latest high-end smartphone, Korean animation too faced the upper limit of its industrial development and the animating power of techno-utopian nationalism. Rather than gaining mastery over key technologies and intellectual properties, open circulation and play with

intellectual properties were already characteristic of global otakudom. In the information age, profits come from monopoly control over platforms which circulate these properties and mastery over the brands that become the objects of affection, what Dal Yong Jin calls “platform imperialism” (Jin 2015). That form of capitalism is beyond the capacity of any nationalism to tame.

Fly! Spaceship Geobuksan could copy *Space Battleship Yamato*, it could use Korean labor for Japanese animation for Korean development, it could even give Japan the political middle-finger. But what it could not copy was the new anime and its otakudom that *Yamato* birthed. *Robot Taekwon V*, fully restored in HD, can now be viewed for free on Youtube with English subtitles. But Korean animation is more inaccessible than ever.

Conclusion

Yamato most mostly forgotten among otaku today, the seriality, melodrama, and “adult” themes which made it stand out to both Japanese and American audiences of the time are now either too old-fashioned or taken for granted by today’s rich selection of animation and anime. The anime aesthetics that its director Leiji Matsumoto pioneered are not nearly “anime” enough for a generation of anime fans used to the “super deformed” style of the following decade. Though *Yamato* was foundational to American otaku culture, the Daikon animations have been much more long-lasting, with *Evangelion* still a cornerstone of otakudom. Jim Kaposztas would help run the anime convention I grew up with in Baltimore, Otakon, which always plays Gainax’s *Otaku no Video* once a year and since 2008, the anime music video (AMV) contest always began with a tribute to the Daikon animations. Otaku, once considered a “a reserve army of criminals” (Galbraith 2022, 13) in the Japanese media and a term of abuse at its birth (Otsuka

2015, xx), are now part of Japan's "Cool Japan" policy of cultural promotion. It is barely notable that the prime minister of Japan Fumio Kishida is personally a fan of *Demon Slayer* and promises to support anime and manga exports with government funding (Liu 2021).

If Japanese animation is now cool, Korean animation remains hot. During the boycott of Japanese goods in South Korea during the 2019 trade disputes, one of the first casualties was the Japanese animated film *Butt Detective the Movie* (2019). Riding on the success of social media pressure tank the film and the internet's power to not only pressure buyers of Japanese good but sellers to abstain, the Korean internet turned to the Japanese animated characters that are ubiquitous in Korea: Pikachu, Crayon Shin-chan, and Hello Kitty with calls to replace them with domestic characters like Pororo (Kim and Yoon 2019). *Pororo* (2003), a successful and politically important Korean animation^{xlii}, was an excellent candidate to take up the mantle of *Robot Taekwon V* and Korean animated nationalism against Japanese cultural and economic hegemony.

But politics are the weapons of the weak. In fact, Korea was reproducing the same cultural boycotts that the Chinese internet had called for against Korean popular culture in 2017 over THAAD, now targeted at Japan. Above China but below Japan, the limits of Korea's semi-peripheral status soon became clear. Two Japanese animated films were released in Korea in 2021: *Demon Slayer -Kimetsu no Yaiba- The Movie: Mugen Train* and *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. Though the latter is based off an American comic, it was produced by Sony Pictures, one of the largest media conglomerates in the world. *Spider-Man* ended up making \$46,766,267 in two weeks in the Korean box office and *Demon Slayer*, the Japanese PM's favorite anime, made \$17,350,728 during its Korean box office run, the "first time a Japanese film has cracked the top

10 [box office gross] in South Korea since modern records started in 2004” (Harding 2021).

UNIQLO continued to suffer in Korea but the power differential in animation was too great, and after 3 years of COVID calls to boycott *The First Slam Dunk* (released January 2023 in Korea) fell on deaf ears. After all, Korean otaku are as discerning as American or Japanese, and they are part of a larger transnational community for whom the nationalism of the Korean nation-state is at best an anachronism.

^{xxxiv} The term “Japanimation” is itself a transitional term used in US marketing “in the early 1990s in order to sell anime to large retailers who weren't reacting positively to the term “anime” (Sevakis 2016). As the result of the otaku fan revolution which used the term “anime,” these days it is remembered with disdain.

^{xxxv} This history is discussed in more detail in chapter six.

^{xxxvi} This suit is discussed in chapter four.

^{xxxvii} The Namuwiki article for *Robot Taekwon V* discusses the widespread online mockery that met an attempt in 2013 to build a statue of the film’s Robot on the island of Dokdo. *The Korea Times* also called it a “not great idea” (Kim 2013), quoting the original creator Kim Hyung-bae reflecting on its mimicry of the Japanese *Mazinger Z* as “the embarrassing part of the story that has been buried by patriotism.”

^{xxxviii} To borrow Marx’s famous quote in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 2004).

^{xxxix} Whereas *Neon Genesis Evangelion* became a global touchstone of anime fandom, FLCL (*Fooly Cooly*) was a minor side project of the studio that was shown on repeat on Cartoon Network’s *Adult Swim* late-night block of mostly anime and American adult cartoons. As one of the few mainstream, easily accessible reference points for an American otaku collective sociality, all the shows on the block became hugely popular and influential for the post-Yamato, pre-high speed internet generation of American otaku, many of which were marginal in Japan itself. This is an example of the localization and Japanification otakudom, where the global spread of culturally odorless commodities are re-encharmed with affective meaning in local contexts, reshaping rather than dissolving the geographies of late capitalism.

^{xl} Discussed in chapter five.

^{xli} Another type of mass-produceable memory chip with a similar history. Invented by Toshiba in 1980, it too saw Japan go from world leader to capitulating to Korean manufacturing.

^{xlii} The “children’s president” as discussed in Chapter one

Chapter Four:

Wonderful Days and The Limits of Imperialism

The Asian financial crisis was catastrophic for the Korean economy and the Korean people, so much so that it is still commonly called the “IMF crisis,” a characterization that equivocates it with “past humiliation of losing the Korean nation,” comparable to Japanese colonization and the U.S. military occupation after the Korean war (Song 2009, 3). But for the animation industry, it was a boon. Already opened to global finance and manufacturing, outsourcing benefitted from the collapse of Korea’s currency in relation to the US dollar (Lee 2011, 142) and after a slight dip immediately after the crisis in 1998, animation exports reached a historic high of 167 million USD in 2000, double the amount from 1995 (84 million USD) and more than twenty times the amount of a decade prior (7 million USD in 1986) (Lee 2011, 129).

The post-crisis boom was short lived. By 2004 Korean animation exports had declined from an all-time high of 167 million USD to 62 million USD (Lee 2011: 143). Korean animation exports have recovered slowly, reaching 159 million USD in 2022 (KOCCA 2023, 3), still not reaching the height of the bubble two decades later.

When exports started to fall, the state stepped in. Since the 1990s, culture had become a major target of government funding and active guidance. Infamous in the film industry is the “Jurassic Park moment,” in which the recently elected Kim Yong-sam government observed that “the export revenue of *Jurassic Park* (1993) had matched the foreign sales of Hyundai cars that year” (Jeon 2019, 16). What followed was a reclassification of movie production from “service” to “semimanufacturing,” matching the tax benefits in the manufacturing industry (16). Corporate

and government money soon flowed into the film and animation industries, and the final lifting of formal censorship in 1996 promised them a new life. Taking government money and fast financing, Korean animation industry exports saw “a staggering twelve-fold growth, from \$7 million in 1986 to \$84 million in 1995.” However, financial incentives had opposite effects on film and animation. Lacking a culturally indigenous culturally resonant domestic hit like *Seopyeonje* (1993), a blockbuster like *Shiri* (1999), or a globally respected auteuristic work like *Oldboy* (2003), fiscal incentives incentivized profit chasing and made animation’s dependence on outsourcing even worse over the next decade. Through the 1990s, animation exports were “completely driven by offshore outsourcing, which accounted for 97 percent of 1999 exports” (Lee 2011: 129), and the returns on indigenous production never materialized.

Nevertheless, Korean animation was not left behind by the Korean wave for lack of state effort. The first five-year plan for animation was announced in 2001 (Lee 2011, 231) and KOCCA was created in 2001 (236) to set up foreign co-productions and help animated projects secure funding. By 2008, when the program was eliminated, KOCCA had set up “16 projects” with a total of “5.5 billion won of financial and logistical support” with some successes in foreign investment (236). And a Korean TV quota system dedicated to local animation, pushed for many years, was finally established in 2005 (238). As Joonkoo Lee points out, rather than evidence of a neoliberal withdrawal of the state (243), in the animation industry the state took a more active role in culture than previously (240-241).

The immediate cause was clear. Increased competition from low wage competitors like China, India, and the Philippines undercut South Korea’s competitive position as a source of cheap labor. Even within Korea, rising wages and new expectations for working conditions

meant that the animation industry, which had seen stagnant wages throughout the 1990s and the same labor conditions of the 1980s, no longer attracted young workers looking for “globalized” industrial opportunities (144).

But why couldn't Korea upgrade to domestic production? It attempted to and saw some success. Revenue from domestic original animation increased from 75 billion to 107 billion won in 2004-2006 and reached 137 billion won in 2007 (147). Nevertheless, at 921 billion won in sales in 2022, animation has the lowest sales out of all cultural products at only 0.6% of the total (KOCCA 2023, 3), a dismal record for what was once the most promising post-crisis cultural industry.

The real reason was the switch from 2D to 3D animation (Lee 2011, 142), both in the American switch to 3D animation as an aesthetic and the integration computer animation backgrounds and character movement into Japanese anime. This was doubly painful, as Korean animation outsourcing had been built on decades of 2D animation now many superfluous and the technology itself was labor shedding. But this begs the question of why Korean animation could not develop its own 3D animation industry? As a highly computerized and internet connected society, Korea was not lacking the technical basis. Without the prejudices of picky and stubborn fans like Japanese otaku, there was nothing to lose.

This chapter will analyze post-crisis Korean animation's attempt to do exactly that: *Wonderful Days* (2003). It was not just Korea's most ambitious high-budget, adult-oriented, animated feature-length film but also an aesthetic experiment in what Korea could accomplish in 3D animation. The retreat of Korean animation in the wake of its failure points to the technical difficulties in switching to 3D animation as not merely a matter of policy, investment, or even

aesthetics. It points to something about technology itself as the horizon of industrial development and the nature of imperialism in the age of late capitalist globalization.

This chapter completes the three major theoretical approaches towards Korean animation: Korea as a concept, animation as a concept, and the limits of these concepts in the world system.

Theories of Imperialism

South Korea has therefore been something of a blind spot of theorists of imperialism. Imperialism, based on an understanding of “monopoly capitalism” (Lenin 2005) as the final stage of capitalism in which oppressed nations could no longer ascend into the club of imperialist nations, was ill-prepared for the rise of the “Asian Tigers.” Worse than wrong, the imperialism-focused dependency theory of the 1970s was uninteresting to the “developmental state” theorists of the 1980s, such as Alice Amsden who called the East Asian economies a “paradox” not merely for dependency theory but the very concept of imperialism (Amsden 1979: 342). With few exceptions, East Asia outside of Maoist China had not been an object of close investigation for the global left, and even Immanuel Wallerstein’s study of the “semi-periphery,” a sub-category of dependency theory specifically designed to complicate the binary divisions of imperialism, does not mention South Korea at all and instead takes North Korea as its example (Wallerstein 1976). This is despite the fact that the semi-periphery, defined by expansion of manufacturing at the expense of core producers and regional hegemony of export goods (464), describes the rapid rise of South Korean manufacturing far better than North Korea’s especially autarkic socialist ideology. Taiwan, the other major nexus of global semiconductor manufacturing, the other “miracle” of the 20th century, compounds the problem as it too is an “Asian Tiger” which followed the export-oriented manufacturing path out of poverty. Though

there were political reasons for the decline of dependency theory, by the 1980s “the inadequacies of both early and late dependency literature as applied to Taiwan” (Winckler and Greenhalgh 1988, 7) and South Korea (249) were clear.

When noticed, these semi-colonized, anti-communist rump states, carved out of cold war conflict and given the patronage of American imperialism, were dismissed by theorists of imperialism as privileged exceptions to a general rule, particularly when they remained sources of cheap labor during the heyday of dependency theory. Even Bruce Cumings, one of the most knowledgeable historians of Korea, dismissively said “there can be one Japan and one Taiwan, but not two or many of either, in the world economy” in his study of East Asian regional industrialization (1986). But the development of China through export-oriented industrialization has made it untenable to dismiss this path as exceptional in a nation of over a billion people with de-jure communist party leadership. Nevertheless, recent theorists of imperialism trying to understand post-Mao China continue this trend. John Smith, for example, dismisses Korea as a “relatively small country” that is “the exception to the general rule.” (Smith 2016: 357) and Samir Amin sees the Korea and Taiwan as beneficiaries of American political anti-communism unavailable to other countries (Kvangraven 2017: 16). Smith understands the problem with this argument, elsewhere in his book pointing out that “the rapid growth of industrial production in Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan heralded a broader transformation—the globalization of production and thereby of the capital-labor relation, opening the door to a new phase of capitalism’s imperialist development” (Smith 2016: 222).

China has many aspects of the Asian Tiger developmental state: decollectivization of agriculture that left it with the same small family farm system of South Korea and Taiwan when

they began industrialization (and the same subsequent massive migration of young women from the countryside into manufacturing labor), a powerful state apparatus capable of controlling foreign and domestic investment and subsidizing infrastructure, broad 5 year plans for industry, and key state-enterprises not subject to short-term profitability concerns, all driven by a massive pool of educated, disciplined, and healthy workers subject to a historical defeat as a class. It even gained the political favoritism of the United States, leveraging the cold war conflict with the USSR to become a “most favored nation” of U.S. trade in 1980, a status retained even through the collapse of the USSR and the Tiananmen Square protests and made permanent in 2001 with its ascension to WTO membership.

Problematically for the new Marxist theorists of imperialism, what sets China apart from South Korea is not the strength of its de-jure socialist state apparatus but a lack, with Chinese economic development decentralized through regional responsibility for filling national targets, regional self-financing, and inter-regional competition for state largesse. Most importantly is the predominance of outsourcing labor for China’s leading global manufacturers. Whereas outsourcing work was peripheral to the Korean developmental state, it is central to Chinese development, with historically unprecedented “Foxconn cities” of millions of migrant workers making smartphones for the whole world.

China’s openness is not a choice, but a structural necessity. With the collapse of “actually existing” socialism and the globalization of manufacturing, the protectionism of South Korea tolerated by the U.S. is no longer possible and China had no choice but to open its economy, at least if the developmental state were to be preserved in any capacity. What has changed is not the strategy of development but its conditions of possibility, making China far more dependent on

and subject to the vicissitudes of the world market than South Korea's developmental state ever was. New theories of imperialism therefore question the "development" of China in the first place and its ability to reach the level of South Korea. Instead of another Asian Tiger, to them China is merely a symptom of global neoliberalism's defeat of Third World "import substitution" development and a "race to the bottom" of global labor conditions (Smith 2016: 67). Even with all the legacies of the socialist period marshalled for moving up the value chain in manufacturing, it has at best gone from "one of the poorest to one of the most developed Third World societies" without in any way upending the imperialist world system (King 2021: 235), very different than OECD member South Korea.

Among these theories, Sam King's concept of imperialism is the most compelling because it is centered on competition in global manufacturing value chains. Defending "monopoly capitalism" as the essence of imperialism, King modifies it by making monopoly and competition co-dependent forces (116). Rather than the ability to control prices or regulate competition as cartels, i.e. market distortions, it is the possession of the highest value-added labor processes that defines monopolies, backed by immense investment in research and development. As the possessor of the leading technological standards, intellectual properties, and most profitable production processes, monopoly capitalists pit what King calls "non-monopoly capitals" against each other, or those capitalists and nations who must compete for low value-added production which is competitive on its cost rather than technological sophistication. Imperialism, rather than a distortion of capitalism, is the law of value realized on a global scale, against the earlier dependency theorists who took the suppression of an aspect of the law to be the key to monopoly, whether the free movement of labor (Smith 2016), the global equalization of wages, equalization of prices of production, or other "violations" (King 2021: 69-70; 137) of

the free market. Though imperialism remains dependent on nation states, who protect their monopolies and use the powers of the state and other non-market advantages to defeat their rivals, the process of monopoly/non-monopoly differentiation is a result of the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production on a global stage.

The smartphone industry is an example of this global law of value in action. Apple has a series of patents on advanced technologies such as cutting-edge semiconductors and cameras, an immensely profitable platform ecosystem within the products those patents allow, and final say in advertising, distribution, and revenue. The manufacturing of these products is done in China for little profit, an advantage in cheap labor it is rapidly losing to Vietnam, India, and other Third World aspirants. Though China attempted to use this experience to develop its own technologies to challenge the Apple monopoly, the CHIPS act attacked this very possibility, showing the complete dependence of Chinese manufacturing on not just Apple but a whole network of monopolies in the advanced imperialist countries: Qualcomm semiconductors, Apple products, ASML EUV lithography, Carl Zeiss lenses, JSR Photoresists, TSMC foundries, and Samsung memory chips. Huawei, the best challenger to Apple, faded in the face of sanctions, to be replaced by lower end manufacturers like Xaomi and OPPO. Though shocking the world with a Chinese made 5G smartphone with a 5nm domestic chip in 2023, this was the exception that proved the rule. It was remarkable because it achieved so much without access to EUV lithography and represented the absolute limit of the capacity of older technology, built on previously acquired chips and fabs. Even if one of these monopolistic industries could be challenged on quality and price, it is nearly impossible to challenge all of them. Huawei's recovery and the resilience of Chinese exports in 2024 were driven not by challenging the first world semiconductor monopolies but by vastly increasing exports of cheaper devices to the

Third World and relative increased in value added on a global scale (Goldman 2024), competing with Korea in places like Vietnam (Lim 2024). Hitting the limit of the American market, Korean exports to ASEAN increased “about 15 fold, from 8 billion United States dollar (US\$) in 1989 rising to US\$121 billion in 2016” (Truong, Dong and Nguyen 2019, 56). As a result, ASEAN trade “surpassed the US, EU and Japan to occupy Korea’s second largest trading partner after China” (57). As this trade primarily integrates ASEAN countries into Korean led global value chains, Korean exports have shifted from consumer goods to intermediate goods to capital goods depending on the country’s own industrial development (60), leading to an overall “trade deficit with Korea, rising from US\$3.8 billion to US\$36.1 billion between 2000 and 2016” (57).

In fact, the chip rivalry between China and the U.S. is in many ways a distraction. Subsequent breakdown of Huawei’s 5G smartphone revealed that the largest value-added component replaced by Chinese suppliers was the Korean LG OLED display, the most expensive component. Nevertheless, the share of South Korean parts actually increased to 36%, by far the largest foreign contributor to the phone’s value (Ban and Matsuura 2023). Huawei may be compelled to replace American parts to survive but its real goal is to replace Samsung for the low and middle end market, a process already well underway. Similarly, the SMIC chip that shocked the world is not meant to free China from dependence on American technology but dependence on TSMC, a Taiwanese company. Even industries where China has become world leader like EV batteries had already been outsourced to Korea, where “multinational automakers [pressured] their South Korean suppliers, which at the time led the electric car battery industry to build factories in China” (Bradsher 2024).

That is, China aspires to indigenize labor processes that were already outsourced to East Asia for the sake of price competitiveness. Despite their technological sophistication, these labor processes are non-monopolistic.

South Korea and Global Capitalism

As chapter one discussed, Samsung has capitulated to American leadership of semiconductor manufacturing to beat back the challenge of China. If the real target of Huawei is Samsung and not Apple, what does this say about Korea or Taiwan's security in the club of "developed nations"? Were they ever part of it in the first place?

Though one of Sam King's major examples is Samsung's relationship with Apple, he does not follow his own logic. After describing the simultaneously competitive and complementary relationship between them, he describes Samsung as a kind of "non-monopoly monopoly" capitalism (King 2021: 169). This awkward phrase is better encapsulated by the older term "semi-peripheral," which describes South Korea and Taiwan's non-competitive, middle-man position vis-à-vis to global manufacturing. But King ignores this concept for a binary division of the overall world system and writes off South Korea as "special cases benefiting from the Cold War blessings of US imperialism" (King 2021: 9). Besides the similar relationship China cultivated with the U.S. and the difficulty of describing a nation of fifty million as an exception, this is the one area where he diverges from the law of value.

On the other hand, South Korean scholars, though historically peripheral to discussions of dependency theory, have long questioned the "success" of South Korean development and its ascension to the imperialist core. Even before the IMF crisis, Martin Hart-Landsberg, a Marxist

and expert on Korean economic development, had already argued that the Korean economy was “an unbalanced and unstable economy” that had “finally exhausted its potential” (Hart-Landsberg 1993: 17). In the wake of the Asian financial crisis, he pointed out in eulogizing “developmental state theory” that East Asian countries had never escaped dependence on FDI and “import-dependent structures of export-oriented production” which collapsed in the face of competition from “lower wage countries (especially China)” (Burkett and Hart-Landsberg 1998: 446). They point out the “fundamental limits” of “intensively exploitative and thus contradictory, crisis-ridden dynamic of ‘scrap-and build’ industrial accumulation” in a work following the IMF crisis (Burkett and Hart-Landsberg 1998: 88). It was logical for Hart-Landsberg to extend this argument to the fundamental limits of Chinese industrialization in *China and Socialism* (2005), predicting the future limits of Chinese development.

Dae-oup Chang, a Korean scholar of value theory, argues that the export-oriented development model encountered not only an external limit in the imperialist world system but an internal limit of class struggle provoked by labor-intensive production for the global market, creating a condition of intense class struggle without a clear resolution, predicting that neoliberal Korea would lack “a stable basis for capital accumulation” (2009: 153). Seongjin Jeong, the leader of a group of Korean Marxist economists, finds that Korean profit rates declined from a “high of 16.7 percent in 1978 to a low of 6.6% in 2002” (Hart-Landsberg, Jeong, and Westra 2007: 64) and that falling profitability since the 1980s was the cause of the 1997 crisis, not external impositions by the IMF or mistaken neoliberal policy. Concluding that South Korea’s “structural crisis continues” (64), he points out that “financialization” theses do not apply to Korea where manufacturing profits have remained higher than manufacturing financial profitability (15) and instead profits were restored after the crisis purely through intensive

exploitation of labor (Jeong 2007: 60). Finally, in the realm of popular culture, Dal Yong Jin, a popular culture theorist, discusses the “platform imperialism” that Korean culture is subject to in its distribution and profitability, which keeps it subordinated to American operating systems, internet platforms, and ICT (2015), while Gooyong Kim contextualizes the rise of k-pop as a continuation of the superexploitation of young women’s labor in manufacturing (2018)

What to make of Korean popular culture, which has in many ways exceeded Japanese popular culture in global success? Korean popular culture exists in a “social mediascape” (Jin and Yoon 2016), in which participatory fandom culture develops on social media networks through interacting with an entire media mix of “various intangible cultural forms” (2016: 1287). Rather than a planned strategy, Korean popular culture is one element among many in the broad practices of “global fans embracing transnational mobility as an element of their everyday cultural practices” (2016: 1288). This is true of all fandom and in many ways was pioneered by Japanese anime fandom practices. What distinguishes Korean popular culture from Japanese practices is the active intervention of Korean companies “strategically adopt[ing] social media by maximizing social media channels” (1280) compared to Japanese historical indifference and even hostility to global anime fandom and, by extension, the use of social media algorithms by Korean pop-culture fans as a mediator.

But such reliance on American social media companies comes at a cost, as these algorithms are controlled by primarily American global monopolies. The algorithm that promotes Korean pop-culture is at their mercy as is the lion’s share of profit. Subject to platform imperialism, a new international hierarchy is forming in which American platforms are uncontested (Jin 2017: 3894). Meanwhile, what is platformed through the algorithm can be

deplatformed, and fans themselves are often disloyal to Korean popular culture exclusively, acknowledging the temporal and contingent nature of their current fandom (Jin and Yoon 2016: 1287). Just as Korean smartphones are being challenged by Chinese competitors, so too is Korean popular culture increasingly challenged by popular cultural exports from new Third World players like China and Thailand as well as persistent culture industries in Latin America. Korean popular culture has even seen backlash because of its regional hegemony (Ainslie, Lipura, and Lim 2017). The specific difficulties Korean popular culture faces are secondary to the fact that it is structurally positioned to face such difficulties, whereas the platforms it relies on are globally irreplaceable. China's outsourcing-led "miracle" retroactively explains Korea's own incorporation into imperialist global value chains in a semi-dependent position.

Wonderful Days was the culmination of Korean structural dependency in animation. But it also tried to challenge it. The film neither charted a completely independent path nor completely subordinated to a semi-peripheral position in the global animation manufacturing value chain. Instead, it tried to combine the entire development history of South Korean animation into something original, an impossible combination of monopoly, non-monopoly, and semi-monopoly capitalism. The result was the same for animation and smartphones: the submission of Korean industry to American monopolies at the top of the value chain and the development of Chinese industry, including animation, in the image of Korean animation's outsourcing model (Li 2011).

The Background of Korean Animation

Wonderful Days used what the producers called "multi-type layer animation," a brand-new aesthetic that combined 2D, 3D, and miniatures. In theory, this would build on Korea's

indigenous 2D animation industry with the 3D industry Korea aspired towards. Not only did 3D animation become the global aesthetic standard for the most profitable animated films, 3D animation made technological breakthroughs with every film that applied to every industry, such as the mocap work done on for Gollum in 2002's *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* and the technical possibilities of the PlayStation 2 released in 2000 and the Xbox in 2001. The most proximate concern for Korea was the potential of 3D animation to make the Japanese 2D hand-drawn anime industry obsolete, offering Korea the rare chance to leapfrog its former colonizer and East Asian rival.

The third visual element, combining miniatures and painted backgrounds with digital post-production enhancements, pointed to the contradiction between Korea's labor-intensive past and its capital-intensive aspirations for the future. *Wonderful Days* was advertised in the Korean media as the second movie in the world to use a SONY HDW-F900 digital camera, first pioneered by George Lucas in *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), the first blockbuster to be shot completely digitally. The Star Wars Prequels also used miniatures in such a way that audiences thought they were CGI, using a hyperreal aesthetic to make real objects look fake rather than fake digital objects look real, both a directorial choice of George Lucas and an accommodation of the limitations of the CGI technology of the time that had been harshly exposed by the previous year's digitally uncanny *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001), a box office bomb because of the immense production cost of its entirely digital animation. This Japanese-American coproduction served as an explicit reference for *Wonderful Days*' Director, who pointed to *Wonderful Days*' cost as highly competitive compared to both American and Japanese animation (Kim 2003) despite the film eventually going vastly overbudget.

The usage of Industrial Light and Magic's technology at great expense was not just an aesthetic choice. It was an attempt to visualize into being success in the new world of animation production out of the old one's collapse. Within the outsourcing industry, there were two distinct value chains in the Korean animation industry, an American system of fables outsourcing and a Japanese keiretsu system of subcontracting (Lee 2011). Within the American production chain, reliance on a few large suppliers with a strict division of labor meant that the old system was no longer viable. American companies, having used Korean labor for their immediate profit-driven needs and never sharing advanced technologies, left nothing in their wake and took most of the market with them. For example, 90% of Sunwoo's revenue in 2002 came from its lucrative U.S. buyers such as Disney, Fox and Nickelodeon (145), which Korean animation producers had no hope of filling in for.

In the post-America system, ambitious companies turned to original animation or licensing and marketing, both high value-added activities possible with new government support and a new Korean economy of even more consolidated conglomerates like Samsung and LG, increasingly structured as multinational corporations. Despite the impossibility of reaching the level of American companies, the Korean government and Korean animation companies hoped that they could become regionally hegemonic in animation markets which did not want to pay the American premium, such as the television animation market in Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. *Pororo* was exported to dozens of countries from 2003-2006, finding success especially in France with 56% viewer ratings (Kim 2013, 16). Korean companies leveraged every advantage they had over Japan and other regional producers, such as Korea's high level of web connectivity, which allowed *PUCCA*, an "animated online e-card service" from 2000 using flash animation, to explode in popularity on the early internet. Originally targeted at foreign

markets (18), *PUCCA* was licensed by Jetix Europe in 2004 and made into a TV show in 2006 where it was distributed globally.

Other firms stayed in outsourcing but attempted to move up the value chain within it, differentiating themselves from new low-wage competitors by the quality of their work and long-established relationships with American companies for long-running shows with an expected look and output schedule. AKOM continued to work on *The Simpsons*, a loyal relationship rewarded with a contract to work on 2007's *The Simpsons Movie*, the highest grossing animated movie based on an animated television series of all time. Sunwoo and Rough Draft Studios found work on *Family Guy* seasons 2-6 after proving the superiority of their work compared to American studio Film Roman, and Digital eMation, which took over *Family Guy* after season 7, also alternated animating even and odd episodes of *Futurama* with Rough Draft.

In the Japanese value chain, rather than the bubble-like expansion and contractions of American investment, regional supply chains extended slowly over decades-long connections between Japanese and Korean companies. Just as Japanese outsourcing had begun as an extension of the Keiretsu relationship between suppliers and core industries, the “family-like” relationships between tiers of the production process extended the internal Japanese system internationally, with Korea now at the middle level of production processes such as layouts and key-frames (Lee 2011, 146-147) and China and Vietnam doing the labor-intensive tasks formerly done by Korea. Still today, most of the most high-budget and globally successful anime regularly see Korean, Vietnamese, and Chinese names in the credits, such as 2022's *The Rising of the Shield Hero Season 2* co-produced by Japanese studio Kinema Citrus and Korea's DR Movie with work by a variety of subcontracted Chinese firms like Shanghai Phantom and Shanghai

Honghuang Art, or *Attack on Titan The Final Season* (2020) which featured Korea's Maru Animation, Vietnam's Nam Hai, and China's Fast Snail Animation Productions Co. among others in a complex web of global subcontracting relationships assembled ad-hoc for that specific anime.

Even in the Japanese value chain, where Korea seemed to move up the value chain more securely and gain a larger piece of the pie, the hierarchy remained structurally given. Decades of integration in Japan's animation industry in works of "hyperbolic nationalism" (Choo 2014) from *Robot Taekwon V* (1976) to *Phantom Master: Dark Hero from the Ruined Empire* (2004). The latter, a Japanese-coproduction based on a Korean manhwa with theme songs by k-pop artist BoA (hugely popular in Japan at the time), nevertheless had "70 percent of the work done by Japanese staff" so that the Korean studio could "learn [Japan's] skills and technologies" (Kim 2005).

The third option was to leverage this accumulated experience to generate original animation, leveraging every historical advantage, hidden opportunity, and contradiction between the two major monopolists. There was a newly formed basis for this path. To help finance local cultural production, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT) had established the Cultural Industry Promotion Fund (CIPF) in 1999 with a 50 billion won (42 million USD) of government seed contribution (Lee 2011, 231). By 2004, the government had contributed 250 billion won (218 million USD) in total, and combined with other public funds, the CIPF reached 301 billion won (263 million USD). (231-232). Animation was the biggest beneficiary of the Fund's loan program, receiving 136 billion (118 million USD) won out of the total of 628 billion won (547 million USD) loaned (153) or 21 percent of the total amount loaned to local firms for cultural

product development in 1999-2003 (232). This was not the old system of state-driven investment. The state instead created a system of private-public joint funds in which “private venture capital companies [took] responsibility for administering the funds” and selecting “which firms or projects to invest in” (232). “By 2004, 14 special [VC] funds of this kind had been set up with a total of 185 billion won (161 million USD), and 43 billion won (37.5 million USD) was invested in 31 different animation projects in 2002-2005...30 per cent of the fund available” (232).

Wonderful Days’ Aesthetic Ruptures

Wonderful Days’ “multi-type layer animation” attempted to combine all three developmental paths in its production at both an industrial and aesthetic level. 2D animation was handled by DR Movie, an outsourcing company that is closely integrated into Japanese anime production, an exclusive partner with the Japanese animation studio Madhouse and partially owned by it since 2001. The live action miniatures were handled by Tin House, a Korean Television “CF” company (TV advertisements). 3D animation and compositing were handled by Independence, a special effects company working with the latest VFX software Inferno. Inferno was imported from Autodesk Media and Entertainment, a division of the California based software company Autodesk now famous for its work on James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009).

Funding came from both the government and existing animation companies for its massive production cost. Chosen as a “star project” by the ministry of culture and tourism, it received 150 million won from the Korean Film Council in 1998 (Kim 2003: 175) and 300 million more in 2003 as part of an effort to sponsor a series of animated films including *My Beautiful Girl Mari* (2002) and *Oseam* (2003) (90) and 400 million won by Sunwoo (Jeong

2003), a Korean animation company that could serve as a mediator between the industry's norms and the government's policies.

Wonderful Days most important private investor was Samsung Venture Investment, a subdivision of the massive conglomerate founded in 1999 to invest in technology-focused small and medium industry. Despite the shock of forced liberalization by IMF dictate, Korea had begun liberalizing as soon as Chun Doo-hwan came to power in 1980, a process that greatly accelerated with democratization in 1993. The 1995 Motion Picture Promotion Law that incentivized investment in film was followed by the more general "Special Law to Promote Venture Capital Companies" on July 30th, 1997, months before the crisis, and the government further subsidized financial liberalization and venture capital speculation in its wake.

Theoretically, animation was a perfect investment target for small and medium enterprise (SME) and technology focused venture capital. But Samsung cared even less about Korean animation's quality than the outsourcing-focused small investors of the 1980s. With the state continuing to strongly incentivize avenues of VC profitability (Ko and Shin 1999: 459), animation combined the government's desire for cultural production and Chaebol VC investment in capital-intensive industries at the cutting edge of global standards without either learning anything about the industry or producing a coherent product.

The result of doubling down on financial liberalization was that Korea recovered stronger than ever from the crisis, at least in numbers, with 10.6% GDP growth in 1999 on the back of free-flowing credit. A massive stock market bubble formed, particularly in KOSDAQ, Korea's electronics stock market created in 1996 and benchmarked to the NASDAQ. It had originally crashed with the global dot-com bubble, but in concert with the global economy, recovered in the

following years as venture capital continued to speculate on technology stocks. 2002 would be the final year of the previous decades spectacular GDP growth as the institutional legacy of the dictatorship's rapid industrialization, suppression of wages, and protectionism finally exhausted itself, its 7.7% growth rate remaining the last peak. But this was not yet apparent to Korean companies, and Samsung especially for a time combined vestiges of the old system of crony capitalism with the new system of global financial flows.

Samsung had VC funds and was still recovering from the consolidation of the chaebols in the wake of the Asian financial crisis that had wiped out the weaker firms and greatly concentrated the remaining few. Already focusing on the global marketplace rather than the domestic profitability of cultural production or the demands of the state for cultural promotion, its investments in animation were the last vestiges of the earlier chaebol model of having one's tentacles in every part of the economy regardless of suitability. Halfway through production, Samsung pulled out as *Wonderful Days*' budget spiraled out of control, giving Samsung a final "excuse [to] fold their cultural industry businesses" (Shim 2008, 19) that had begun with the breakup of Samsung Entertainment Group in 1999. In doing so, it closed the curtain on the sprawling chaebol empires in which politics, culture, and profits intermixed behind the veil of state control.

Samsung cut back on unprofitable investments and peripheral subdivisions, concentrating on the electronics industry. By the mid-2000s it had overtaken the dying Japanese memory chip industry, surpassed Motorola and the companies of the 2G phone generation and challenged Sony in consumer electronics, achieving twice its market cap by 2005. In that year it signed an

agreement with Apple to supply it with flash memory chips, a timely integration into the soon-to-be born smartphone industry.

Samsung opened the Leeum Samsung Museum in 2004, part of a larger movement of globalizing Korean art that began with the 1995 Gwangju Biennale to promote Korean art locally and globally. It also sponsored the 2002 Japan-Korea co-hosted World Cup and the 2002 Olympics, continuing state-chaebol relations in the democratic era. But such investments were now explicitly cultural promotion rather than industrial investments or political favors for favorable interest rates. The culture industry would continue to develop, culminating in the globalization of Korean popular culture. Neither Samsung nor animation would be involved.

Investor Aesthetics

Wonderful Days in parts appears more like a tech demo for investors than a coherent film. In one scene, bullets fired at a tank appear as bullet holes in the screen, giving the viewer a point of view shot closer to a first-person shooter video game than the rest of the film's 2D hand-drawn animated aesthetic [Fig. 18]. Similar shots appear throughout the film, such as a scene in which an axe is thrown at the viewer and then the camera following the axe in three-dimensional space.



[Figure 18 – First-person shooter (FPS) aesthetics in an action scene]

The most incongruous scene takes place a third of the way into the film, in which a female performer performs at a club. Though it is subsequently revealed the setting has plot relevance, the scene opens without this context and the viewer is treated to a roughly two-minute surreal music video in which backgrounds undulate and melt, the performer multiplies, becomes disembodied, and turns into a flower. A colorful, complex geometric pattern is repeatedly highlighted and contrasts with the flowing of water, flowers, and the performers hair and dress, showing off smooth 2D animation [Fig. 19]. The scene is the closest the film comes to abstract hand-drawn animation, in which the morphing of objects and lines into different forms of life, what Paul Wells calls “abstract forms in motion” opposed to “the assumed ‘objectivity’ of the exterior world” (Wells 2013: 44). The scene is impressive and abstractly beautiful but was so incongruous within the aesthetic and pacing of the film that it was removed from the international

release. It now lives on mostly as an upload to YouTube, where the uploader and Korean commenters marvel at its artistic. The animation, a reminder of both American psychedelic animation like *Yellow Submarine* (1968) and Japan's *Belladonna of Sadness* (1973), harkens back to a history that Korea never had, subject to military dictatorship, cultural censorship, and anti-communism while the global cultural revolution occurred.



[Figure 19 – A surrealist music video in the middle of the film combines 2D and 3D]

These scenes are highlighted in a “making of” video that came with the DVD release which focuses on the use of miniatures and CG to create a “new” type of animation (2003). We are shown that the bar scene and the stage in which the dance takes place were handmade miniatures, and the labor-intensive nature of the production is shown, such as the hand-painted detail of guardian deity statues that briefly appear at the entrance of the film’s museum of human history where the first confrontation between the two main characters occurs, a scene that is

highlighted in the film's promotional materials that combines 2D and 3D in a multi-layered aesthetic [fig. 20].



[Figure 20 – The film's promotional image highlights the aesthetic layering of 2D and 3D]

Even in the most advanced CGI shots highlighted in the 3D POV shots, the use of miniatures and intensive human labor that goes into them is emphasized. The film's opening scene is highlighted as a miniature, in which the construction cranes looming in the background were hand constructed and even hand glued [Fig. 21].



[Figure 21 – Hand glued miniatures show the physical labor that went into the production]

Not only does the tedious labor of the production mirror the exploitative conditions depicted by the film itself, but scenes of Seoul's working-class neighborhoods were also used as reference images for the slums and factories [Fig .22].



[Figure 22 – Reference images of Seoul for the film’s backgrounds]

The DVD extra as a totality traces out the whole production process from miniatures and hand-drawn blueprints, storyboards and hand drawings, computer mapping of environments and motion, and sound production, and the director introduces the film with a pen in hand and a computer behind him, adept at both the old and new technologies. Elements of Koreanness are mostly to be found in these miniatures and other elements lurking in the backgrounds of scenes, such as in the beginning of the film where a masked dancer does a traditional folk dance (samulnori) among a variety of other cultural elements and the main character appears in a folk mask (tal) in the background of the scene.

However, in the film itself the director avoided Koreanness, going for a generic post-apocalyptic look and designing the main characters after Keanu Reeves and Winona Ryder (Martin 2011: 144). In its global release as *Sky Blue*, the film went through major reedits,

changes in dialogue, and the marketing gave no indication that the film was Korean (148). Despite the film's efforts to distinguish itself from Japanese anime, the Japanese release, dubbed and reedited by anime studio GAINAX, was considered by much of the Korean audience the superior version because of a more streamlined story (Namuwiki 2023). *Wonderful Days* was criticized by Korean audiences for not being authentically Korean and instead copying Japanese anime, even by staff that worked on the project, a failure they saw as closely tied to its history of subcontracting rather than original production (Yoon 2010: 213-214; 360) and "a perceived lack of 'creativity' in the "compulsory transition from 2D to 3D and the conflicting in-between experiences this transition encourages" (286). Rather than a strength, the attempt at an original aesthetic seemed to bring out the worst in each and satisfy no one.

The nature of Korea's position in global animation value chain is reflected in the aesthetics of the film itself, with 3D animation spectacle borrowed from the U.S. and 2D animation, the main substance of the film's aesthetic, borrowed from Japan. Korea is reduced to the labor-intensive work of miniatures, background elements, and Korean hands making in-between frames. *Wonderful Days* attempts to draw attention to, animation's "multiplanar image" of cel layers that move in relation to each other within a flat space (Lamarre 2009). For Lamarre, this relation creates an ontological freedom, in which background movements have their own autonomy and movements within foreground explode into multiplicities. But what if imperialism and a global hierarchy of layers were added to animation? Lamarre goes only as far as pointing out that Korean animation "raises questions about whether such animation is actually produced in Japan" (90). The aesthetic contradictions between layers generate contradictions in the narrative, as *Wonderful Days* tries to mimic Japanese anime's eco-criticism, cliché genre elements of Disney, and a Korean anti-colonial, proletarian undercurrent in a mishmash.

The Proletariat in Transition

Wonderful Days takes place in a dystopian world destroyed by pollution. The rich political elite live in a city named Ecoban which is literally powered by the pollution produced by the industrial wasteland outside the city, Marr. In the opening scroll, Ecoban is called an “arc” that protects “human civilization” from both the ecological catastrophe and class struggle outside. A voiceover explains that refugees were turned away and settled in the oil fields, all over ominous music. This leads to the opening scene of the film in the present, where Marrian industrial workers producing energy suffer an industrial accident and the Ecoban ruling elite, differentiated from the working class in their extravagant, ascetic fashion, show indifference to the lives of the latter.

An early dispute between one of the main characters and the film’s most irredeemably evil villain sets its class conflict. In the scene, Jay, a woman of Ecoban, salutes the production site’s supervisor (commander Locke in the dub) and asks him to stop work for the safety of the workers, to which he scoffs and responds that the workers are mere beasts of burden meant to be worked to death. When the production site collapses, Locke tells a Marrian supervisor to abandon them and when he objects, Jay is told to shoot him. She hesitates, using a technicality of her position to get out of the task, and Locke shoots instead. A second worker then disconnects the bridge they are standing on from the rig, with scenes of its collapse and dozens of workers shown falling to their deaths. Locke commands Jay to return to Ecoban, frustrated by her lack of obedience, but showing indifference and even amusement at the deaths of the workers and the collapse of the production rig.

In this allegorical representation of South Korea's historical combination of military discipline and capitalist development, the main dispute between Jay and other Ecoban citizens is over the most efficient means of labor discipline. Jay, in discussing the incident, objects to fellow Ecoban citizen Simon that such actions will provoke riots and that mass violence is counter-productive to their energy needs. Simon attempts to find a middle ground, criticizing the implications of Jay's words for their social reproduction but agreeing that commander Locke's methods are too extreme. Jay leaves the conversation cynical and powerless against the dehumanization endemic to Ecoban's basic functioning, and it takes the main character Shua's emergence to give her hope. Shua lives in the polluted slums and is working on behalf of his father to steal the code for the energy system of Ecoban in order to destroy it. On the run after a successful theft, he runs into Jay, and when they confront each other she realizes he is a former citizen of Ecoban she played with as a child but believed was dead. Coming from the ruling elite but living among the workers, he is the figure with the potential to unite them in class harmony.

Wonderful Days' opening scenes of manual labor in heavy industry is reminiscent of the propagandistic scenes of industrial construction in *Robot Taekwon V* (1976), Korea's most well-known animated film, and reassembly of the robot in its many sequels across both military dictatorship periods. *Robot Taekwon V* represented "the prosperity of the nation through the symbols of the heavy chemical industry, the visual images that implied the power of the steel industry, [and] a symbol of national confidence, scientific achievement and successful industrial development" (Lee 2020: 154) and in critiquing this image, *Wonderful Days* seeks to pick up where Korean animation had been left behind by the military dictatorship. In fact, in the same year as *Wonderful Days*, a "near-complete film print of [*Robot Taekwon V*] was discovered" after being lost for decades, which generated a huge amount of nostalgia and nationalism around

the film (Magnan-Park 2011: 111), its anti-communism repurposed under a progressive administration and targeted at Japan (112). Restaging Korea's Fordist past in the democratic present, *Wonderful Days* is representing not only the industrial remnants of development but what previously could not be represented, the radical worker unionism that was still a regular occurrence on the streets of Seoul.

The movie picks up the love story subplot in the middle of a riot by the Marrian slumdweller. The riot resembles the militant labor protests of the 1980s that overthrew the military dictatorship, with masked and headbanded groups waving red flags and confronting riot police with makeshift clubs. But as Jay enters the scene, the slum rebellion gains a mystical quality. She passes through a mist as chanting Buddhist monks go by and disappear again. Shua enters the scene in conversation with a blacksmith who laments that "now they are rioting in the morning, guess that means no business today." Earlier class conflict is replaced by riots of the precariat in a carnivalesque space of heterogeneity and directionless, non-ideological violence, which the characters are no longer interested in. Shua's surrogate younger brother Woody navigates through the fights between the rioters and police to find his goggles and Shua and Jay look for each other on motorcycles. Shua rescues Jay in her motorcycle first from a Molotov cocktail and then a rocket launcher, transitioning from the representation of working-class struggle to an image of organized terrorism, an image closer to global fears in the wake of the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq than Korean society. From these deterritorialized images the film leaves behind the riots to pursue Jay and Shua's middle-class love story (Lovins 2022: 6), without ever showing any resolution to the riot scene.

Whereas earlier scenes of class struggle corresponded to a lingering Korean industrial proletariat forged in class struggle, its dissolution into mist corresponded to a developing neoliberalism. The KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions), the radical umbrella union that had broken with the FKTU (Federation of Korean Trade Unions), the historical yellow union tolerated by the dictatorship, had only been created in 1995. Soon after, labor reforms caused both unions to declare a general strike in 1996, the first of its kind in Korean history. The strike, which provoked widespread middle-class support against the secretive and dishonest mechanisms for forcing the reforms through, forced the government to back off. But in substance, nearly everything in the bill was passed in parts and the post-strike labor movement was too weak to resist (Koo 2000). By 1997 and the IMF crisis, the new liberal Kim Dae-jung administration attempted to share the pain of the crisis in a tripartite commission of government, management, and workers, a form of political representation the labor movement had long sought. Initially accepting its position as a partner in austerity, rank-and-file resistance caused the KCTU to pull out and take a hardline stance. IMF dictate, forced through regardless, led to further labor conflicts, and the KCTU remained illegal until 1999, a decade after so-called “democratization.”

2003 continued 1997’s political clashes: 5 years of neoliberalism under Kim Dae-jung fundamentally reshaped both the Korean economy and the Korean political scene, with a neoliberal, pro-globalization liberal political elite becoming hegemonic against the fractured and defeated state-capitalist right wing tied to the dictatorship. But on the streets, a very different image: a national wide rail strike of 150,000 workers, led by the president of the KCTU in jail for two years, as the culmination of violent clashes between riot police and company thugs against workers and democratic activists. Workers set themselves on fire and the union president

at Hanjin Heavy Industries, Kim Ju-Ik, hung himself from a crane on the company's premises. All of this under Roh Moon-hyun, a new president seen as to the left of Kim, elected after some of the largest protests in the country's history in the wake of the acquittal of two American soldiers who ran over and killed two Korean schoolgirls in November of 2002.

These protests reveal the contradictions at play in the image of South Korea in *Wonderful Days*. On the one hand they were constituted on old issues of the Marxist left: anti-imperialism left over from the role of the United States in the Gwangju massacre, national pride and anti-Japanese sentiment immediately after the 2002 world cup co-hosted by Korea and Japan in which Korea, making it further than Japan to the semi-finals, got "payback for colonialism" (Longman 2002). But these protests also pioneered the form new social movements would take in Korea, from the usage of the internet and abstract, virally spreadable images like candlelight vigils and the predominance of youth and possessing physical space in the city, and thus contained "South Korea's robust social movement tradition," the "nationalistic and festive gathering of the recent World Cup", and a fashioning of "new political sensibilities liberated from authoritarian era preconceptions and limits" in the new age of the internet's "cultural ignition process" simultaneously (Kang 2016: 3;5).

As a spectacular image, industrial labor conflict remained an image all Koreans would be familiar with in 2003, as the KCTU sought forgiveness for its initial capitulation with increasing radicalism. But as a social force, labor was fading, unable to keep up with the new neoliberal regime of irregular workers and the fracturing of the political alliances of the past.

Ecological Utopianism

In leaving behind the working class, Shua finds his motivation to fight Ecoban. In the finale, Shua unites with the slum dwellers he previously looked down on, with the blacksmith and rioters symbolically brought together in the DIY welded tank used in the final assault on Ecoban. But this is Shua's plan, and the slum dwellers sacrifice themselves in their tank while Shua flies above them in an air glider for his personal redemption.

Shua's utopian solution that will save both Ecoban and Marr is the mythical land of Gibraltar, representing as the end of pollution, the clearing of the sky, and the beginning of classless society. It is eventually revealed that the environment has already recovered and there is not enough pollution to continue to run Ecoban. The Ecoban elite were therefore conspiring to produce pollution and eventually kill the rest of the Maraan population off and by extension themselves, turning into a parasitic class that would sooner destroy the environment than allow it to heal itself. To match the declassed lumpen-precariat, the bourgeoisie is replaced by a neo-feudalist aristocracy which is purely parasitic on nature's internal harmony. Rather than revolution, classless society comes from nature as a self-healing system, merely to be discovered and allowed to thrive. Utopia is achieved through the love of Simon for Jay, the antagonist who originally pushed Shua into the slums out of jealousy and is redeemed by sacrificing himself for their sake, while Jay becomes a passive agent to be rescued and then sacrifice herself. Even the initial regression to a Disney-esque gendered middle class fantasy that is "indifferent to race, class, and social conflict" (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 83), fails, substituting nature for the agency of characters and classes.

This eco-utopian solution saturates the setting as well. Jay, on her motorcycle back from the industrial accident to Ecoban rides through a giant metal spine, with Ecoban represented as

the brain that is connected to the working body but artificially separated and Jay’s motorcycle as the connecting thread between the worlds [fig. 23]. After the riots, Jay and Shua meet in an abandoned windfarm and then on the boat that Shua lives on, the only location in the film with any remaining nature. Birds, fish, flowers, gusts of winds and rays of sunlight hint at what could be, emphasized by its international release as “Blue Sky”.



[Figure 23 – The spine that connects the natural and the artificial shown during the credits]

Ecology as a utopian solution to class conflict is a major feature of postmodernism (Jameson 2003). *Wonderful Days* finds it in Japanese anime and Japanese postmodernism: superflat’s “eco-rejuvenation” after the atomic bomb and at end of the world (Lamarre 2009, 142), the postmodern rejection of grand narratives and the “extinction of nature” (183), and Studio Ghibli’s reframing of the relationship between technology and nature (49). For Lamarre, these reflections on nature are expressed aesthetically through animation’s layering. *Wonderful*

Days contains these aesthetic features as well: Jay and Shua's motorbikes are computer generated 3D animation while the riots are 2D flat backgrounds, a chance to show off the rich movement of the bikes in animated space as well as the 3D effect of a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) being launched. This contradiction between 2D "animatism" and 3D "cinematism" (10) has the effect of separating the characters in their motorcycles from the world around them, emphasized in climactic confrontation in the cold, artificial 3D world of Ecoban. But there is another aspect of this borrowing of Japanese anime that is problematic in the Korean context. Japanese ecological utopianism in anime can equally stand for the "rising sun" after the end of the Earth "as a symbol of Japanese integration, of Japanese nationalism and empire" (Lamarre 143), otakudom's theaters of "love and fascism" (154) and the immanence of Nazi racial ideology to Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian concern with technology and ecological destruction. *Wonderful Days*, in borrowing an aesthetic from the imperialist core, borrows an ideology as well.

Although South Korea has a long history of ecologically minded literature (Thornber 2012: 78) and protests against breakneck industrialization under the military dictatorship had ecological content (80), ecology as an alternative to Marxism and working-class politics is an American import and itself a kind of political colonialism and linguistic imperialism (Kim 2014: 2). Historically, not only were ecological concerns separated from proletarian class struggle alien to South Korea, they were associated with Japanese "reactionary environmentalism" (Reitan 2017), in which ecofascism became an ideological justification for the Japanese empire and rural degradation served as a motivator of Japanese settler colonialism in Korea. During the colonial period Korea became associated with the "primitive" natural state of pre-modern Japanese folk practice, both the object of a nostalgic gaze for Japanese colonizers and destined to

backwardness (Atkins 2010, 132). What Iyko Day calls “romantic anti-capitalism” based on “Malthusian, ecofascist and eugenicist beliefs” (2020) took Asians as the cause of environmental destruction even within Asia, with Japanese imperialism reproducing ideologies of racial hierarchy even while advocating a pan-Asian Empire. But what distinguished the Japanese empire from previous settler-colonialism, and thus necessitated this contradictory racial ideology, was the lateness of Empire which found an already formed Korean nation and modernity (Gottesman 2020). Korean anti-imperialism confronted Japanese ecofascism with an increasingly proletarian movement with no nostalgia for the past and a commitment to modernization and materialism.

Emerging out of the Japanese colonial period, a common understanding that a failure to modernize had been the cause of colonial occupation and national humiliation united North and South Korea and the subsequent military dictatorship in the South as well as its opponents, who increasingly turned towards the working class and Marxism to resist. Even the “New Community Movement,” the military dictatorship’s concept of rural revitalization, took modernization as its starting point.

In the 1980s, the minjung movement looked for an authentic Korean “people” in folk culture, and this return to the past for the first time critiqued industrial modernity’s relationship to nature (Kim and Kim 2023) and ecological conceptions of modernity that were repressed by the drive towards industrialization (Park 2018), replacing class struggle with a more abstract, individualistic concept (Lee 2011, 4). Nevertheless, it elevated factory workers and farmers as “true minjung” and in practice took the form of students going to the workers and farmers (11) as well as a reevaluation of North Korean socialism (6). More fundamentally, though breaking with

“the metanarrative of state-led development”, Minjung was “not conceived as a primordial opposition to modernity and modernization” (6). It was, at its core, a restoration of a “true historical subjectivity” to Korea’s “failed history,” (4-5), fundamentally distinct from the post-modern end of historical metanarratives.

It was only in the wake of the breakdown of this alliance in the post-democratic period, the crisis of Marxism and communism, and Korea’s exposure to “financial difficulties caused by global economic crises” that environmental movements gained autonomy in theory and political practice (Park 2018, 506; 524). But even here, new rural movements were opposed to any “romanticism” of the “idyllic” rural past, confronting “all political, social and economic problems in partnership with different types of progressive groups “(Park 2016, 106).

The combination in imagery of old and new social movements reflected an objective situation: Korea’s inability to leave behind its industrial, proletarian past. Even the renewed candlelight protests in 2016 against Park Geun-hye, which took much further the characteristics of a street festival postmodern, multi-identity “captivation” (Kang 2016), grew out of protests on the same site that were already occurring throughout 2015 over labor reforms, the president’s reputation as the “daughter of a dictator”, the Sewol ferry disaster, and a confrontation between the government and the KCTU over the arrest of its president Han Sang-gyun. More fundamentally, the financial bubble of the post-IMF period was a mere blip in Korea’s dependence on manufacturing, which has remained the core of Korea’s economy despite theories of so-called neoliberal “financialization” (Jeong 2007).

Wonderful Days attempts to “imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world,” (Jameson 2003) a mimicry of the postmodern condition. But if Korea’s reality does not easily conform to that condition, the world itself must shrink to compensate.

The final scene and last showcase of the multi-type layer animation has computer generated clouds and a sun shine light on the hand-drawn backgrounds and characters. This has the effect of highlighting the flatness and painterliness of the 2D and miniatures, the advancement of Korean 3D animation overwhelming everything else. But this is followed by an image on a map, revealing Gibraltar to be a tiny island with an inconceivably tiny population given the opening images of massive industrial manufacturing and class struggle. The scene lingers on Shua flying in the clouds, leaving behind the island shrinking from view for the openness of the sky. A visual metaphor for the hoped-for future of Korean animation, the result was instead the film and industry remaining stuck on that small island it wished to leave behind, dragged back by Korean material realities.

The Afterlives of Wonderful Days

Wonderful Days did have two unexpected fans. Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, co-creators of American animated show *Avatar the Last Airbender* (2005-2008), had originally wanted to outsource production of the show to Japan, having grown up watching Japanese anime and envisioning an anime-inspired martial arts for the action and an Asian setting with Asian characters. The Japanese studios were uninterested, and so after being recommended *Wonderful Days* by a friend, DiMartino and Konietzko decided to animate the show in Korea with the film’s studio Tin House. Tin House, as is typical of the Korean animation production system, went through various restructurings, becoming JM animation and

then studio Mir, working on both *Avatar* and its follow up *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014). *Avatar* and *Korra* became huge successes for Studio Mir and “Korean” animation. Not only did the show win Emmy and Annie awards, it marked the first time a Korean won either award, Sang Jin Kim of MOI Animation (a spinoff of DR Movie that did work on season three) receiving an Emmy Award in 2006 and Jae Myung Yoo of JM Animation winning an Annie Award in January 2007. Most promisingly, as *Avatar* went on and particularly during the production of *Korra*, Koreans took on more and more of the creative labor, taking over character designs, backgrounds, and even participating in storyboarding and the direction of the show. Studio Mir would go on to produce its own animation for Netflix directly distributed to global audiences with *Voltron: Legendary Defender* (2016-2018), *Dota: Dragon's Blood* (2021), and *The Witcher: Nightmare of the Wolf* (2021), and the studio’s Ryu Gi-hyun would become executive director of Netflix animation division in 2019. Bypassing Japan, Netflix went straight to Korea, which worked hard, was willing to work exclusively for Netflix, and already had longstanding relationships with American studios, and Studio Mir was happy to bet on Netflix to take on Japanese anime in the American market. Despite the failure of *Lookism*, Netflix is involving itself even further in Korean animation, directly producing *Lost in Starlight*, its first Korean-Language animated film (Chang 2023).

But whether working with Nickelodeon on *Avatar* and *Korra* or Netflix on *Dota*, the American home office never gave up final control over the intellectual property at the top of the value chain and is driven by an economic race to the bottom. *Squid Game* (2021), the massively successful Korean Netflix show, cost 5 to 10 times less to make in Korea as it would have in the United States (Sherman 2021). And despite all its work on *Avatar*, Studio Mir has been left in the cold for the Netflix “live action” remake, with digital work done by DNEG Virtual

Production, a British VFX studio. The new Netflix produced shows are an evolution of the American animation value chain which initially turned to Korea to outmaneuver American labor unions in animation (Sito 2006, 262), globalized and fully “fables.”

In the other direction, Studio Mir produced *Big Fish and Begonia* (2016), a Korean-Chinese coproduction in which Korea served as production lead and China served as outsourcing labor. Though the film was not particularly successful, China built on it to develop its own animation industry, relying on its massive internal market for recent successes like 3D films *Ne Zha* (2019) and *Monkey King Reborn* (2021) and 2D television show *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (2018-2021). Despite state-led policy shifts to emphasize the domestic market, foreign success has not followed and China, once the center of global animation outsourcing, is already losing out to cheaper alternatives (Li 2011, 196). Following the model of Korean animation, *Wonderful Days* is an image of Chinese animation’s future.

DR Movie also briefly attempted to work with Chinese animation studios but now has established itself comfortably in global outsourcing production. Outside of its work for major Japanese anime, it has worked on experimental animations for new platforms like Crunchyroll’s attempt at an American animated show *High Guardian Spice* and AMC+’s *Pantheon* based off a Ken Liu science fiction story (along with Nepalese studio Incessant Rain). Though both series were critical and commercial failures, they show that Korean animation outsourcing continues to leverage the spaces between the Japanese and American animation value chains and maintain its relative advantage against new, low-end challengers.

Independence, the film’s VFX studio, went through a series of permutations before its founder directed *Red Shoes and the Seven Dwarfs*, a 2019 Korean 3D animated film. The film,

with famous Korean Disney animator Kim Jin as animation director, music by emmy-award winning American composer Geoff Zanelli, and a star studded cast of English voice actors, was a box office failure. A flawed marketing campaign, in which a skinny and fat Snow White were compared with “what if Snow White was no longer beautiful and the 7 dwarves not so short?” provoked widespread condemnation on social media and disavowal from Chloe Moretz, the voice of Snow White (Mcnary 2017). Despite the promise of using Koreans in the American animation industry to bridge the industrial and cultural gap, a strategy used in Korea’s industrial development, *Red Shoes* was instead an embarrassing reminder of the difficulty of America’s rapidly changing marketing environment enabled by social media. The film is a technical success, but the gap between the American and Korean industries remains massive, as shown by Autodesk, *Wonderful Days*’ onetime partner, following up its work on *Avatar* (2009) with VFX on the multi-billion dollar *Avatar 2: The Way of Water* (2022). Compared to James Cameron’s highly lucrative technological auteurship, *Red Shoes*’s muddled message and botched pandering to global audiences globalizes the criticism that met *Wonderful Days* from Koreans themselves.

After nearly two decades of obscurity, *Wonderful Days* was rereleased in 2020 with new voice actors, new lines, and the opening narration removed. This was a de-facto response to much of the criticism of the initial film, emphasizing the central conflict and the relationships between the characters (Namuwiki 2023). Director Kim Moon-saeng, when asked about the rerelease, called on audiences to use this opportunity not to reevaluate the film but to meet the “challenge” of developing the future of Korean animation (Jo 2020). Though quickly forgotten, the film remains a marvel of labor and technology, a unique aesthetic experiment, and the foundation for much of the subsequent Korean animation industry. But few have dared to match the director’s challenge to the American and Japanese monopolies of the global animation

value chain, instead further integrating themselves in subordinate positions. In an epoch of globalized commodity production, Korean animation is therefore the rule rather than the exception, shedding light on the very success of Korean development itself as also dependent on American “platform imperialism” (Jin 2015) and monopoly-led global value chains. *Wonderful Days* was the apogee of a transitional moment when it appeared that South Korea could transcend its dual dependence on America and Japan and join them in “creative” labor. It was brought back down to Earth (or Gibraltar) by global imperialism and its junior partner in the Korean state-corporate nexus.

Conclusion

The weakness of the best Marxist theories of Chinese underdevelopment vis-à-vis imperialism are China’s continued economic growth and seeming immunity to American economic warfare. The post-CHIPS act period has seen China move up the value chain in a variety of sectors and even become world leader in many technological processes, so much so that American politics has centered around the question of “reindustrialization” of processes currently dominated by China. Will Sam King’s analysis of Chinese poverty, based on gdp-per-capita statistics at the time of writing, hold up in five or ten years? The logical alternatives, which are denying the capitalist nature of Chinese industrialization and positing China as an anti-imperialist, socialist power (Ross 2023) or claiming that Chinese capitalism is exploiting the US working class in a world where imperialism no longer applies (Harvey 2016, 169), are much more fatal to the theoretical coherence of imperialism as a concept and its revolutionary political consequences. While it is probably true as Minqi Li posits that the ecosystem does not have enough resources or a large enough periphery to support the Chinese people at Korean living

standards (Li 2016), making the question somewhat moot, this is a regression into theories of imperialism outside the value form and tells us little about the present conjecture.

However, if Korea is incorporated as a reference point, there is still significant room for Chinese capitalist development to move up the value chain without thereby violating the fundamental division of the world into monopoly and non-monopoly capitalism. This is not just a theoretical point but a practical one for Korean animation. Despite its domestic box-office failure, *Wonderful Days* was not just a foundation for the Korean animation industry but even the Chinese animation industry, and this article has only touched on a few of the products that grew out of its production. It therefore continues to inform their potentialities and limitations to the present.

Chapter Five: The Nature of Outsourcing and its Ideological Presuppositions

It's not completely accurate to say that *Fly! Spaceship Geobuksan* was forgotten. In 1992, a video game *Space TurtleShip* (Uju Geobuksan) was released for the Super Aladdin Boy (originally Super Gam*Boy). The Super Aladdin Boy was the Korean name for the Japanese Sega Mega Drive. Since Japanese cultural exports to Korea were still banned well into the 1990s, Samsung became responsible for licensing Sega products in Korea and rebranding them (Nintendo worked with Hyundai on the Comboy series). Unlike the rebranded Sega console, Samsung produced *Space TurtleShip* in Korea to support the release, though the game is suspiciously similar to the 1988 Mega Drive game *Tatsujin*. Nevertheless, it was the first 16-bit game produced by Koreans, a historical milestone, and the only game produced by Samsung in-house for the console.

The game is mostly forgotten as is the animation it is based on, but I have dredged it up as an interesting moment when Samsung and Korean animation once again collided. Samsung was now too large for the state to control and had received its wish of liberalized capital markets and foreign exchange. Flush with cash, an economic bubble was rapidly growing as, also in 1992, foreigners were for the first time allowed to invest in the Korean stock market, though still with limits and regulations. As we saw in the previous chapter, this eventually led to massive state and corporate investment after the Asian financial crisis. Between the last Park-era nationalistic animation and arguably the first neoliberal-era Korean video game, a new dictatorship served as midwife against its own best efforts.

Korean Animation in the 1980s

The new Chun Doo-hwan military government cracked down on the brief freedom of the democratic era but also, in an attempt to legitimize itself, also cracked down on the culture of the Park era, including animation. As chapter two discussed, science fiction robot animations were specifically criticized. Despite this crackdown, sequels continued to be made and *Super Taekwon V* (1982) was released after *Robot Taekwon V: Underground Escape* failed to find funding, itself a copy of another low-budget sci-fi feature (Ho 2002, 92). But continuity disguised change. Now without government support, *Super Taekwon V* had to look elsewhere for funding. The film became an opportunity for joint production with a toy company, and after the film's success at the box office this source of domestic funding became indispensable to domestic animation (93) in the early 1980s, the first sign of privatization of cultural production. But to save costs, Korean companies bought old Japanese toy molds (82), merely shifting the area of dependence on the Japanese economy.

Along with the private sector came a diversification of source material. As the previous chapter discussed, Korean animators turned to Western comic books and soon borrowed just about anything popular. Both *An Alien Prince Who Rode a UFO* (1983) and *Golden Pencil and Alien Boy* (1983) "borrowed" from Stephen Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982), which had only been released in 1984 after domestic animation had a shot at the domestic market. *Golden Pencil and Alien Boy* was in the older model of import substitution, being produced by Lee Soo-young who came back to Korea after working for Disney. But neither impacted *E.T.*'s popularity, which was hugely successful in character merchandise like stationery, snacks and children's shoes as well as on the recent video market (84).

The Chun dictatorship soon found its own use value for culture. South Korean media in the 1980s had its own, late capitalist version of bread and circuses: “sex, screen, and sports” or the “three S policy” (Kim 2021). The theory claims that the new Chun Do-hwan dictatorship wanted to distract the population, which had previously rebelled in Gwangju in 1980 and whom Chun had suppressed in his rise to power, and to do so reversed the previously conservative moral censorship for sleaze under Park Chung-hee. Whether this was a purposeful policy or simply part of a larger cultural reevaluation of the previous period and opening to global cultural trends, erotic movies did take over the screens of Korea, most famously 1982’s “Madame Aema” which was wildly successful, selling over 315,000 tickets in a single first-run theater and twelve sequels (Nam 2014). An era of erotic movies was ushered in trying to capitalize on its success. Though few watch the film today, the scene of Madame Aema riding a horse while naked lives on in popular culture and the term is still used by people of that generation for “loose” women.

The Chun government equally applied the 3S policy to animation. First were sports, where *Dokgo Tak: Throw toward the Sun* and *The Golden Arm*, baseball themed animated films were funded by the government in 1983 to celebrate the founding of the Korean baseball league the year prior (Kim 2013, 48). The leadup to the 1988 Seoul Olympics incentivized further production, with another baseball themed film *Kkachi the Wanderer* and *Go on Running, Hodori*, featuring the tiger mascot of the games, both released on Children’s Day of 1987 (49). Despite the still infant toy market, government approval was not just required to justify these bread and circuses, it was one of the few means to make domestic animation at all: “at the time, an imported animated work that ran for 30 minutes cost on average USD 1,500, whereas a self-produced piece went for USD 62,500” (49).

The market itself had also changed. Koreans had been making color TVs for export for over a decade. Whether seeking legitimacy through encouraging a consumer society or lacking the legitimacy to suppress it, Koreans experienced rising purchasing power and bought color TVs en-masse. First made available in 1980 for purchase, by 1985 50% of households had a color TV, increasing to 66% by 1990 (Kwon and Kim 2013, 521).

Feature-length animation could no longer justify its cost, and for the first time Korean television animation became the focus of the industry. The most well-known television show from the period is *Dooly: The Little Dinosaur* (1987-1988). Made immensely popular on rebroadcast in the 1990s, it was initially criticized by the government and civic groups because Dooly talked back to his elders and wore a crooked hat (Ahn 2019) and even the choice of a dinosaur as the main character was made to avoid government censorship (Baek 2013). Nevertheless, the show could navigate government pressure because it was less dependent on it. Rather than the effort of government propaganda, it was an adaptation of a Korean comic [manhwa]^{xliiii}, also the case for *Meoteol Dosa* (1989), *Run Hany* (1989), and *Fly! Superboard!* (1990), all adaptations of already popular source material and all broadcast on television (Kim 2013, 50-51). With democratization came the relaxation of state control over broadcasting, and the beginning of cable tv broadcasting in 1995 saw a proliferation of channels including Tooniverse, a channel devoted solely to animation.

Breaking with the past did not come easily. *Bridal Mask* (1986), anti-communist animated film, came out only a year before the overthrow of the Chun dictatorship. As late as 1991, Japanese anime *Akira* (1988) was released in Korea as *Storm Boy* (1991). Japanese films were still technically banned, so the Korean distributor colluded with a Hong Kong company to release the film in Korea as a Hong Kong production (Hwang 1998, 159). Released with 40

minutes cut from the original, the film was dubbed and localized poorly into Korean. The illegal release was discovered a month later and both distributors were punished, but this time the pirate market distributed the VHS tape outside of the government's control, influencing a whole generation of Korean animators (Lee 2018; Ahn 2013). Meanwhile, an animated film produced by the recently opened Lotte World, *Lotti's Adventure* (1990), advertised its characters without the permission of Lotti's original creator and provoked a four-year lawsuit. The supreme court eventually ruled in favor of Lotte World's right to use and modify character advertising, setting the stage for the future of merchandise-driven animation (Hwang 1998, 159). With merchandise came exports, and *Kkachi the Wanderer* was exported to Germany, Thailand, Taiwan, and other countries (Kim 2013, 49). For the first time, Korean animation had to consider foreign audiences, and with a weak domestic market, animation followed in the path of other Korean popular culture products, such as *Hamos the Green Chariot* (1997)'s relative success in Japan and *BASToF Lemon* (2001), a fingerboard based animation exported to the U.S. and Japan with merchandising success (65-66).

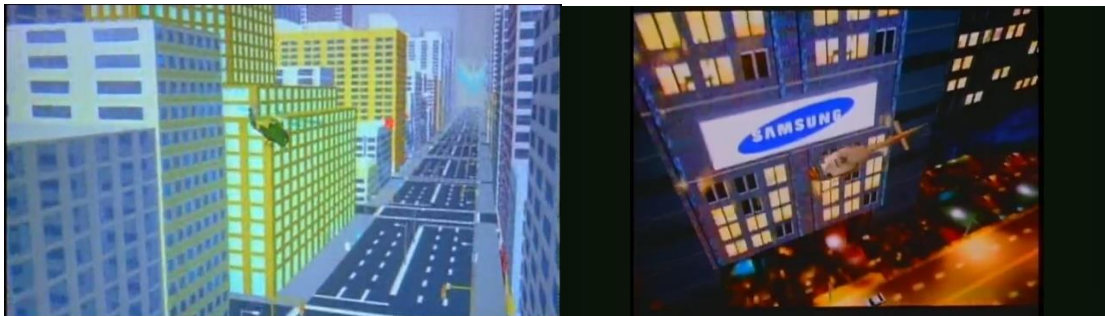
A final tendency emerged in the 1980s: attempting to overcome the objective backwardness of the Korean animation industry through leapfrogging technology. The earliest example was *Taegeuk boy white eagle* (1979). Though in substance a copy of the Japanese series *Gatchaman* (1972), it was technically the world's first 3D animation feature (Choo 2014, 155). Requiring special 3D glasses to view, the poster made the nationalist appeal of the technology explicit: "Wow! Exciting! Completely three- dimensional full- length animation film that only our country's children will get to see for the first time in the world" (155-156). The creator even applied for a patent on the technology (Ho 2002, 182).

More impactful was *Armageddon* (1996), also based on a comic but with an enormous budget of 2.1 billion KRW and nearly all production done by Korean labor including one of the first Korean usages of CGI (Kim 2013, 52). Though unsuccessful at the box office, that it was criticized mostly for its story rather than technical ability was, given the industry's low expectations, a positive sign (Ho 2002, 127). *The Choson Ilbo* captured the mood of the time with an editorial titled "animation is industry" and the production team behind the film recorded the production process, attempting to provide guidance to the industry (127-128). Amid free-flowing government and corporate funding, *The Steel Force* (1999) was Korea's first 100% digital feature-length animation (and the second in the world after 1995's *Toy Story*) and *The Story of Chunhyang* (1999), a modern retelling of the folktale, was Korea's first 2D digital film coordinated with Dolby THX sound to the cost of 2.4 billion KRW (133).

By the early 1990s, these efforts seemed to be paying off, and the success of the animated film *Dooly the Little Dinosaur: The Ice Planet Adventure* (1996) led to the company behind the film selling syndication rights to a German company and several other countries. The company, named "Doolynara" – a pun on the nationalistic term for South Korea as "urinara" [our country] – showed what was at stake, and a deal with Warner Brothers was nearly completed. But it failed after the IMF crisis (Kim 2013, 55).

Korean animation would finally get a proper "3S" sleaze animation long after the end of the dictatorship that needed it, 1994's *Blue Seagull*. The film was successful in Korea purely because of its novelty and raciness, despite borrowing elements of Japanese anime films like *Golgo 13* (1983) and *Wicked City* (1987). The film's plot combines a sword from the Joseon era, the FBI, and Japanese Yakuza in an action-packed, mostly incoherent hyper-violent and hyper-sexual film with many famous Korean voice actors and a combination of production companies.

Anipia, in charge of animation production, had only worked on American outsourcing contracts, Yongseong Cinecom, in charge of production, had no experience with animation, and Paradise, in charge of CG, lacked technology and expertise. Out of the three efforts, the CG was most effective at adding to the novelty, and the film sold 450,000 tickets despite a poor critical reception and legacy (Noh and Yang 2010, 141). But even this was an echo of the era of Japanese industrial mimicry. *Golgo 13* was one of the first Japanese anime to use computer animation, notably for the movement of a helicopter in a three-dimensional space. In an echo of the hyperbolic nationalism of the previous period, the scene and technology were replicated but this time with the Samsung logo briefly appearing in the background [Fig. 24]

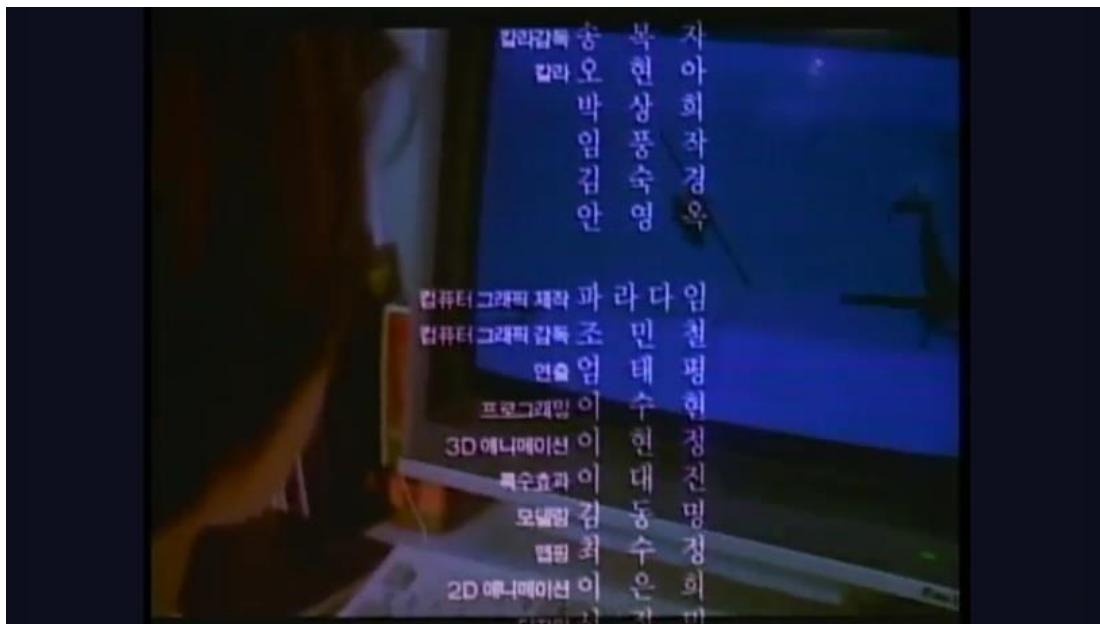


[Figure 24 – *Golgo 13* and *Blue Seagull* CGI helicopters]

Following *Blue Seagull*'s success was *Return of the Hero Hong Gil-dong* (1995), a de-facto Japanese coproduction as discussed in chapter two and criticized by Nelson Shin as “Samurai Hong Gil-dong” because of the main characters appearance (Yu and Lent 2001, 95). *Hungry Best 5* (1995) got dangerously close to *Slam Dunk* (1993-1996) and *Soul Frame Lazenca* (1997), commissioned by Tooniverse with a budget of 2 billion KRW (Kim 2013, 50), was Korea's version of the *Gundam* franchise. Though the latter work was only moderately successful on the video market, the animation's opening song by Korean rock band NEXT, a

Korean answer to the J-pop opening songs of Japanese anime that were an essential part of Japanese anime's global success, remains popular to this day.

In the shadow of Japan, *Blue Seagull* was the last gasp of the “hyperbolic nationalism” of the dictatorship era that lasted into the pre-IMF democratic period, now with increasingly American computer technology. Since the film lacks originality on the international stage, the end credits emphasize the Koreanness at the heart of the film instead. Starting with the voice actresses recording their lines, the camera takes a tour of the animation studio, showing every aspect of the production. The manual labor of coloring/inking, sweeping the dust from the animation stand on every frame, and drawing are shown alongside the automated labor of the computerized CG that went into the helicopter scene [Fig. 25] and the advanced equipment used for sound recording and filming. Considering almost every character in the film looks like a foreigner, it was wise to remind the audience that this was, in fact, a Korean film.



[Figure 25 – The credits of *Blue Seagull* show off the new computer technology that made the helicopter scene possible]

Why, then, did the film leave no legacy, instead serving as a blip in the further expansion of the outsourcing industry and furthering the distance between animated children's TV and adult-oriented film? The secret lies in the nature of outsourcing.

The Concept of Outsourcing

Though today the outsourcing bubble of the 1980s-1990s is decried as the cause of Korean animation's failure, at the time outsourcing was just another stage in shadowing Japanese industrialization. The relationship between domestic Korean production and outsourcing goes back to the origins of not only the Korean animation industry but the Japanese animation industry, far enough that "domestic" starts to lose its coherence as a concept.

"Subcontracting" as a term has existed for centuries to refer to hiring a third party to do part of the work for a final product, but "outsourcing" has only existed as a term only since 1982 to refer to hiring a third-party to do work that the main company does not have the ability to do and is responsible for its part of the production network. Though etymologically the latter term is a special case of subcontracting that emerged with neoliberalism and globalization, with the spread of global manufacturing, subcontracting has come to mean specifically the hiring of a third party to do work one can do and according to specifications from the main contractor (Mieghem 1999, 954). That is, as outsourcing becomes more dominant, subcontracting becomes a special case of outsourcing.

When does outsourcing or subcontracting become co-production? Co-production can either take place between two companies or two countries, and in both cases an equal partnership splits production tasks which neither could do on its own. Company co-production strategies go as far back as attempts to establish a "film Europe movement" going back to 1904 while "state

led” co-productions are a post-WWII phenomenon, beginning with the Franco-Italian Co-Production Agreement of 1949 and the larger economic changes of post-war Fordism that allowed nation-state cultural protectionism (Parc 2020, 448).

Even in these business terms, the ideological stakes of labeling a production outsourcing, subcontracting, or co-production are clear. To co-produce is to be acknowledged as an equal party, particularly as a nation-state, whereas to outsource is to be barely acknowledged in the final product, lost in the complexities of global value chains. Subcontracting is too ambiguous to satisfy anyone except as an intermediate demand. Most importantly, these terms come out of the postcolonial period, when nation-states confronted each other equally as political entities but unequally as economic units. The first system of postcolonialism created the first system of animation outsourcing: Korean work on Japan’s first feature-length animated film *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors (Momotaro: Umi No Shinpei)* (1945).

Proto-Postcolonialism

At first glance, *Momotaro* is a clearly Japanese production created for the purposes of a clearly colonial empire. Directed by Mitsuyo Seo, it was commissioned by the Navy as propaganda for children to give positive images of the war just as the Japanese Navy was suffering bitter defeats.

But as the Japanese empire came into crisis, the first inklings of postcolonialism were already manifesting. The Japanese empire had always contained a contradiction between its anticolonial critique of Europe and leading a unity of Asian people in an “Asian Co-prosperity sphere” and a racist vision of the Yamato race bringing civilization to inferior peoples. In Korea, this contradiction met the resistance of the Korean people to Japanese rule. The Japanese

met the 1919 March 1st uprising, the first great challenge to Japanese colonialism, with a relaxation of cultural repression (which loosely corresponded to the relatively relaxed peak of “taisho democracy” in Japan) only to restore the repressive apparatus at the start of the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and then 1937. But the return of repression did not mean the dehumanization of Koreans. In fact, with the Chinese frontier opened and Korea in the middle, Koreans were now an asset instead of burden, and though cultural censorship and political repression continued to accelerate, a shift from “vulgar” to “polite” racism occurred as well (Fujitani 2011). These two discourses continued to intermix in space and time, and by the end of the Empire Koreans had gone so far as to gain seats in the Japanese diet, against the objections of Japanese settlers in Korea (who did not have representation), even as Japan was committing mass genocide and enslavement of these same colonial “subjects.” But whereas the latter became the way the Empire was remembered in Japan, Korea, and the U.S., the former tendency was mostly forgotten.

As the very term “colonialism” became taboo within Japan’s new “inclusive” Empire, film co-production became a way to “render invisible the violence and coercion undergirding colonialism” and specifically the full subsumption of the Korean film industry by Japan (Nayoung Aimee Kwon, 14). *Momotaro* shows this polite racism in the final moments of Empire, when desperation pushed it to take previously unimaginable steps towards inclusivity.

In the film, the different nations of the Empire are represented by different animals. These animals, high ranking officials at the movie’s start, represent the older nations of the Japanese Empire (Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria). They encounter the newly conquered nations as objects of cultural curiosity, both to be “civilized” but also preserved as “noble savages.” Eventually, all the animals unite to build a military base and conquer Goa from the British, and having won target

the United States next, with the various animals seeming to mix war and play in their practice for its conquest. This mix of cultural backwardness and egalitarianism represents Japan's "primitive selves" (Atkins 2010) to the film's ostensible audience of children, implying that the childishness of backwards cultures is immanent to Japanese childhood as well [Fig. 26]



[Figure 26 - A presumably Japanese dog teaches the subjects of the Empire as different animals Japanese in the same way Japanese children would learn]

The aesthetics of the film are also more complex than a simple patronizing mission of cultural enlightenment. *Momotaro* emphasized labor in a way that is unusual for animation. As Otsuka Eiji points out about the film, it combined Disney animation aesthetics and Einsteinian realism (2013, 268), especially the labor of the "collective" (272). The film is mostly composed of scenes of labor: farming in the Japanese countryside, domestic labor in the home, building a military base, teaching the natives Japanese in the classroom, and getting the guns, bombs, and planes ready for the invasion.

There are only three human characters in the film: Momotaro, the British, and the ancient Goans who were tricked by the British and only shown in mythical form. Momotaro leads the Japanese forces, composed of various animals, but given he is human it is not clear which of the animals is closest to his species or that being human is a sign of being civilized. Since presumably some of the animal soldiers are Japanese, they are far closer to the subjects of the Empire than the cartoonish British who are portrayed with big noses, buck teeth, and an actual horn. The Japanese audience would already be familiar with the story of Momotaro, who was born of a peach and makes friends with animals to defeat demons. Even Momotaro is animalistic.

John Dower thus points out that while the film is part of a “Momotaro paradigm” opposing the good Momotaro to the evil Oni, *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors* portrays the Japanese as “youthful and vigorous, but not necessarily innately superior” and enemies as “atrocious and “inhuman,” but whose nature was not necessarily intrinsically so.” This “intimation of essential equality, however latent, was almost completely lacking in Western representations of the conflict with Japan” (1986, 255-256). Though Dower posits that this equality “helped prepare the ground” for ideological shifts once Japan had “acknowledged its defeat,” what is more interesting are the effects in the colonies, where Japan supported genuine anti-colonial movements in its dying days which made the restoration of colonialism impossible in Burma and Indonesia, sponsored the Indian National Army and Provisional Government of Free India, allowed the People’s Republic of Korea to develop as it evacuated, and in its efforts forced the West to support communist anti-colonial movements in Vietnam and China to counter the Japanese (Spector 2008). In terminal decline, the “reluctant” narrative of “Asia for Asians” that

the Japanese had so cruelly betrayed finally gained life (Miller 2004, 79), an immanent postcolonialism in one of the most brutal colonial empires^{xliv}.

Within this reality of colonial subjugation under a façade of equality, many Koreans took these slogans seriously as a means of self-advancement, a modified version of pro-Japanese Korean nationalism that existed at the very beginnings of Korean modernity^{xlv}. This had been used by the Japanese even before formal colonization to interfere in inter-Korean politics such as the pro-Japanese, pro-modernity Gapsin coup, and by anti-Japanese forces like the Korean Empire which nevertheless sought to replicate the Meiji restoration.

Once Japanese colonial occupation was clearly established, so too did the opportunities for indigenous industrial development. As Carter Eckert (2014) showed in his study of Kyongsong Spinning & Weaving and the Koch'ang Kim family, Japanese financing, technology, and legal structure became the only means for Korean industry to develop, blurring clear distinctions between nationalists and “collaborators” as well as between the colonial era and “postcolonial” Korean development in the South. Within a regional division of labor, opportunities for Korean businessmen and industrialists grew as the Japanese empire expanded, especially as Manchuria was opened as a new frontier and source of agriculture and raw materials. It would take the war effort to proletarianize millions of Koreans, not just in Korea but in Japan as well, where shortages of manpower created opportunities for working in industry. The Koch'ang Kim family used Japanese capital to develop industry in Korea. But Koreans could also physically go to Japan and, especially after the war, return to Korea with essential technical expertise.

Given the labor intensity of animation and the nearly 2.4 million Koreans in Japan by wars end, it is safe to assume that many Koreans in Japan worked on *Momotaro*, a material

substance of its images of equality through collective labor. Though we will never know given Japan's own "shadow animation" industry during the war (Clements and Ip 2012) and the "unhappy past" of the colonial-era animation that both Japan and Korea would rather remain "neglected or forgotten" (Kim 2006, 65), it is known for a fact that at least one Korean, Young Hwan-kim, worked on the film under director Mitsuyo Seo (Kim 2006, 65). Young, who began his career in Japan under the name Gita Koji, returned to Korea after the war where he became South Korea's first manhwa artist, drawing *The Rabbit and the Monkey* in 1946 (Yecies and Shim 2021, 25) and started South Korea's first manhwa magazine *Manhwa Haengjin* in 1948 (Lambiek 2020). Traversing the border between collaborator and nationalist, Young published a series of "kojubu" [big nose] comics. The term originally appeared in Japan in 1940 in "Tokyo Chosun Minbo, a weekly magazine aimed at leading and enlightening Koreans in Japan." Nevertheless, "Kojubu Romance of the Three Kingdoms" was hugely successful in South Korea, serialized for two and half years from 1952 and selling more than 10,000 copies even during the Korean war (Kim 2015).

In the animation industry, Young then went on to start his own studio in Seoul after the war, Kim Yong-Hwan Cartoon Movie Production Company (Giammarco 2005), though it closed without having made a film. Nevertheless, Shin Dong-hyun, director of *Hong Gil-dong* (1967), started as Young's student (Kim 2022, 156) and Osamu Tezuka in an interview mentions that "Korean staff" were in charge, implying at least that Kim was more than an in-between (159) and had more Koreans under him.

Momotaro exists at a transitory moment, when the Japanese Empire in crisis politically but also the postcolonial "Northeast Asian political economy" was being formed (Cumings 1984). Once freed from the fetters of Empire's economic backwardness which necessitated

slavery as the form of mobilizing labor, the persistence of the landowning aristocracy in Korea under Japanese occupation, and the isolation of the Empire from American markets, the “1930s model reappeared, in nearly all its aspects” in Korea and Taiwan (15-16).

Everywhere the Empire touched, including the now colonized Japanese mainland, the “speciesism” of *Momotaro* anticipated “American postwar speciesism because of an overlap in their geopolitical concerns” (Lamarre 2008, 78), surviving into the formal postcolonial period. *Momotaro*’s highly militarized animals resemble both North Korea’s *Squirrel and Hedgehog* and South Korea’s *General Tteoli*, a common frame of industrial modernity shared by the Cold War antagonists. But the film itself did not have the chance to reach an audience. By the time the film was released in 1945, Tokyo had been leveled by allied bombing and there were no theatres left to see it in. More than a million Japanese children had been evacuated to the countryside, and the final collapse of the Empire meant there was no chance to show it in Korea or anywhere else represented by an animal. Soon after Japan’s surrender, the film was forgotten and thought to be lost until 1983 a negative was discovered in Shochiku’s Ofuna warehouse (Sharp 2018).

Perhaps its most important legacy was setting the terms of outsourcing in East Asia. Japan, compelled by its advanced regional imperialism and its own backwardness in the face of the West, would incorporate outsourcing into its industrial development. At the peak of the Empire, it would sit on top of regional production which incorporated Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria into Japanese manufacturing. These junior partners could nevertheless fight to be treated as equals and depending on the contradictions immanent to a particular moment, could win. *Momotaro* was initially meant to be a fully Japanese film with a clear lesson in the “Momotaro paradigm” of patriotism, obedience, and hatred of the enemy. That is, in fact, what its predecessor *Momotaro: Sea Eagle* (1943) is, a 30-minute film also by Mitsuyo Seo with much

of the same staff. That film is almost entirely composed of a bombing campaign and Momotaro is the clear human leader of well-organized animal squadrons fighting a faceless enemy. Instead, *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors* shows an image of the collective labor of all the colonies, an aesthetic reflection of the Empire's objective reliance on their labor to even animate the film. Targeted at Japanese children, it instead was a film for the literal "offspring of Empire^{xlvi}" (Eckert 2014).

Japanese Outsourcing as a Model

Japan soon established its own animation studio after the war, Toei (1956), which aspired to be the "Disney of the East." But despite early success with feature length animation, Toei was soon caught in an economic pincer grip. Toei relied on cheap, low-skilled labor to remain profitable, but in 1960 the government committed itself to a "income doubling" plan, forcing wages to rise. Even worse, this commitment had come out of worker militancy and widespread social upheaval in the wake of the 1960 renewal of the Japan-US security treaty (Kapur 2018, 100), so that rising wages brought even more labor organization and further radicalism. Although wage increases actually lagged behind economic growth (138), over the course of the 1960s labor radicalism could not survive the market-driven wage increases of the private sector, the political repression of the state, and the triumph of a moderate labor aristocracy in the unions (142).

The one solution to rising labor costs was limited animation. *Tetsuwan Atomu*, which debuted in 1963, was conceived as a loss-leader to convince Japanese studios an animated television series could be successful. But even with this commitment, Osamu Tezuka saved where he could and thus set the standard for the aesthetics of anime: static backgrounds, a fraction of the frames per second of a Disney animation (as wide as 29 frames per second vs 10 fps), and reusing stock images. The success of *Astro Boy* became written retroactively as the

success of Japanese anime as a national product. But the real history is much more ambiguous and involved at every step a much less risky solution to the costs of production and labor: outsourcing.

Japanese animation outsourcing can be grouped into three periods. The first was the work of Mochinaga Tadahito and his MOM studios on Rankin/Bass productions from 1960-1967, the second was Toei and Mushi work for Rankin/Bass from 1966-1972, and the third was the work of Topcraft for Rankin/Bass from 1972-1982.

Mochinaga had been the assistant to Mitsuyo Seo on *Momotarō's Sea Eagles* (1942), the precursor to the feature length *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors*. He was in charge of backgrounds and shooting (AWN 1999) and was put in charge of *Fuku-chan's Submarine* (1944), another wartime propaganda animated film around 30 minutes in length. But facing exhaustion from the work on *Fuku-chan* and a fear of reprisals against propaganda workers by the Americans, he fled to occupied Manchuria in 1945 (having grown up there as the son of a SMRC employee) to work at the Manchukuo Film Association rather than on *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors*. Remarkably, rather than go back to Japan after the end of the occupation, he stayed in China and worked for the Soviets on subtitles and then newsreels and painted portraits of Mao and Stalin for the Chinese Communist Party. Eventually assigned to produce a puppet animation satirizing Chiang Kai-shek as a puppet of the U.S. imperialists (with budget constraints leading to the artistic choice to leave the strings above the marionette in the shot for artistic effect), he ended up producing *The Year of the Uprising* (1947) and *The Emperor's Dream* (1947) with a combination of Chinese and Japanese staff, the latter running twenty-six minutes to great accolades. He then returned to cel animation with *Turtle Caught in a Jar* (1948), a film so popular the audience at one showing demanded “not one, but three encores in a single night” (Clements 2013, 72).

Despite the momentous efforts of the Wan Brothers in *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), the destruction of the occupation and civil war coupled with the uneven spatial development of socialist China on the skeletal remains of Japanese industry meant that “in the north-east, there were no Chinese animators at all” (Clements 2013, 70). *Princess Iron Fan* had been animated in Shanghai, a legacy of the Wan Brothers early exposure to Western animated shorts, like those featuring *Koko the Clown*, which had been imported into Shanghai in the late 1910s and early 1920s and their work at the Shanghai Commercial Press which began making films in 1919 (Du 2019, 35), the result of Shanghai’s international presence and semi-occupation by Japan which took over the foreign concessions in the city only in 1941. Though Socialist China would return animation to Shanghai under the golden age of Chinese animation with the establishment in 1957 of the Shanghai Animation Film Studio, the legacy and model of Japanese industrialization would continue to influence even anti-colonial, socialist China (Hirata 2021). Mochinaga was thus responsible for China’s own unofficial animation “co-productions” with Japan in the early period.

He would return to Japan in 1954 and make *Little Black Sambo* (1956), a puppet stop motion animation which attracted the attention of an American investor, Arthur Rankin Jr., with an offer to make 130 episodes of *The New Adventures of Pinocchio* (1960) (Clements 2013, 97), now with Japan trying to assert itself as “co-producer” with its own post-colonial occupier, the United States.

Rankin had a small studio, which led to exploring outsourcing to Asia as an alternative to hiring American animators or having animators on staff at all. Mochinaga, despite the acclaim given to *Sambo*, found himself in debt and with the death of his producer, without revenue streams. Mochinaga was under no illusion about the nature of outsourcing work, and when

Rankin approached him at an international film festival, he initially rejected the work that would take the entire worktime of his studio. Eventually, the producers leaned on his wife to encourage him to take the money and he agreed with the self-justification that he would never do work of this type again (97). Thus, a Japanese studio “successfully made and exported 12.5 minutes of animation every week for a year, three years before the much-discussed ‘pioneering’ efforts of Tezuka Osamu with *Astro Boy*” (97). Mochinaga, working with two wartime co-animators, formed MOM productions out of these efforts.

Though the order of events is disputed, a fire destroyed the MOM studio, and delays and overtime to make up for delays pushed Mochinaga even deeper into debt. He was forced to take on further outsourcing projects for Rankin, animating *Willy McBean and His Magic Machine* (1963) and the much-beloved in America *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964), a stop-motion animated special that made up its \$500,000 budget after just two U.S. television screenings (106). It has become an American Christmas tradition since and a watershed moment for Rankin/Bass. The film was less successful in Japan and Mochinaga, after working on Rankin/Bass for three more years, quit MOM in 1967 and returned to China during the cultural revolution to teach and work in news media. Finally, in 1979 he was asked to consult on *Who Mewed?* a Chinese puppet animation and taught animation technique at the Beijing Film Academy from 1985-1986 (Ono 1999). The brutal capitalist enterprise of outsourcing animation, which he called “the days of hard battle and bitter fights,” (Clements 2013, 107), drove one of Japan’s most important animators to cultural revolution era China.

As this outsourcing relationship between America and Japan was developing, Toei animation would be drawn into it from a very different starting point. With dreams of rivaling Disney, Toei leaned on the advantages of its former Empire. One of the studio’s first projects was

Hanuman no Atarashii Boiken (1957, *The New Adventures of Hanuman*), an anti-communist propaganda film for the U.S. embassy in Thailand (Clements 2013, 98), anticipating the Korean animated films for the US Operating Mission to Korea^{xlvii}. Combined with its new relationship with the U.S., Japan revived its old regional co-productions. *The Legend of the White Serpent* (1956), a Japanese-Hong Kong production, led to *The White Snake Enchantress* (1958), Toei's first animated feature film. Initially billed as a co-production, Hong Kong lost interest and pulled out, but the film retained the elements of the Chinese folktale (98-99).

Nevertheless, the latter film drew every aspiring animator in Japan to Toei and creating a Disney of the East out of outsourcing seemed possible. There was even a sense of complete creative freedom: because the studio only released one film a year, animators could spend the rest of their time doing whatever short films and experiments they wanted. Unfortunately, Toei was hemorrhaging money with this model, and as it grew and trained an entire labor hierarchy of animators, the aforementioned labor disputes were inevitable. Toei's response was to switch from hiring salaried animators to free-lancers (105) and an exodus of those who would become Japan's greatest animators followed. Having turned its own labor force into a contingent, Taylorist animation factory, it was natural to serve that role for American studios looking for the same contingent labor abroad. Toei would do work for Rankin/Bass on *King Kong with Tom of T.H.U.M.B* (1966), *The Wacky World of Mother Goose* (1967), *The Mouse on the Mayflower* (1968), and *The Smokey Bear Show* (1969) (Brubaker 2014).

Toei still retained some control over distribution and profits. It gained the rights to show the shows on NET (Nihon Educational Television), a channel it partially owned, making these works technically U.S.-Japan coproductions. Rankin/Bass would also outsource work to TCJ (Television Corporation of Japan), an advertising agency with an in-house animation studio,

although the collaboration only led to *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1967), a mostly forgotten Christmas special. But it was clear that as Japanese animation grew, its aspirations for moving up the value chain of animation and American animation's search for cheap outsourcing labor would come into conflict. One final period brought these contradictions to the fore.

Among the exodus of animators from Toei, two stood out: Osamu Tezuka's Mushi Production and Toru Hara's Topcraft. Tezuka had created his own studio to compete with Toei and drove down costs as much as possible, including production costs. Despite the huge domestic success of *Tetsuwan Atomu*, Mushi was deep in the red and turned to licensing deals with America for injections of cash. Despite hiccups in a deal with NBC Enterprises, a lesser subsidiary of NBC, Mushi was able to renew a deal for *Tetsuwan Atomu* and an investment from NBC Enterprises's for *Kimba the White Lion* (1965). The American company imposed itself on the production, but Mushi was able to fight back and create a Japanese animated show not beholden to American storyboards and production demands. Mushi's success inspired Toei and TCJ to compete in original Japanese animation, and Japan seemed on the cusp of a breakthrough in the global market.

This ended up being an illusion. Instead of moving up from NBC Enterprises to NBC, the former dumped the episodes to local stations across the U.S. in syndication. Early episodes had been sold at a loss to generate high ratings in the New York market and these figures were used to sell the show across the U.S. without ever showing sustainable ratings or pricing. Dreams of a global Japanese anime were far too early at a time when the show's Japanese origins were disguised because American's associated "made in Japan" with "cheap" (Clements 2013, 124). Mushi, experiencing the bursting of the initial bubble of the Japanese animation market, became ever-more reliant on American investment. Tezuka made one final attempt at Japanese animation

with *A Thousand and One Nights* (1969) and *Cleopatra* (1970), feature-length animated films for adults and everything that *Tetsuwan Atomu* was not. Both films were box-office failures and the latter eventually bankrupted the studio in 1973, although Tezuka had already left by then. *Cleopatra* was eventually released in the U.S. as *Cleopatra: Queen of Sex* (1972) with an X-rating, a lazy attempt at exploitation that only confused audiences and cheapened Tezuka's vision for Japanese feature-length adult animation with global popularity.

Mushi had already experimented with outsourcing work within Japan and had done the animation for *Frosty the Snowman* (1969) for Rankin/Bass to accrue capital while Tezuka was at the company. After its financial and arguably creative collapse, Mushi leaned heavily on outsourcing, making cheap television works like *The Mad, Mad Mad Comedians* (1970), a television special aired before the Oscars that came out poorly given the unfamiliarity of the Japanese animators with the designs of American cartoonist and caricature artist Bruce Stark. The studio was eventually reduced to animating 17 out of 20 episodes of *Festival of Family Classics* (1972), with the other three animated by Topcraft.

Unlike Mushi, Topcraft had been founded with the goal of outsourcing and subcontracting. Their first project was *Kid Power* (1972) for Rankin/Bass as well as three episodes of *The Jackson Five* (1972) as part of a larger global production chain incorporating Halas & Batchelor in England and Pegbar Productions in Spain (Brubaker 2014). Topcraft wanted to move up the value chain under American leadership, and in this regard they were successful. While Mushi had gone bankrupt, Topcraft was allowed to do storyboards on *The First Easter Rabbit* (1976) and animated *The Hobbit* (1977), an extremely ambitious project that took five years to make and cost \$3 million. Even well into the 1980s when South Korea had emerged

as a competitor, Topcraft was doing outsourcing work on films such as *The Return of the King* (1980) and *The Last Unicorn* (1982), still an American cult favorite.

As Mushi's aspirations for domestic animation collapsed, Topcraft's grew, and the future of Japanese animation seemed to be as a source of cheap labor for American animation outsourcing. But this industrial model was reaching its own limit by the 1980s. Topcraft had also served as a subcontractor for Japanese animation companies. As chapter three discussed, Topcraft worked on *Naussica* and was taken apart by the new Studio Ghibli, for which Topcraft founder Toru Hara served as head manager. What remained reconstituted itself as Pacific Animation Corporation, continuing to do outsourcing work on major American shows like *ThunderCats* (1985-1989). The studio was eventually bought by Disney and renamed Walt Disney Animation Japan, making Disney direct-to-VHS film sequels to the films of the "Disney renaissance" like *Aladdin and the King of Thieves* (1996) and *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World* (1998). As Japanese anime was exploding in global popularity, the continued existence of Japanese animation outsourcing was an anachronism, and the production of the 2D hand-drawn *Buzz Lightyear of Star Command: The Adventure Begins* (2000) as a sequel to the CG *Toy Story* (1995) showed the final curtain was about to fall on Japanese outsourcing. Disney closed the studio in 2004, part of Disney's larger restructuring after the acquisition of Pixar and reemphasis on original works rather than cheap sequels that, according to John Lasseter and Steve Jobs, were "embarrassing" and devalued the originals (Gentile 2007).

Taiwanese and Korean Outsourcing

The irony of Toei's attempt to be a Disney of the East is that it was resistance to Disney's aesthetic that created the conditions for the rise of Japanese animation. Disney strove for naturalism and mimicry of live action, in *Snow White* even using live action references for the

characters and rotoscoping for dance scenes and all of Prince Charming's character movement. Behind this was an ideological commitment to naturalism and animation getting as close to cinema as possible. The 1941 strike was a watershed moment, with young animators rebelling against the seniority system at Disney and personally punished for their efforts by Walt himself. *Fantasia* would be the last attempt at aesthetic experimentation, and its box-office failure along with *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Bambi* (1942) and the onset of the Second World War led to near bankruptcy for the studio. Though it recovered with *Cinderella* (1950), the deeply conservative film visually and politically showed the mad technological visionary who had imagined building his own "Fantasound" system for theaters to properly show *Fantasia*, and who provoked the fascination of theorists like Benjamin and Adorno, was gone (Leslie 2002, 290). The box-office failure of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) was the final nail in the coffin for the "drive to realism" (290) that had made *Snow White* revolutionary. Disney animation had been left behind just as Japan was aspiring to become it, with even Walt Disney's attention focused on theme parks (296).

The rebellious ex-Disney animators went on to found United Progressive Artists (UPA) who intended to push the limits of animation without reference to cinema or any indexicality to nature at all. After early works for the UAW and FDR's reelection campaign, an UPA style developed in the post-war period. Bold lines and colors, heavily stylization, modernist visuals, and Brechtian techniques characterized the new animation aesthetic. For example, the Oscar winning *General McBoing-Boing* (1950), based off a Dr. Seuss story, began with the characters being drawn into life from nothingness and uses the same colors for the characters' skins and the backgrounds, a flatness completely opposed to the depth Walt Disney had worked so hard to achieve with the multiplane camera.

What made all this possible was limited animation, both as a style of flatness and a way to save money. Though UPA had developed limited animation to give artists freedom, the techniques like animating “on twos” (12 cels for 24 frames per second) and reusing static backgrounds also made outsourcing possible, as labor could be easily divided into repetitive tasks for backgrounds and in-between frames and “creative” tasks like key-frames and storyboarding. Rather than the single visionary of an entire production, the collective vision of UPA ironically created the possibility of a collective underclass to support it, a labor aristocracy of animation to replace the bourgeois tyrant of old.

UPA influenced everyone, even Disney animation. Through Walt Disney’s indifference and sometimes hostility, *101 Dalmations* (1961) was a massive success with its industrial technique of Xeroxing cels and movement away from the “fantasy” style Walt remained committed to. But UPA itself was short lived, losing its exclusive distribution contract with Columbia pictures in 1959, shifting to away from theatrical shorts to TV shows under new management, and the creative energy of the studio soon after dissipating out into many small studios for the TV era (Sito 2006, 222-223).

The political radicalism of UPA didn’t survive but the production techniques did, and already by the late 1950s studios were looking abroad for outsourcing work. Jay Ward Productions’s *Rocky and Bullwinkle* (1958) is considered the first outsourced work, produced in Mexico by Gamma Productions, a studio set up by the advertising agency of the show’s corporate sponsor General Mills. Storyboards were sent to Mexico City and final work often returned wildly different (Animation Obsessive 2022; 2023). Though unclear in its economic viability until the 1960s, further attempts to outsource work were made in Japan, Italy and Eastern Europe (Lee 2011, 96). The potential was too much to resist for the new small TV

animation studios that had been spun-off the great movie studios, and others would soon follow their lead over the next two decades.

After relative acquiescence to the growing importance of subcontracting and outsourcing, in 1979 the American MPSC animator's union shocked the studios by going on strike to exclude "runaway production" (meaning subcontracting and outsourcing) in the upcoming contract, the first animators' strike in 32 years. Caught off guard, the studios capitulated to the union (Sito 2006, 260-261). This triumph would be the American animators' last, and the animation companies engineered new contract negotiations in 1982 to provoke a strike on their terms. Now explicitly working with "start-up animation studios in Canada, Taipei, and Korea" (262), studios confronted the entire workforce of the LA animation industry. Generational differences, a different political environment, fracturing of the animation production process across different unions, and the inexorable pull of globalization doomed the strike to failure.

The union was destroyed and outsourcing fait-accomplé. But in a final historical twist, the triumphant animation studios soon found themselves equally irrelevant to the new global system of production, unnecessary middlemen in the relationship between foreign studios and American television networks (278). In time, nearly all production occurred overseas and historic studios like Hanna-Barbera bought and merged into larger media conglomerates.

The first American work done in South Korea was coloring of old black and white theatrical shorts for TV rebroadcast by Hannah-Barabara (founded in 1957 out of ex-MGM animators). International Art Production was set up in 1969 for the task (Hwang 1998, 182) and soon other studios were set up for similar specific contracts with both American and Japanese companies. As chapter one discussed, all production on the Japanese-Korean "co-productions" *Ogon Bat* (1967) and *Humanoid Monster Bem* (1968) was done in Korea, and Universal Art,

founded in 1973 by Shin Dong-hun (despite his hatred of outsourcing work), was hired by Tatsunoko Production for *Science Ninja Team Gatchaman* (Lee 2011, 122). Other small companies, like Golden Bell, Donggi Dongwha and Yoonsung Silup, also worked with Japanese studios.

Both South Korea and Taiwan emerged as the new outsourcing destinations for American and Japanese animation, following similar paths. A key element for both countries was the return of immigrants to the US who had worked in American studios to open Korean/Taiwanese studios with American support. For example, Cuckoo's Nest Studio was established by James Wang in 1978, a Taiwanese immigrant who had been an "assistant animator drawing "in-betweens" for *Raggedy Ann & Andy: A Musical Adventure* (1977)" (Lee 2012, 48). While working in LA, he had met William Hanna of Hanna-Barbera Productions, and the studio soon began working officially on its productions (48). With American supervision, training, and partial ownership, Cuckoo's Nest (now Wang Film) rapidly growing to become the largest animation outsourcer in the world (Shaiu and Lent 2003, 90).

In the realm of animation, South Korea and Taiwan reversed their typical economic structures. Whereas Taiwan's economic development was characterized by small and medium sized family companies and South Korea's the massive chaebol (Kim and Heo 2017, 18), in animation Wang Film engulfed any smaller competition well into the 1990s whereas South Korea's animation industry was composed of multiple studios that emerged around a single Korean-American returnee. An example was Steve Hahn, who created Dongsuh Donghwa in 1974 to work on productions by companies he had worked with in the United States like Bakshi productions and Hannah-Barbera (Lee 2011, 122) or Nelson Shin, who worked in the United States for DePatie-Freleng and Marvel Productions before returning to Korea to set up AKOM in

1985. In fact, Shin had set up outsourcing work for American company DePatie–Freleng in Taiwan while working there (Sato 2006, 255) on his way to becoming an American director in his own right, most famously on *Transformers: The Movie* (1986). AKOM would become indispensable to long-running American series like *The Simpsons* (1989-) and *Arthur* (1996-2022). As in Japan, such efforts also had the goal of funding domestic production, and AKOM and Hanho would collaborate to make *Dooly the Little Dinosaur*.

American outsourcing, which had begun as only the simplest labor tasks, became the most lucrative source of outsourcing for Koreans, who quickly moved into doing more complex tasks throughout the production. Dongsuh Donghwa took over the entire main production for American orders by 1978 and hired as many as 300 animators (Lee 2011, 122-123). The company would become Hanho Productions in 1978 and continue to work on American shows up to the present, including Netflix's *Castlevania* (2017-2021). Other studios followed suit, and a division emerged between studios that worked on American shows like such as Sunwoo (1974), Dongyang (1982) and Seyoung (1981) and those working on Japanese shows like Universal Art (1973), Daiwon (1977) and Golden Bell (1973), Donggi Dongwha (1973) and Yoonsung Silup (1973) (Lee 2011, 102; Hwang 1998, 183). By 1993, the five largest American-aligned studios accounted for 56 per cent of Korea's offshore animation exports (Lee 2011, 137). With much more lucrative and potentially long term productions, even Japanese-aligned studios attempted to switch to American contracts when possible (137).

In Taiwan, it was Japan that forced the animation industry to shift to the American value chain. Japan broke diplomatic relations in 1972 in order to establish them with the mainland to immediate economic consequences. Companies such as Ying Ren, which worked on Tokyo Movie's *Star of the Giants* (1968-1971), and *Attack No. 1* (1969-1971) (Lee 2012, 47), closed

after less than two years (48). James Wang pointed out that this was potentially advantageous, as the Japanese had been reluctant to share technology (MOFA 1998), and outsourcing relations and even co-productions with Japan would soon recover. But the immediate effect was to pit both Korea and Taiwan against each other for American contracts.

Though both continued to develop, Korea had some advantages in its competition with Taiwan. Korean immigration to the US in the 1970s vastly exceeded Taiwanese immigration (Chen 2021) and were more likely to work rather than go to graduate school like many Taiwanese immigrants (Koo and Yu 1981, 11-12; Wang and Zhou 2021, 64). Finally, South Korea had a much larger population with much more room to grow: “Taiwan's GDP per capita was US\$2,570 by 1981, whereas Korea's was US\$1,697” (Scitovsky 1985, 216), a pool of cheap and disciplined labor irresistible to American outsourcing.

When American animation outsourcing was growing, the pie was big enough for both. But when the crisis hit, it was much more fatal to Taiwanese animation. Wang Film Productions had to lay off 1000 out of 1400 staff in the 1990s (Shiau and Lent 2003, 91), with the composition of unskilled labor dropping from “53 to 0 percent” (92).

Taiwanese animation responded in a variety of ways. At the low end of the value chain, it invested heavily in overseas branches, with Wang Film outsourcing all labor-intensive tasks to its branches in mainland China and Thailand (91-92). At the high end, the company diversified clients, going from near-total dependence on the U.S. to major clients in Canada and Europe (93). Wang Films would also attempt domestic productions, such as 2005's *Fireball*, but find little success.

CGCG, a computer animation studio founded in 1988 for “making commercials and architectural simulations” (Lee 2012, 52), would largely take the place of Wang Film in the new computer animation era. Like Wang’s earlier relationship with Hanna-Barbera, George Lucas would become the largest shareholder in CGCG in 2008 for the production of *Star Wars: the Clone Wars* (52) and it has continued to be involved in every animated Star Wars project after the purchase of Lucasfilm by Disney in 2012 as well as other series for American streaming services including Netflix and Amazon Prime (CGCG Inc. 2023).

Despite major crises and disruption, Taiwanese animation ultimately maintained its same position in the global value chain of animation outsourcing, eventually adjusting to the opening of China, Vietnam, Thailand, etc. to animation outsourcing and the switch to 3D animation while remaining in the background.

On the other hand, Korean animation outsourcing was able to maintain longstanding relationships with American animation studios throughout the crisis that threatened its underlying industrial model. Much of Korean animation would remain 2D and labor intensive despite Korea outpacing the median wages of Taiwan by a huge margin (Ngerng 2024). This would lead to a strange contradiction: through labor-intensive work, Korean animation outsourcing would get the chance to do more and more creative tasks. One project in particular went farther than any before in expressing Koreanness in an outsourced animation. That project was the *Avatar* series, an accidental decade-long project that emerged from the ruins of *Wonderful Days*.

Studio Mir: Outsourcing Up the Value Chain

In the first pencil tests of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008), Aang and Zuko, the protagonist and antagonist of the show respectively, bounce around and make exaggerated facial expressions as a tribute to FLCL (2000), the Gainax side project that became a cult classic in the United States after being played nightly on Cartoon Network's Toonami^{xlviii}. Other elements are influenced by Japanese anime and the American anime subculture, like Aang's flying bison Appa who is influenced by the Catbus in Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), Zuko's samurai-inspired armor, and the general circulation of Hong Kong martial arts movies and "Eastern" philosophy and religion which were part of the American otaku subculture. Show creators Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko initially looked to Japan to participate in a co-production, only to find out that the Japanese studios were uninterested after "many unreturned phone calls" (Colbert 2024).

Konietzko had been art director of Nickelodeon's *Invader Zim* and had worked with South Korean animation studios in that capacity, but Korea was not part of the thematic of the show. It was only after rejection by Japan and being tipped off by a friend to *Wonderful Days*, which had come out soon after *Avatar* was picked up for a pilot episode, that DiMartino and Konietzko headed to South Korea to try to work with Tin House, the studio that had produced the "anime-inspired look" of the film and its breathtaking, labor-intensive animation (Colbert 2024). Though *Wonderful Days* had failed to impress Korean audiences, it impressed the *Avatar* co-creators enough to bring their idea of a co-production with Japan to South Korea with some modifications. Konietzko, in his reflections on the origin of the series, notes that he had found the system of outsourcing under Nickelodeon to be creatively stifling for the Korean studio and prevented them from doing their best work, even by the standards of what the American animation studio wanted. For *Avatar*, with its heavy Asian inspiration, the creators of *Avatar*

envisioned a system of collaboration with the Korean animators, giving them more time, more creative control, and a personal stake in the success of the show.

In practice this meant setting up a value chain closer to the Japanese system than the American one: to augment JM animation, a recently created studio out of ex-Tin House animators, DR Movie and its spinoff company MOI animation (owned by Madhouse, the Japanese anime company) were brought on to do additional work. Designs were sent from the US to Korea and work would be divided among the American and Korean studios after JM animation proved their worth by animating the first two episodes themselves. More value-added work was given to the Korean studio, including the animation director (who did storyboards and character design as well) for *Wonderful Days* Yoon Young Ki, who served as animation director for the pilot and did most of the backgrounds, and character designs from the Korean animators such as Ryu Ki-hyun's suggestions for Aang's design and his original designs for Jet's gang in episode ten, based on the Japanese anime *Cowboy Bebop*. By season two and three Hye Jung Kim was promoted to color supervisor and Jae Woo Kim would design nearly all the new characters, such as the Indian Guru who teaches Aang to open his chakras and the Lion Turtle who gives him the gift of taking away the bending powers of the enemy (Konietzko and DiMartino 2010).

Combined with creative input from the Korean animators, other cultural consultants were brought in, including an expert on Chinese calligraphy, multiple martial arts experts, and a trip to Beijing before season two for reference images. Even a Korean character would appear in the show: season two's episode two featured Song and her mother [Fig. 4], villagers in the Earth Kingdom wearing Hanbok, and episode five "Avatar Day" featured Sokka wearing a yangban's hat. The Lion Turtle combined Korean turtle statues, which the creators had seen visiting Seoul,

and Chinese features. Avatar became a multicultural production, with the Korean animation staff contributing their own representations of other Asian cultures and contributions to the unique, vaguely pan-Asian setting and philosophy of the show. But multiculturalism had its limits. The show was ultimately the product of American showrunners on behalf of Nickelodeon which would tolerate relative artistic freedom for the Korea staff only if the work got done. And the work was labor intensive. Visiting a new location every episode required many backgrounds, bending fights based on live action footage demanded many more key-frames and in-between frames than Japanese anime or American cartoons, and the incorporation of natural elements as tools in the show meant backgrounds were dynamic between frames and action chaotic and fluid^{xlix}. By the show's end, even the American creators were so exhausted they would not return to the world of the show for years, finding inspiration for a sequel after revisiting the art of the show for an art book.

Both the strengths and problems of Avatar's production would be amplified in the sequel *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014). Picking up 80 years after Avatar and targeted at teens, Korra would attempt to address the ideological problems of the ending of the original show immanent to its pan-Asian multiculturalism. In pushing the concepts of the original show to their limits, *Korra* also pushed the limits of what Korean animation could creatively contribute.

Avatar: The Last Airbender

Avatar takes place in a world of four nations divided by four elements: Earth, Water, Fire, and Air. These correspond to the basic fighting styles of the show, in which "benders" manipulate a single element to perform martial arts. Aang, the protagonist, is the "avatar," a role passed down for millennia through reincarnation. He is tasked with bringing "balance" to the world and

can use all the elements as well as go into the “Avatar state” in which all his past lives possess his body and give him immense power.

All of this is summarized in the opening crawl of the show. The setting, implied but not directed, is that each nation is ruled by a feudal aristocracy composed of benders corresponding to their territory’s element. Though the setting is vaguely Asian, the Earth Kingdom resembles China in both architecture and government; the Fire nation resembles at times Japan and at other times Qin Shi Huang, the first unifier of China (as portrayed in Chinese films that became popular in the West at the time like *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1998) and *Hero* (2002)), though narratively they evoke the Japanese Empire; the Water tribes are closely styled after Inuit-Yupik culture with some Chinese elements; the Air nomads resemble Tibetan Buddhist monks and espouse Buddhist-esque philosophy while living in religious temples in the clouds.

Aang is accidentally frozen in ice for a century, and in his absence the Fire nation industrializes through fire-bending combustion and seeks to take over the world. As the only modernizing “nation,” it threatens to bring modernity and the violence of national formation, such as propagandistically referring to the loosely collected air nomads as a “nation” to justify declaring war on them and wiping them out completely. The fire nation rides black metal ships that spew smoke in their conquests, evoking the “black” ships of Admiral Perry that shocked Japan into opening to foreign trade and eventually the Meiji restoration.

Aang is not just the Avatar but personally “the last airbender” after the genocide of his people. Two water tribesmen and siblings, Katara and Sokka, find Aang and awaken him, spurring him to fulfill his destiny to stop the Fire nation from wiping out water nation as well and accompany him on his mission.

The terminology implies the show's ideology. Harmony is the eternal pastness of pre-history, which Foucault described as "the sequence of chronologies merely scanned the prior and more fundamental space of a table which presented all possibilities in advance" (Foucault 2002, 237). Aang, literally carrying the timeless past in his head and a frozen remnant of a social order based on balance between eternal elements, is particularly detached from the social changes happening around him as an air nomad. Fredric Jameson points out that Foucault's concept of pre-history combines "elements of the medieval...with the more superstitious features of the Renaissance to convey a timeless mythical world" projected onto an eternal orient. Like Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Adam Smith who saw in China's empire a contrast to the flaws of European feudal absolutism (Richter 1997), the show projects onto Asia an alternative modernity where the feudal revolution and capitalism happened simultaneously.

In its basic formulation, the show has some ideological contradictions to work through. Bringing "balance" to the world is conflated with stopping the Fire nation's unification efforts. But because this combines absolutist unity in the form of China's Qin unification and capitalist modernity in the form of Japanese genocidal imperialism, it is not clear to the characters what they are fighting for. As the show goes on, the status quo is revealed to also be oppressive, as they discover in the misogynistic, backward culture of the Northern Water Tribe, the feudal stagnation, widespread poverty, and impotence of the Earth Kingdom's puppet king, behind whom lurks an all-powerful vizier and praetorian guard, and the unethical detachment of the air nomad's philosophy in a world at war. On the other hand, the group takes refuge in the fire nation in season three, discovering they are regular people rather than fundamentally evil. This plot progression mirrors the central villain's character arc: Zuko's, a prince of the fire nation tasked with killing the avatar to regain his honor, eventually rejects the ideas he has grown up

with and joins the protagonists to defeat his father and save the fire nation's people from their tyrannical leader.

While water bender Katara becomes more powerful and, as Aang's love interest, more central to the contradictions between Aang as an individual and Aang as a symbolic figure of eternal pre-history, Sokka, the non-bender of the group, acts as the comic relief. Sokka's humor often consists of the impotence of his boomerang in a fight compared to Aang's and Katara's abilities. Through humor, the violence of the bender/non-bender caste system is naturalized. The developing abilities of the bender protagonists also imply a natural basis for caste within benders, since only certain talented benders like the protagonists are capable of advanced bending techniques like "lightning bending" or "blood bending". In *Korra*, these caste-like differentiations are later used for their opposite purpose: as revolutions in the forces of production that make capitalism possible.

For example, the earth bender Toph, who later joins the group, invents "metal bending," the necessary element of urban development; Zuko learning lightning bending from his uncle, the foundation of electricity; Katara learns blood bending which gives rise to both modern medicine and the much more lethal killing methods of total war.

Similarly, *Korra* would explore the contradictions of Aang's political role which the show never comes to terms with. For the "White Lotus" secret society, named after the anti-Yuan and later anti-Qing White Lotus society of China but with features of the Freemasons and other early modern sects, religious reverence for the Avatar as the force of balance serves to justify a secret political sect that intervenes at the end of the show to overthrow the Fire Nation and install a coup government. The White Lotus consists of the most skilled Benders and other fighting masters including a non-bending swordsman who teaches Sokka sword fighting. Thus, one

aristocracy is replaced with another, as a feudal world system is replaced by an equally hierarchical social order that combines images of the new religious movements of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, the secretive Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, and the elite students and intellectuals of the Xinhai revolution.

Given that Aang is both an air bender and the representative of all four elements, there is a clear political bias to the position's embodiment, resolved by the *longue durée* of feudal history where each nation gets its turn once every four avatar reincarnations. But when events break this eternal present, with the Fire Nation stepping out of turn by using a once-a-millennium comet to enhance their power over the other nations, Aang is unable to come to combine his Air-nation instilled monkish philosophy of non-violence and his political task of killing the Fire Lord. This contradiction is resolved with a literal *deus-ex-machina*, as an ancient lion-turtle shows up and gives Aang the power to remove the Fire Lord's bending without killing him, eliminating the choice (which itself would do nothing if bending did not serve as the basis of royal privilege and the larger caste system).

Other political issues in the show create similar unresolved contradictions. For example, in their attempt to defeat the vizier of the Earth kingdom and restore the power-by-birthright of the buffoonish king, Aang and his group misunderstand the true nature of power in the kingdom which lies in the Dai Li, the pretorian guard and secret police of the kingdom, leading to the Fire Nation taking over the kingdom in a bloodless coup and Aang's group fleeing the capital. A giant owl spirit who guards a great library, Wan Shi Tong, even directly confronts Aang's claim to righteousness as one claim among many throughout history leading only to the present moment. After failing to convince him, "team Avatar" lies that they will not use his knowledge for violence and are caught, fleeing as the library sinks into the sand and Wan Shi Tong attacks them.

This underlies one of the major themes of the show: the contradiction between the indifference of the “spirit world,” a timeless mythical land from which the avatar derives his powers, to the political affairs of humans and the ethical responsibilities of the modern world. Aang is repeatedly confronted by this, most explicitly when he is forced to abandon his love for Katara (and by extension his love of humanity and concern with its suffering) or abandon his connection to the powers of the Avatar.

On the side of detachment is Guru Pathik, an Indian yogi who teaches Aang the nature of chakras, giving basically a new-age lecture to the audience about Hindu spiritualism. The show never disagrees with Guru Pathik; he is shown to have successfully reached enlightenment and he is correct about how Aang can reach the Avatar state again. Rather, it is his presence as a representative of new age philosophy with an Indian veneer in a story centered on East Asian history that creates an impossible choice. Guru Pathik combines Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism into a western oriental image of a mystical, timeless Indian subcontinent. This image comes into conflict with the allegory of the unification of China and the nationalism and anti-colonialism of the Japanese empire. The transhistorical concept of the “Avatar,” itself derived from a Hindu concept culturally appropriated in Western popular culture in “a deliberate process of re-enchanting the mundane world” (de Wildt 2020, 964), is unable to withstand the explicitly political questions that emerge in the show’s retelling of the creation of modernity.

Aang saves Katara by giving up his worldly attachment to her, nearly dying in the process and losing his ability to reach the Avatar state. This too is eventually solved conveniently, as Aang hits a rock which opens his chakras and allows him to reach the Avatar state again without giving up his worldly attachments. Though Pathik was named after a school friend of Konietzko and dreamed up in the mind of the American show runners, the actual

character design was done by Jae Woo Kim and brought to life by the Korean animators. In the age of global outsourcing, American orientalist fantasies are mediated by Asians themselves.

As previously mentioned, a Korean character appears once, Song [Fig. 27]. Song and her mother are members of the Earth Kingdom who shelter Zuko after he fails to kill the Avatar, is branded a traitor, and is on the run from his own father as a result. Zuko sees the effects of war on the citizens of the Earth Kingdom as well as their humanity when Song heals Zuko. She reveals that her father is missing because of a Fire Nation raid and shows him a scar she received from a fire nation soldier that mirrors his own scar. This is an essential moment in the show as Zuko for the first time questions his upbringing and purpose, beginning the path to his redemption. This is also the most detailed scene in the show of how everyday people live after a century of war and the contradiction between the self-sufficient peasant agriculture of the Earth Kingdom countryside and the proto-industrial warfare of the Fire Nation. Besides the visual cues, Song's story is the most Korean, stuck between Chinese stagnation and Japanese colonial violence during the Sino-Japanese conflict over Korea. The episode ends with Zuko stealing an ostrich from Song and her mother, with Song seeing the whole thing and looking away with disappointment, a very Korean melodramatic moment.



[Figure 27 – Song and her mother in hanbok in *Avatar*]

What is notable about this scene is not just its importance but also its marginality. Song and her mother never appear again and Zuko never returns the ostrich on-screen, despite his eventual redemption. Unlike the multicultural fusion of clothes, religious icons, and historical events, Song seems to be straight out of a Korean cultural product. The themes of rural poverty and political backwardness in the Earth Kingdom is approached at a higher level of abstraction with verbal reference to the refugees of the war in the slums of the Earth Kingdom capital, but never again is it directly personified. When Aang and Zuko visit the capital, while Zuko the fire nation prince again interacts with the poor, Aang and his friends remains in the upper ring of the city as royal guests.

The show is pulled in two directions politically and aesthetically. On the one hand, as the political complexities of the world develop, Koreans as bearers of an authentic Asianness become more prominent. Aesthetic experiments, such as the use of East Asian ink-paintings to

tell a mythical story of “The Cave of Two Lovers” [fig. 28], the title of the same episode Song appears in, give the Korean animators more freedom to portray Asia to an American audience and anticipate entire episodes animated in this style in *Korra*. On the other hand, the contradictions of a vaguely Asian setting implicate Koreans in the orientalism of the setting and the contradictions of Asian politics as a series of disputes between nation-states. The Korean animators are forced to represent their own conquest by Japan and resolve it not according to their own knowledge of history but the naïve liberal humanism of the American creators.



[Figure 28 – Experiments in traditional painting from the Korean animators of *Avatar*]

The Legend of Korra As Critique

If this were the limit of *Avatar*, it would be one of many shows that expresses a western image of oriental mysticism and non-history, albeit a show particularly rich in its usage of Asian

culture and the use of Asian animators for creative tasks. What makes *Avatar* remarkable is that the show would critique its own contradictions through aesthetic experimentation, and in doing so would empower the Korean animators even further to give their creative input on the sequel that followed, *The Legend of Korra*.

After the end of *Avatar*, the show built a massive following among those who had grown up with the show as well as those who had watched it online through word of mouth, and a series of comics, books, video games, and a live action film kept the franchise alive. The comics were surprisingly political, showing there was significant room for a more sophisticated exploration of the show's setting. For example, one comic gave backstory to Chin the conqueror, a comedy-side character from a single episode. In the show, he had been killed by one of Aang's past lives, Avatar Kiyoshi, after being stripped naked by air bending and falling to his death in cartoonish fashion. Though the episode briefly discusses him as a "brutal tyrant" who had tried to conquer the homeland of Avatar Kiyoshi, the comics elaborate that he was in fact attempting to unify the kingdom against the "yellow neck uprising," a period of widespread banditry and murder because of the political impotence of the king. The entire period is elaborated as part of the peasant uprising against political corruption in Ba Sing Se, the capital of the Earth Kingdom, portrayed as still corrupt by the time of *Avatar*. Avatar Kiyoshi, used by various factions, eventually "ended" the uprising by installing a constitutional monarchy which supposedly addressed the grievances of the peasants. Kiyoshi also created the Dai Li, the totalitarian secret police of the Earth Kingdom. The comic not only complicates the story of *Avatar* with questions of class conflict but questions the very political function of the Avatar, revealing that the praetorian guard that overthrows the Earth Kingdom on behalf of the fire nation was created by the Avatar in the first place to maintain the corrupt monarchy and the poverty depicted in *Avatar*

the result of failed social reforms to depoliticize the revolutionary peasantry. *The Legend of Korra* takes up these unresolved questions immediately.

Korra begins 70 years after the finale of *Avatar*. In the wake of the defeat of the fire nation, Aang has set up a politically neutral city, Republic City, an early 20th century Hong Kong-like metropolis. Established within the United Republic of Nations, a sovereign state on Earth Kingdom territory previously annexed by the fire kingdom, Republic City has arisen around an UN-like organization, the United Republic Council. Most importantly, Republic City is founded on the implied industrial revolution of the fire nation and the innovations in bending of Aang's group, generalized to the masses as the foundation of a modern industrial proletariat.

Season one confronts the problem of a proletariat based on bending abilities: the remnants of feudal privilege among benders, the political and economic relations between benders and non-benders, and the increasing irrelevance of the Avatar system of "balance" in the face of modern mass politics. Korra, the new teenage avatar (rather than the prepubescent Aang), leaves her cloistered existence as a sacred figure to confront an anti-bender revolution, the "Equalists." Amon, its leader, wears a mask with a red sun in the middle, and art posters released with the show evokes a potential association with Japanese fascism [Fig. 29]. The equalists combine aesthetic features of Japanese fascism, Chinese communism, and Korean masks (Konietzko and DiMartino 2013, 28).



[Figure 29 – Poster for Amon’s anti-bender revolution explicitly evokes the Japanese Empire]

After exposing the discrimination and precarity that motivates the Equalist movement and its growing popularity, Korra slowly learns that the United Republic Council is corrupt, detached from the concerns of the masses, and using Korra as a tool for their corruption because she symbolizes the sacred Bender privileges that maintain the status quo. Even the accomplishments of Aang’s group as the Avatars that restored balance are revealed to be misused as a popular justification for the corrupt government and themselves deeply flawed. Korra is repulsed by the machinations of politics but alienated from the concerns of the masses by virtue of her symbolic existence as the basis of the sovereignty of the modern system of nation-states. She avoids this choice by spending her time with two orphaned brothers Mako and Bolin, impoverished pro-benders in a secularized sport of bending and Asami, daughter of a wealthy industrialist. A love triangle develops between Korra, Mako, and Asami, all insecure because each stand for the incompatibility of their class position to stand for the social totality.

Though initially indifferent to politics, the revolution, and the remnants of Avatar worship, Korra's friends all are forced to take political positions and at times are potentially sympathetic to the equalist message. Asami's father is revealed to be funding the equalists because of his wife's death at the hands of a firebender, while it is revealed that Mako and Bolin live in poverty because their parents were killed by a firebender. Korra, seeing the repression of the masses by Tarrlok, the Northern Water Tribe's representative and chairman of the United Republic Council, takes a stand against the government at risk of undermining democracy itself.

Amon, in a speech given to followers, explains that his mask is the result of a firebender attack that killed his parents and left him scarred, a mirror of Bolin and Mako. Though the form of the show presents Amon as a brutal leader, he only threatens to take people's bending away, a rather tame and even egalitarian measure. Underlying Korra's horror is the unstated assumption that bending is essential and natural, hence its removal is akin to death. The mid-season climax comes when it appears that Asami will switch sides with her father as the result of unstated prejudice against her as a non-bender. Once Asami rejects her father, the stage is set for the ideological confrontation between Korra's group and the equalists under Amon's leadership, the latter with clear ideological conviction and the former with increasingly muddled motivations.

But even this is not metaphorical enough for the ideological critique of *Korra*. Amon explicitly frames his actions as justice for economic exploitation, inter-bending wars that cause the common people misery, and the indifference of the Avatar, with bending only targeted because of its consequences. As he says in a grandiose speech to his followers:

“As you know, the Avatar has recently arrived in Republic City. And if she were here, she would tell you that bending brings balance to the world. But, she is wrong. The only thing bending has brought to the world, is suffering. It has been the cause of every war in every era.

In revealing that he has the power to take bending away, he symbolizes this as a sacred gift to match the Avatar's superhuman powers, a mandate of heaven for the equalists and a sovereignty that challenges the entire social order:

Since the beginning of time, the spirits have acted as guardians of our world, and they have spoken to me. They say the Avatar has failed humanity. That is why the spirits have chosen me to usher in a new era of balance."

And, when taking the bending away from a wealthy firebender, explains his economic motivations clearly:

"Lightning Bolt Zolt: "Zolt has amassed a fortune by extorting and abusing nonbenders. But his reign of terror is about to come to an end."- Season 1, Episode 3: The Revelation

Korra, presented the revolutionary program of Amon clearly, ultimately regresses to the interpersonal fantasy of *Avatar the Last Airbender's* deus ex machina non-fatal defeat of the fire nation's king. It is revealed that Amon is Tarrlok's brother and a blood-bender motivated by petty family revenge rather than his espoused values. *Korra* exposes that the story of his mask is a lie and that he is a bender, and he quickly dies afterwards. The political choices confronting the characters are erased by a battle spectacle between Republic City forces and the Equalists. The masses who sympathized with Amon's message are again made invisible and his movement falls apart offscreen between seasons one and two. Even *Korra*, having lost her bending, has it restored by Aang reincarnated at the end of the last episode, an echo of the deus-ex-machina of *Avatar*. But if *Korra* ultimately retreats from its historicization of the contradictions of *Avatar* in East Asian modernity, the same is not true of the involvement of Koreans, who became even more involved in the show's production.

The Korean Production of Korra

Avatar had ended with more and more responsibilities going to Korean staff and creative freedom for the Korean animators. *Korra* picked up by going even further. JM animation had been created out of former Tin House animators by Yoo Jae Myung, the former animation director of *Avatar* and who had worked on 32 episodes of *Avatar* across the whole series. As is typical of Korean animation studios oriented around American subcontracting, the company was mostly a group of animators around Yoo gathered to work on a few specific contracts, and Yoo would leave with most of the animators to form a new studio Mir in 2010 to work on pre-production for *Korra*. It took on a larger role from the beginning, working on pre-production, storyboarding, and martial arts choreography. Studio Mir even pushed for *Korra* to be female against the initial designs of Nickelodeon and won, with Yoo commenting sarcastically that Americans are more culturally conservative than Koreans in his experience dealing with Nickelodeon executives. Ryu Ki-hyun, character designer for *Avatar*, had moved to the U.S. during *Avatar*'s production and returned as director of the entirety of *Korra* season one and a character designer and supervising producer across the whole series. New 16:9 backgrounds showed off the background designs of Korean animators, populated by characters increasingly designed by multiple Korean staff. In-Seung Choi handled the storyboarding, directing, and key animation for the opening of the show. Koreans in various production roles even got to contribute original art to the artbook published after each season.

With more creative input also came more work for the Korean studio. Yoo had already left JM animation because of pay and labor disputes and *Korra* began with production disputes between JM and Mir over the contract. Despite the success of *Avatar*, JM animation had failed to leverage it into success, and Mir was formed with the explicit goal of overcoming the barriers of

the Korean animation subcontracting and valuing creative labor and collaborative spirit in the model of the Soviet Space Station Mir and its scientific accomplishments (Kim 2017).

Korra prioritized hand-drawn animation, and in its complicated character designs and dynamic fight scenes, averaged 18,000 drawings per episode across the season. This is about three times the average Japanese anime and comparable in number to an episode of *The Simpsons* (May 2020). However, these drawings had to be generated from scratch on a tight schedule and the variety of environments, characters, and bending scenes (both the new sport of “pro-bending” and fights using multiple “elements”) meant an exhausting amount of work. This is clear in Studio Mir’s self-tribute video, which shows animators sleeping in their chairs, on the floor of the studio, nursing shoulder pain, and doing nearly everything with pencil and paper. In fact, this was Korea’s strength in *Korra*’s global value chain. Despite the Korean industry having nearly collapsed as the result of its dependence on 2D hand-drawn animation in the age of 3D and computer animation, *Korra* outsourced its computer animation to Technicolor India and privileged hand-drawn animation as its value-added creative labor. Representing this aesthetically, the pro-bending arena was based on Sri Harmandir Sahib, the “Golden Palace” in India, as well as the Moorish-inspired Saltair Pavilion in Salt-Lake City. Designed by a Korean Jung Su Lee and painted by an American Frederic Stewart, the actual CG model was done in India (Konietzko and DiMartino 2013, 55; 56). Korea, moving up the production chain in the decade since *Avatar*, served as a transmission belt for the oriental image of India from *Avatar* to India itself.

Regardless, the significant increase in thematic complexity mirrored the increase in Korean involvement, in some ways a reaction to M. Night Shyamalan’s 2010 live action *The Last Airbender*, which had been widely criticized for whitewashing its cast including by Bryan

Konietzko in a blogpost justifying the variety of skin colors in *Korra* (Konietzko 2013). Whereas Shyamalan had defended his film with reference to Japanese anime's racial ambiguity, *Korra*'s animation director Yoo Jae-myung used the same reference to come to a very different conclusion. In criticizing the initial failure to outsource Avatar to Japan and the strength of Korean animation outsourcing, he criticized Japanese anime: "the Japanese have a weakness, which is the fact that when they are drawing in the Japanese animation style they are unable to copy other styles... Koreans have the ability to covert what they learned into tangible products...we have the ability to absorb and adapt to any kind of culture" (MacDonald 2013).

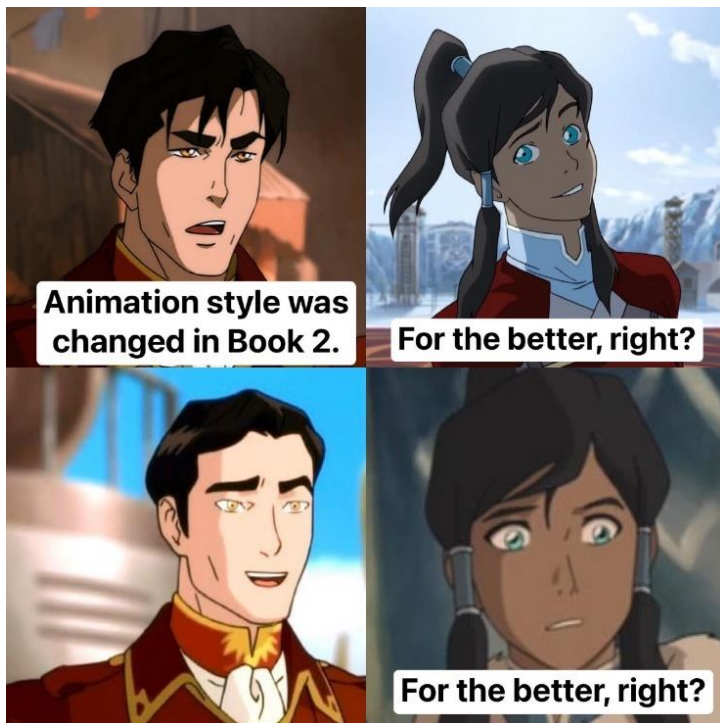
A statement about animation production became part of a larger question of multiculturalism, with Korea's history of outsourcing made into the ability to understand American racial politics and a transnational "Asianness" beyond Korea. This argument, as well as Nickelodeon's ability to squash the creativity of the show's Korean animators, would be explicitly put to the test. The show would be renewed for a second season, now with 14 episodes and without the initial pushback from Nickelodeon about a female protagonist and the adult themes and complexity of the show. Given the exhaustion of animating season one, Studio Mir would leave the project to animate *The Boondocks* (2005-2014), with Japanese anime studio Pierrot taking its place. Finally getting a collaboration with Japan, the result was a disaster.

The Triumph of Korean Animation

Season 2 puts Korra in the middle of a civil war between the northern and southern water tribes. Korra and her friends again confront political and the contradictions of the Avatar's function in a secular political system. But given the non-existence of the southern water tribe except as a punchline in *Avatar*, *Korra season 2*'s direct commentary on its predecessor as well

as issues of class and revolution are greatly lessened. Instead, the plot is mostly an excuse to explore the world of the spirits and fully liberate the show’s aesthetics.

To achieve this, Pierrot’s creative role was much smaller than Studio Mir’s, mostly reduced to “cleanup work” for the designs and storyboards of the American creators. Though some Koreans did work on creative tasks like storyboards and paintings, the division of labor was much sharper between the American and Japanese sides. Even the name of Pierrot’s director, Yoriyasu Kogawa, was misspelled as “Toshiyasu” in the credits, symbolizing that the relationship with the studio was not what DiMartino and Konietzko had imaged. Whether the result of Yoo’s prediction about Japanese anime studios, stylistic choices by Pierrot that clashed with the Korean work of season 1, or the immense amount of labor required that the Japanese could not do, the result were visuals widely mocked as inferior to the work of Studio Mir [Fig. 30]



[Figure 30 – An internet meme mocks the animation in *Korra* season 2 by Japanese studio Pierrot]

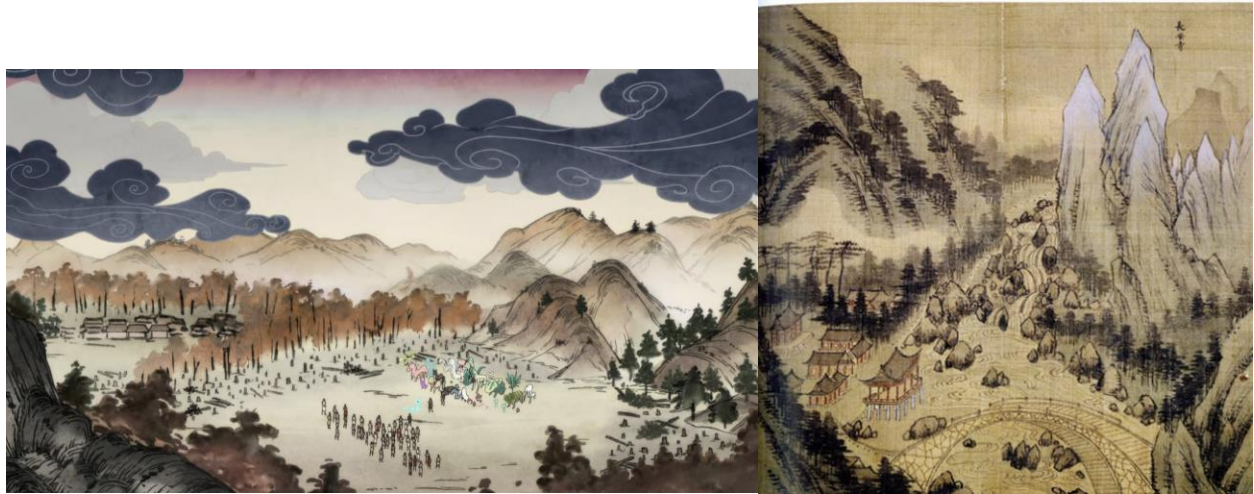
The result was so disastrous that Studio Mir came back to finish the season out of fear they would be blamed and suffer reputational damage, despite exhaustion from having just worked on *The Boondocks*. The result was the greatest visual triumph of the series, a two-part exploration of the ancient origins of the avatar. *Avatar*'s brief experiments in East Asian ink painting were expanded into 45 minutes of lush backgrounds, inventive magical creatures, and smooth animation in *Beginnings, Part 1* and *Part 2* [Fig. 31]



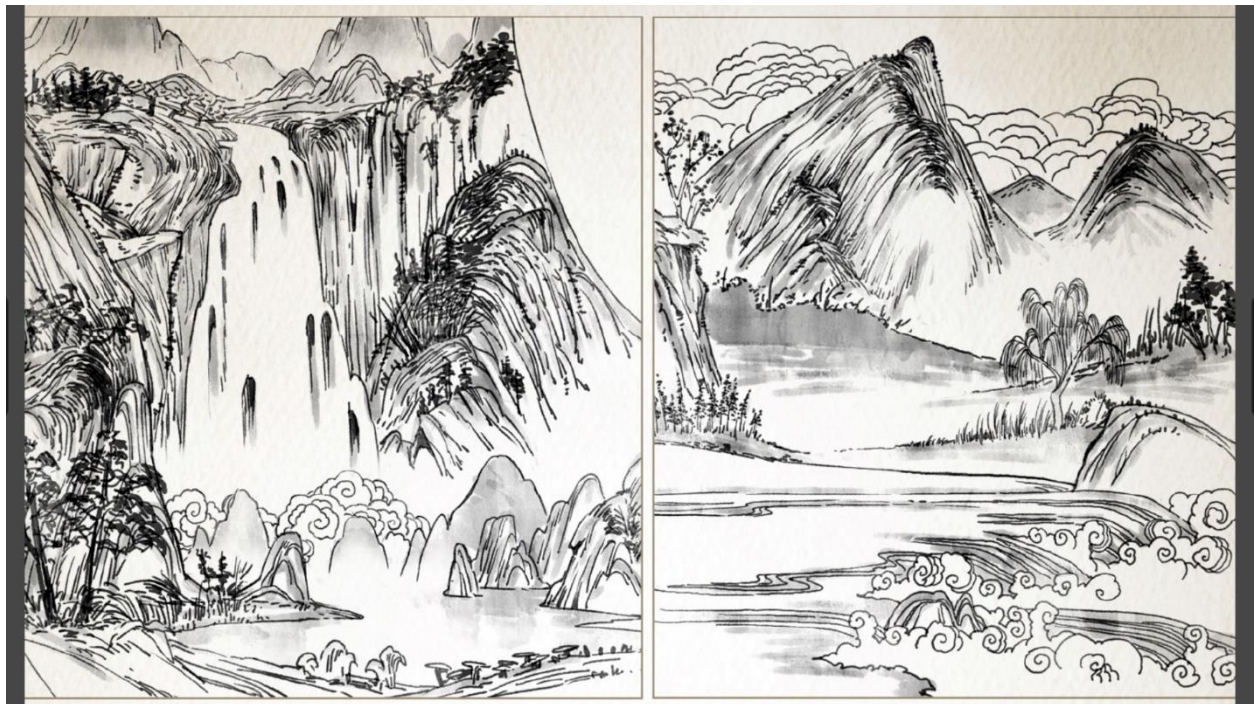
[Figure 31 – A highly stylized East Asian backgrounds from *Beginnings*]

Though inspired by “Chinese ink wash paintings and Japanese woodblock printing” (Konietzko and DiMartino 2014, 89) and Hayao Miyazaki (95), Koreans were responsible for nearly all the designs and backgrounds. The dragon spirit is clearly Korean given its four toes and Korean language notes on the spirits can be seen in the artbook (93). Some designs evoke

Korean art, such as shots of looming mountains which evoke the “true view style” of Jeong Seon [Fig. 32], especially backgrounds cut from the episode [Fig. 33]



[Figure 32 – Left a scene from Korra; right Jeong Seon’s “Jang’an Monastery” (1711)]



[Figure 33 – Cut backgrounds show elements of Korean landscape painting]

This is not just a visual spectacle but a self-contained fable about the avatar's failure to prevent the loss of Eden, the origin of war, and the division of the world into nations, far more affecting than the lackluster plot of the season. Ironically, such stylistic backgrounds were easier than the normal backgrounds of the show, with Konietzko semi-sarcastically wishing they had been used for the entire franchise (90). Though still a mishmash of East Asian aesthetics, the failure of Pierrot's anime style created a glimpse of a Korean animation within an American production, permitted because fans themselves expected more. Though Pierrot would return for the following episode, Studio Mir would take up the remaining episodes and rescue the show's animation, if not its plot.

However, Koreans were only given the chance to contribute creatively to Korra because they were willing to work excruciating hours and do the work that the Japanese anime studio would not, despite the anime's own infamous reputation for low pay and overwork. Konietzko begins the season's art book with "book two was hard" (6). Explaining that "we each have our special skills and attributes" and together "digging deep, sticking to our ideals, and clinging stubbornly to a vision, we can reach our goals" (6). This would be patronizing, considering most of the work was done by exhausted Korean animators forced to save their reputation after the mistaken partnership with Pierrot rather than "friends and colleagues working towards a common goal" (7), except that Yoo Jae-myung concurs. In an interview during the show's production, he defends the global division of labor as a natural harmony in which "we each have a part that we excel in, so when we work together and contribute to the parts that we are good at, we can produce better content." As for why Koreans cannot transcend beyond their "part", he blames Korean "cultural maturity" compared to American and Japanese audiences (MacDonald 2013).

For *Korra* to become a Korean animation, Koreans had to take the position of pre-modernity themselves. Just as *Avatar* and then *Korra* ran into the fundamental limits of multicultural liberalism in a historical setting of East Asian colonial modernity, so too did the Korean animators come to embody a culture incapable of producing its own national animation and instead naturally suited to super-exploitation. As the show itself retreated from its political implications into a fairy tale about the origins of social antagonism, Korean creative labor was given the task of representing this eternal pastness as authentically Korean. This was the price of beating Japan in the game of co-production.

Studio Mir would work on the remainder of the show and continue to be involved in creative tasks with help from Studio Reve, another Korean studio created in 2013 to work on the show. Both Mir and Reve did key animations. Ryu Ki-hyun would not only continue to serve as main character designer and supervising producer, but he would also get a look alike character “Ryu” in the third and fourth seasons.

But as the political themes returned in seasons three and four, Koreans would never again make the show Korean. Instead, American liberal orientalism would attempt to resolve the unresolved political issues spanning a decade of the *Avatar* franchise.

In season three, the unexplored political implications of *Avatar*’s elite “white lotus society” are brought out into the open, as Korra confronts the “red lotus society,” a breakaway faction. Espousing anarchist philosophy, they wish to restore the harmony of spirits and humans and destroy all nations and corrupt leaders. Unlike season one’s last-minute depoliticization, Zahar, the leader of the red lotus (voiced by punk-artist Henry Rollins), as well as his comrades are genuine in their beliefs and extremely powerful because of their connection to nature and the spirit realm. Korra begins the season being kidnapped by the queen of the Earth Kingdom,

gaining sympathy with the anti-authoritarian philosophy of her eventual antagonists. Though she eventually defeats Zahar without really confronting his politics, she is punished for her naivete and ends the season crippled and depressed. Zahar on the other hand accomplishes his goals, merging the human and spirit worlds permanently. However, the masses and modernity are long gone from the increasingly aestheticized setting and the restoration of the spirit world instead imagines a return of Asian pre-history.

Season four picks up with the results of Korra's failure, as the corrupt Earth kingdom has been overthrown by the Earth Empire under a military strongwoman evocative of Yuan Shikai's short lived Empire of China, Korra powerless to stop it. Korra eventually recovers her powers and confidence, stopping the Empire's invasion of the United Republic and restoring the Earth Kingdom. Though seemingly more political, seasons three and four are a repetition of *Avatar the Last Airbender*, with season three restoring the status quo during *Avatar* and season four repeating the fire nation's efforts at imposing colonial modernity.

In attempting to resolve the same problem twice, *Korra* ends up repeating it. *Avatar's* totalitarian Dai Li are repeated by modern references to Chinese totalitarianism in the Earth Empire, as the military regime takes dissidents to re-education camps where they are brainwashed. After defeating the Empire, Korra restores the monarchy again, which then promises to abolish itself for a system of independent states with a "democratic" government once the people are "ready" for democracy. This self-balkanization of China is straight from a CIA fantasy, and though later comics would again acknowledge the fundamental flaws of this effort, confronting the contradictions of *Korra's* liberal worldview a second time had diminishing returns. Future planned projects in the *Avatar* franchise, including a live action Netflix show (2024) and a series of projects from "Avatar Studios" including three animated

feature films, again return to the initial problematic of *Avatar* and ignore *Korra* as superfluous (Alexa 2024).

Aesthetically, season three evokes South and Southeast Asia to match its transcendental themes and season four evokes late feudal China in its depiction of rural poverty. While this leads to some creative Asian designs, such as Zahar Buddhist shrine-like prison, the Little Ba Sing Se fashion mall which resembles a tulou (Hakka circular village), and the lower ring of slums of Ba Sing Se made to evoke Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, the show never again reached the heights of season two's East Asian paintings. *Korra* had reached its limits as well as the potential of Korean creative input and a vague Asianness again became the aesthetic.

Nickelodeon had already moved season two's timeslot to the competitive Friday night, reflecting and causing a massive drop in viewership. By season three, ratings had dropped further, and Nick stopped airing the show on television after episode eight, releasing the rest online weekly. Season 4 was barely advertised and released online less than two months after the end of season 3, with significant budget cuts necessitating an episode of recycled clips.

Despite a bold finale which had *Korra* and Asami become a queer couple, bringing attention to a show that most people did not even realize was airing, *Korra* failed to match its great ambitions vis-à-vis *Avatar the Last Airbender* and went out with a whimper. But from the perspective of Korean animation, Studio Mir's exhaustive efforts to preserve its reputation succeeded. Unlike the long history of briefly assembled and then dissolving Korean animation studios, it has become one of the most successful outsourcing studios in the world. It is the only Korean studio with a house style developed during the production of *Korra*, as the characters in its shows for Netflix are immediately recognizable as similar to characters in *Korra* unlike its work on *The Boondocks*. In that sense, *Avatar* and *Korra* are the closest outsourcing has come to

creating a Korean animation, aesthetically and in popular memory. It was even the rare instance where Korean “anime-inspired” animation was better received than the real thing. But ultimately, the ceiling of monopoly capitalism is immovable. Netflix produced a live action *Avatar* TV series, ignoring both *Korra* and Shyamalan’s live-action film. With an Asian cast and a Korean-American director, the series was conscious of its Asianness. But rather than Asianness as a vector to Koreanness mediated in the American context, Netflix had no interest in the substance of the work, causing Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino to pull out over creative differences. The show received middling reviews and was almost instantly forgotten. VFX was handled by British studio DNEG with no room for Studio Mir’s 2D animation or a Korean VFX studio. On the other hand, because Konietzko and DiMartino plan a multimedia franchise including animated films, it is probable that Studio Mir will work on at least some of them, having grown significantly as a studio since *Korra* rather than fracturing into new studios as in the old system. Future planned films, coproduced by Nickelodeon and Paramount+, will allow Mir to leverage the streaming wars for its relative advancement up the value chain rather than be subordinated to Nickelodeon. But, as chapter seven will explore, this is merely a repetition of the same fundamental division between monopoly and non-monopoly labor in the global animation value chain with an even lesser chance of ascension.

Korra season two showed a brief glimpse of a Korean animation outside this system of capitalist globalization, freely expressed in the multicultural consumption desires of the show’s fandom. Unfortunately, this came at the cost of history itself. The next chapter turns to another example of this contradiction in action: North Korean animation. Even more insistent on Korean nationalism in its cultural products, North Korean animation responded to capitalism globalization by becoming even more dehistoricized than its South Korean counterpart. After all,

if the South Korean labor of *Avatar* did not become widely known until *Korra*, North Korean labor on the show is uncredited (Kao 2018) and barely mentioned at all except as a bizarre factoid. North Korea also did not object to the show's liberal politics and portrayal of totalitarianism.

^{xliii} Chapter eight discusses the rise of manhwa in Korea outside government control in detail.

^{xliv} This argument is not to downplay the genocidal brutality of the Japanese Empire but rather to point out that, because of its lateness to colonialism and imperialism, it could not simply use European or American biological racism as justification. Rather, Japanese colonialism anticipated the post-war contradictions between America's own post-colonial "democratic" ideology and genocidal brutality in practice.

^{xlv} See chapter two and the discussion of the life of An Jung-sik.

^{xlvi} Carter Eckert's term for the collaborator industrialists like the Koch'ang Kims.

^{xlvii} Discussed in chapter two.

^{xlviii} Discussed in chapter three.

^{xlix} Animating water is notoriously difficult in the industry, hence the technical innovations and massive budget required for James Cameron's *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022)

Chapter Six:

North Korean Animation and the Convergence of Korean Outsourcing

During the 2022 South Korean presidential election, conservative Yoon Suk-yeol's wife Kim Keon-hee regularly became a source of controversy, media gossip, and a general thorn in Yoon's side. Having become famous for prosecuting conservative former presidents Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak and helping to send them both to prison, Yoon became prosecutor general under liberal president Moon Jae-in, only to then prosecute Cho Kuk, Moon's justice minister, for various corruption charges. Eventually, Yoon was forced to resign, and in choosing to run against his former boss, presented himself as the anti-corruption candidate and the alternative to the two parties that had both seen endless corruption scandals in a larger social backdrop of stagnating wages, lack of job opportunities, and rising extremism and bigotry.

Regardless of the truth of this image, nothing could be worse for it than the repeated scandals of Yoon's wife Kim Keon-hee during the campaign, from being under the influence of shamanism (a major cause of Park Geun-hye's downfall), manipulating stock prices, taking bribes disguised as art sponsorships, and padding her resume with fictional accomplishments (Cho Kuk had angered the public because he had padded his daughter's resume as well). The last of these included a strange claim: that Kim had won the grand prize at the Seoul International Cartoon & Animation Festival in 2004 (Lee 2021). In fact, the award had gone to Nelson Shin, CEO of AKOM, the studio that animated *The Simpsons*, and director of *Transformers: The Movie* (1986), for his work *Princess Chung* (2004). That Kim thought she could get away with such a bizarre claim shows how much this work has been forgotten, having never seen a DVD release and being considered "lost media" among collectors¹.

What is particularly interesting is that though it is now forgotten, *Princess Chung* is one of the most historically significant cultural works in Korean history. An animated co-production between North and South Korea, it represents the peak of the progressive “Sunshine Policy” of 1997-2007, in which cultural and economic cooperation between the two Koreas replaced, for the first time since the Korean War, hostility with peace. Cultural efforts, like tour guides to Mount Kungang, reunions of separated families, a 2002 friendly soccer match, athletes of the two countries marching together at the 2005 East Asian Games and 2007 Asian Winter Games, and other efforts in “arts, sports, academics, media, labor, agriculture, and religion” (Kwon and Lim 2006) combined with economic cooperation like Hyundai’s investments in the Kaesong industrial complex, increased trade and food loans, and a planned “iron silk road” that would connect the two Koreas by railroad (Park and Yang 2018; Seliger 2021).

Animation, as an industrial art, served this purpose well, and *Princess Chung* remains the only film co-produced by the two Koreas that was shown in both North and South Korea and the only North-South simultaneous movie release. Other works of the period like the live action films *A Bold Family* (2005) and *Hwang Jin-Yi* (2007) had scenes shot in North Korea but were entirely produced by South Koreans and never shown in the North. The history of South Korea’s animation outsourcing is well known, but less known is North Korea’s equally rich history of animation outsourcing, an island of capitalism in a sea of ostensible socialism. *Princess Chung* connected the two Koreas’ national animation histories and forced them to determine what story was acceptable to both the communist North and anti-communist South.

The result was a Korean pansori story of filial piety. The story had been adapted before in a North-South coproduction of sorts: Shin Sang-ok, the famous South Korean director, had made *Devoted Daughter Shim Chong* (1972) in South Korea and a separate film, *The Tale of Shim*

Chong (1985) after being “kidnapped” by North Korea. The tale of Shim Chong would continue to represent the tragedies of Korean division. Though a fully South Korean film, *Sopyonje* (1993) would use the tale to represent the persistence of han, the Korean feeling of oppression and suffering as a people, and in doing so jumpstart newly democratic South Korean cinema’s political self-criticism, in which normative anti-communist hostility to the North was a central villain.

Princess Chung was something different. It replaced political intrigue and the angst of Pansori with animal friends, a Cinderella story, and Disney-esque character-designs such as the plump and affable king of Joseon. From its inception, it strived for international marketability and profitability, the opposite of North Korea’s usual image as the last bastion of state-planned socialism, dour socialist realism, and hermit-like cultural enclosure. Though marketing entailed the political importance of North-South relations, the film itself gives no indication of its North Korean creation, unlike other later coproductions like the Belgian-Korean *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* (2012) and the Chinese-Korean *Meet In Pyongyang* (2012), which play up the exoticism of North Korea to an international audience. It is a rare North Korean film which can be evaluated on its technical and artistic merits to a world standard.

Princess Chung ultimately failed to match its ambitions at the box office and was soon forgotten along with North-South cooperation itself, which ended under the two conservative administrations that followed the Sunshine period, never reaching the same level under the liberal Moon Jae-in and quickly aborted again by Yoon Suk-yeol.

Princess Chung has been forgotten but the marketization it set off continued apace. The technical skills the film showed off continued to develop, and it even became something of a joke on the South Korean internet to marvel at the technical quality of the sequel to *Boy General*

(2015-2019) compared to the limited ambitions of South Korean animation. In fact, in 2021 SEK studio was sanctioned by the United States government for being too efficient. These targeted economic sanctions came with separate political sanctions against the North Korean government, Chinese surveillance technology in Xinjiang, human rights violations in Bangladesh's war on drugs, and the military government of Burma's crackdown on popular resistance. Unlike all these political sanctions, the US Treasury's motivation against North Korea was the only one based on economic logic: "seemingly fueled by the desire for unreasonably low-cost labor, foreign media companies continue to subcontract animation work to SEK Studio" (Treasury 2021). The accusation is not directed at SEK at all but foreign companies, which are compelled by capitalist competition to seek such "unreasonable" labor. North Korea, which has had little success overcoming American sanctions and following China's path towards globalization, has a singular exception in animation. As the recent discovery of North Korean outsourcing work for major American and Japanese companies discussed in chapter one shows, the sanctions have had little effect.

However, their mere existence shows the strange historical journey of North Korean animation. Though attempting to follow the post-socialist Chinese path of "reform and opening up" to global capitalism, animation is not exempt from the overall demands of "Juche" ideology, in fact becoming a major cultural product of importance. *Boy General* was continued on the personal order of Kim Jong-un, who called on North Korean animation to both represent the "noble mission" of "the party and revolution" and the "modernization, scientization, computerization and digitalization" of the North Korean economy (KNCA 2014).

Can animation accomplish this dual task while maintaining a socialist façade? It is especially strange that an industry at the forefront of modernization takes stories from pre-

modern folktales. How did folktales and pansori stories become the culturally acceptable form for North Korean “socialist” animation? Why was animation acceptable for coproduction whereas cinema and other art forms were so heavily regulated by North Korean ideological strictures? How did North Koreans conceive of “children’s entertainment” and how did Disney-like qualities become acceptable, a vast contrast with the infamously gory entertainment in North Korean TV show *Squirrel and Hedgehog* (1977-2012) which ends its first season with a suicide attack by the heavily militarized squirrels that destroys the world with “Toadstool Bombs”, an obvious reference to nuclear weapons? Finally, how is it that North and South Korea, seemingly ideologically and economically opposite, ended up repeatedly echoing each other in animation, not only during the periods of national developmentalism but, as *Princess Chung* shows, even during neoliberal globalization?

Socialist Animation

The concept of socialist animation was not immediately obvious to socialist artists and thinkers. In the early period of animation and cinema, in which mass-based socialist parties grew into mainstream European political forces, the distinction between animation and cinema was not yet clear. A variety of cinematic devices were used such as the zoetrope, the zoopraxiscope, the stereopticon, as much descendants of advances in photography as the motion of images on a flip book and more technically, the magic lantern and apparatuses that produced “projection-images” which anticipated both animation and cinema (Lamarre 2011).

For early radical theorists of cinema, animation seemed to have more potential for experimentation, critique, and a general freedom. Early cinema had two tendencies: the scientific documentation of Muybridge’s attempt to document a galloping horse’s feet leaving the ground (Williams 1999) or the Lumiere brothers’ films that documented the world and put it within

reach (Gunning 2006, 381); the theatrical spectacle of George Méliès's films which used stage magic to produce effects. Despite the objectivity of the former and the fantastical imaginary of the latter, both tendencies are part of a common "cinema of attractions" (382) which preceded narrative cinema, or cinema that constructs an image of reality through montage. If this breakthrough in cinema-as-such caused Deleuze to dismiss animation, then for early cinema, animation could bring to life cinematic attractions far beyond the mere photographic.

In this pre-montage cinematic conception, Charlie Chaplin was the most revolutionary example of what cinema could do that other mediums, in particular the theater, could not, and cinema's ability to sweep away all feudal, backwards forms of culture (Leslie 2002, 18). Rather than editing, it was the motion of Chaplin within the scene that situated the tramp character as a fully modern, alienated subject, a malleable body at the mercy of the forces of industry and politics, and his timing that made his character seem an automaton of the cinema.

By this standard, animation was "pure cinema" in 1931 (29) and Chaplin "envied the perfect timing of animated cartoon gags" (16). This had theoretical implications as well. Chaplin was at times a comic figure and at others a tragic figure; in either case he could not solve the problems of the modern man faced with capitalist alienation. But animation could. Whereas Chaplin was shaped by the forces around him, cartoons could in turn shape the world back. Anything was malleable in the world of animation, and a cartoon character could just as easily turn into a locomotive as a locomotive could turn into a cartoon character or even an object of nature.

Compared to modern art movements such as cubism, supremacism, constructivism, futurism, and surrealism which in various ways attempted to reach a "point zero" of aesthetic form (40) to match the bankruptcy of modern rationality and perspective, animation could go

much further than painting as a medium, and early experimental Soviet animations such as Mikhail Tsekhanovsky's *Post* (1929) pushed the line, the shape, and the flat composition within the frame as far as they could go (Frank 2016, 104). But even mainstream works such as the silly symphonies of Disney and the rotoscoped jazz dances of the Fleischer brothers had a freedom of form and a situatedness in the frame that cinema was increasingly moving away from in the narrative cinema of D.W. Griffith. Perhaps most consequential was the introduction of sound, which gave narrative cinema a chronological unity and disguised the mechanical unreality of the silent film. Against this, animation unified sound and animation in a way that did not subordinate the latter to the former, or sometimes subordinated it so completely that it produced a critically valuable artifice of its own (Leslie 2002, 180).

Esther Leslie summarizes the entire period of early animation's critical value thusly: "This was not just children's stuff, and certainly not sugar-sweet. Whether they were for adults or children was indeterminate. They were simply for anarchists of any age" (30).

But there was a contradiction at the heart of this concept of animation. As both a framing of the modern industrial subject and a utopian, mystical solution to this situation, animation increasingly was pushed towards the latter as the former became the domain of cinema. As cinema developed its own language of montage, animation seemed to either remain in the early experimental stage of modern, non-narrative spectacle or aping cinema's own realism, most notably in the feature length films of Disney which abandoned the earlier malleability of form for a naturalism and movement-into-depth. With this differentiation between modern cinema and anarchistic, premodern animation, Walter Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein, the first thinkers of a "socialist animation," saw in it a primitivism and enchantment that could serve as a critique of the existing state of things and the subordination of humanity to the age of mechanical

reproduction. For a time, this was still avant-garde: Benjamin, in describing the Soviet Union of the 1920s as “the complete impetration of technological and primitive modes of life,” was also describing what made animation so powerful as an image of an un-natural nature, infused with technology but not dominated by it (Leslie 2002, 86). In animation Benjamin also saw children’s play prior to the separation of nature and humanity, the fairy tales of humanity’s collective childhood with their carnivalesque festivals of class inversion and folk populism. Eisenstein as well saw a “primal protoplasm” in animation in which the world could be reshaped into a harmony of nature and humanity, a “freedom from logic’s fetters and political subjugation” for a world “in which nature has been completely enslaved” (234; 231). But such utopian concepts of childhood and fairy tales were easily mastered by those societies that considered themselves already utopian: Walt Disney’s American dream of progress and freedom and Stalin’s socialist dream of proletarian-peasant harmony. For both, technological progress was the glue that held together society and ideology in harmony. Thus, after its anarchist phase, socialist animation found a strange ideological partner. Disney’s animated fairytales and Soviet fairytales illustrated premodern class allegories for seemingly opposed societies structured around modern industrial rationalism.

Socialist-Realist Animation

At the 1933 All-Union Conference on Comedy, “Russian animators were extorted to ‘Give us the Soviet Mickey Mouse!’” (Frank 2016, 105). This not only meant creating a cute and popular character but mimicking the Fordist animation techniques of Disney’s studios (105), moving away from the earlier avant-garde films of the 1920s towards a socialist-realism in animation. Cel animation replaced the earlier cut-out and stop-motion animation, animation became children’s entertainment in the newly formed state animation studio Soyuzdetmutfilm

(Union of Children's Animation – making its audience clear), and rotoscoping was used for its indexicality to reality (106).

The watershed moment came in 1935, when Disney Animation was showcased at the First Moscow International Film Festival. Sergei Eisenstein was a member of the jury and advocated for Disney's 1933 Silly Symphony *Three Little Pigs* to win first prize (Leslie 2002, 228). Disney only got third place, but the fates of Disney and Eisenstein would go in opposite directions afterwards. Eisenstein would come under attack along with the avant-garde more generally by the new socialist realism and would try to combine the earlier aesthetic experimentation of *Strike* (1925) and *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) with a fairy-tale version of historical heroes in *Alexander Nevsky* (1936) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1945; 1958), both of which faced censorship. Disney would also go in a realist direction, moving away from the Silly Symphonies in the wake of the success of *Snow White* (1937), would do one last experiment with *Fantasia* (1940) before committing to realism in the wake of financial difficulties, war breaking out, and the 1941 animator's strike. *Bambi* (1942) would set the tone for the future recovery of Disney, and in the years before *Cinderella* (1950) Disney would mix animation and live action, with the former seeming to serve the latter in *The Three Caballeros* (1944).

Stalin, who had made known his personal approval for Disney animation, had found Soviet animation held back by the technical limitations of the celluloid sheet system, which was patented by the U.S. (Pikkov 2016, 22-23), and the destruction of the war. With a massive post-war investment, Soviet socialist-realism animation would see its first feature-length animated film in Ivanov-Vano's *The Humpbacked Horse* (1947). The film was a huge success and was even screened by Walt Disney for his animators, a sign of the mutual admiration of these two ideological enemies.

Though committed to realism and with the goal of matching Disney's technical prowess, the film itself is not a mere copy. The contradiction of socialist-realism was in the term itself. The film was based on Russian folklore, Russian culture, and Russian history, all reshaped for socialist ideology. But the production was based on the latest technology and the aesthetic qualities of global modernity, in this case embodied by Disney animation. The film has elements of both Disney animation and folkloric forms (23), most notably the capital's portrayal in 2D woodcut style based on the Russian folk art of the lubok (Balina and Beumers 2015, 130). In the plot as well, the feature length narrative and striving towards realism clashes with the folkloric content, as the entire film is spoken in rhyme.

The story is about a boy who finds a magical horse which helps him out in various outlandish tasks forced on him by the Tsar. Eventually, he tricks the Tsar with the help of the horse, and he becomes a handsome young man while the Tsar is boiled alive. The young man marries the princess and becomes the new Tsar.

On the one hand, the film is the ideal example of socialist realism. The story of "Ivan the fool," a good-natured but simple child is the example chosen by Gorky as representative of the aspirational ideal for the masses (Boyd 2000). However, the moral of the story emphasizes the capricious evil of the Tsar and the magical quality of his defeat rather than any revolutionary resistance (Ivan wins by accepting his fate before the last-minute intervention of the magical horse). Considering Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible II*ⁱⁱ had been banned a year previously because the Tsar was an obvious allegory for Stalin, it seems strange that a portrayal of the Tsar as capricious and tyrannical would be allowed in a children's film. But it is precisely that it is a children's animated film that such satirical messages survives. Not because such films slip beneath censorship; Soviet animation had to struggle with censorship just as much as film.

Rather, the very concept of animation complicated what a socialist realism in animation would look like.

Ivanov-Vano, following the USSR's famous formula for socialist realism, claimed that socialist animation must be "national in form but socialist in content" (Sitkiewicz 2022,213). If film could satisfy this formula through indexicality to reality, animation could only function as a mimicry of film with realist-adjacent techniques such as *The Humpbacked Horse's* "Éclair" aesthetic, a rotoscoping process invented by Disney that allowed for more realism and less uncanny movement than the early Fleischer Brother's works. In this sense, children were mimics of adults who got the same socialist realist didactical works but simplified and made fantastical. This is what Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, argued in the 1920s, using her influence to have children's stories based on fairy tales banned for "mysticism and superstition" (Boyd 2000, 37-38) and treat a child as a "small man" capable of using "his rational facility" (Walter 1977, 185). It was Gorky who intervened against this concept of rationality, instead emphasizing the element of play in children's learning (185) and the importance of mythmaking in socialist construction for children and adults. As he stated: "myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery... That's how we got realism" (Boyd 2000, 38). As socialist realism pushed for less aesthetic experimentation to distract the rational new Soviet man, more freedom opened for animation to indulge in the mystical world of fairy-tales and childhood imagination.

From this perspective, film was a kind of animation, which animated reality to create myths and inspire and mobilize the masses for the idea of socialism. In practice, *The Humpbacked Horse* showed both existed simultaneously. Animation could slip underneath cinema and make political critiques that cinema could never get away with even as it

subordinated itself to cinema aesthetically. Looking towards the future but rooted in the past, the distinction of adult and child broke down, with socialism committed to both representation of the rationally organized, historically progressive socialist system and the mythmaking necessary to mobilize the masses for its purpose, children whose master was the magical, dialectical nature of reality itself. Socialist realism may have appeared to be a complete departure from the earlier avant-garde theories of Eisenstein and Benjamin, but it was closer to a perversion. Children, fairytales, animals, and animation remained objects of intense interest to socialist-realism, and though socialist-realism claimed that it had stabilized their meanings and solved the anarchism of early animation for a didactic animation for the masses, the contradictions of the form remained.

The Political Background of North Korean Animation

After the death of Stalin and Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing him, socialist-realism was brought into question and the aesthetic standards of animation were no exception. But North Korea went in the opposite direction, moving more towards socialist-realism and away from the experimental animation that characterized the post-Stalin USSR and Eastern Europe and later post-Mao China.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea came into existence in 1948, although the peninsula was already divided into separate occupations by 1945. However, the DPRK as it exists today only came into existence in 1956, the same year as Khrushchev's ascension to power in the USSR. During the colonial era, Kim Il-sung was a lesser-known nationalist figure, surviving as a guerilla in Manchuria while better known figures like Cho Man-sik (a leader of the 1919 March 1st movement), Kim Gu (president of the Korean Provisional Government in exile); Yo Un-hyung (creator of the short-lived People's Republic of Korea), and Pak Hon-yong (leader of the communist party) struggled for their version of a united, independent Korea. The struggles

immediately after liberation, in which an agrarian revolution occurred in the North while it was violently suppressed in the South (Cumings 1981; Kim 2013), saw these figures either assassinated or flee North, where Kim Il-sung was slowly emerging as the singular power over a centralized North Korean state. But even after the Korean war, which greatly enhanced Kim's power, there were still four powerful factions in the North: a Soviet aligned-faction, a Chinese aligned faction, a faction of domestically based communists, and a guerilla faction which included Kim (Lankov 2002, 89).

The spark that set off Kim's purge of his enemies in the August Faction Incident was de-Stalinization. Khrushchev, after purging his enemies at home, turned to the global communist movement, and had already purged "Stalinist" holdouts like Valko Chervenkov in Bulgaria, Konstantin Rokossovsky in Poland, Mátyás Rákosi in Poland, factions loyal to Khorloogiin Choibalsan in Mongolia, and imposing the new Soviet political line on global communist parties. Kim Il-sung, who had always been a fierce nationalist and advocate of Korean independence, played a careful game of balancing North Korea's economic dependence on the USSR with its political independence. When the Soviet and Chinese factions in Korea, sensing the shifting winds after Stalin, allied and attempted to purge Kim in 1956, he made his move. Kim emerged the sole center of power with a "Stalinist" personality cult to match. Their mistake, perhaps, was moving against Kim before the Soviets, leaving Khrushchev to catch up. By the time the USSR and China sent a demand that Kim cease the purges of his enemies and reinstate their party memberships, he could do so de-jure while de-facto eliminating all opposition when it was safe to do so (91). By 1957, when it was clear Kim was intent on finishing them off, the Soviets did not insist, facing a different international situation after the uprisings in Hungary and Poland and a growing rift with China over de-Stalinization (102-103).

But even with China coming to the Korean perspective on Soviet “revisionism” and the USSR accepting Korea’s false obedience, the conflict was not forgotten. Socialist animation would diverge between the USSR (and Eastern Europe) and North Korea, a story told in North Korea’s first episode of *Squirrel and Hedgehog* (1977-2012). In the series, nations of the world are represented by different animal species in the world of Flower Hill, a meadow that is also highly militarized. The squirrels, small but brave, represent North Korean people, while Uncle Gom, a strong but arrogant Bear represents the Soviet Union. Gom protects the village from the invading weasels (representing the United States) himself but the wiseness of this is questioned by Goseumdochi, the military leader of the squirrels. Goseumdochi is proven correct when mice (representing South Koreans) working for the weasels get Gom drunk and burn down the village. Gom awakens to this fait-accomplis and, too drunk to help, passes out again, and the political leader of the squirrel village, Geumbitdarami, weeps at his foolishness and gives himself up to the enemy [Fig. 34]. However, Goseumdochi and his animal friends the ducks and hedgehogs (as various small anti-imperialist nations) push back the weasels, save Geumbitdarami, and create an alliance to avenge the village and save Flower Hill.



[Figure 34 – Gom, the Soviet bear, is too drunk to help the villagers]

The episode is called “The Lesson for Squirrel” and the lesson is rather obvious: the Soviet Union may be useful at times and a powerful ally but do not trust it or rely on it. But even the form of the series is a lesson. The squirrel leader, for all his mistakes, is forgiven after a sufficiently melodramatic lamentation. Gom the Bear, on the other hand, disappears from the show until episode 10, made in 1998 after a gap of 15 years from the 4th episode and long after the Soviet Union was gone as one of many animals devoted to protecting Flower Hill. Though on a lower budget, “The Lesson for Squirrel” strives towards the heights of socialist-realism, a peak it would reach with 1983’s *A Swift Winged Horse* as a Korean retelling of the Stalin-era *The Humpbacked Horse* (1947). For now, the lesson for squirrel was that North Korea would have to make socialist-realist animation its own and do so in increasing isolation.

The History of North Korean Animation

The first mention of North Korean animation production came in the Korean Central Yearbook in 1956, a year after the restoration of the national film studio (Hong 2020, 6). The first North Korean animated films released were the hand drawn *Golden Axe and Iron Axe* and puppet animation *Amazing Peach*, both in 1960. These two films had been in development since 1957, when the Cartoon Film Research Institute was established within the Joseon Film Studio (Hong and Moon 2016, 268). Now called the “April 26 Children’s Animation Film Studio”, its purpose was closely tied to children’s political and moral education. Both films were directed and produced by a children’s magazine editor and artist, Lim Hong-un, based on fairy tales. Though made to instill socialist patriotism in children (Hong 2022, 332), the films were the result of extensive collaboration with the USSR, China, and especially the puppet animation of Czechoslovakia (332). Soviet socialist-realism had served as ideology, but China’s animation

industry served as industrial model, as the miraculous production of the Wan Brothers' *Princess Iron Fan* (1941) in occupied Shanghai showed what patriotic animation could be with hard work and extreme thrift. Given the USSR was already abandoning socialist-realism, what it meant in the Korean context was still up for debate, and the role of fantasy and utopia predominated over a realism of form or content (342).

Further films would come out which congealed into a "Juche" style, reaching its complete form in 1969's *The Piggy Who Lived Idly*. Prior films had a variety of topics and aesthetics. *Golden Axe and Iron Axe* was a story of a woodcutter who lost his axe and found it with the help of a mountain spirit. The story and moral do not feel especially North Korean (Hong 2020, 21) and difficulties in the technical side of North Korea's first animation, such as the contrast between the background and foreground, overwhelmed any stylistic concerns (23). *Amazing Peach* contrasts good people who share peaches with their village and bad people who take the peaches for themselves, only to be punished for their greed by nature (20). *Amazing Peach*, coming out 6 years before South Korea's first puppet animation, would lead to a series of puppet animations: in 1961 *Little Red Star*, in 1962 *5 million tons of grain*, *Exciting Field*, *Deer and Tiger*, and in 1963 *Youngnami*, *Fox Caught Fishing*, *Hyodongi*, and the first cut-out animation *Black Rabbit* (24).

Equally important, discussions of the works in the news were relatively free of references to Kim Il-sung. Once the broad terms of socialist realism and the responsibilities of socialist art were accepted, technical and aesthetic features as they related to the story and moral predominated (24).

As North Korean animation established a technical foundation, films became more political and experimental: the cut-out animation *Go Back to My Hole* (1966) mocks American

military efforts in Vietnam and combines animation with real footage of Vietnamese fighters (30-31). *Time Bomb* (1967) depicts South Korea under American imperialist occupation, combining scenes of a young girl's suffering and her brother's resistance to vampire-like American soldiers and a cartoonish chase scene between a dog and a soldier and an explosion that destroys the American military base (33-34), showing tendencies of a UPA animation style.

Such aesthetic experimentation would soon come to an end. In 1965, the "Cartoon and Puppet Film Production Studio" was absorbed into the "Korean Children's Film Studio," and Kim Jong-il would formulate "Children's Film Theory" following Kim Il-sung's teachings soon after (Hong 2018, 40). In 1968, four films would appear that all dealt with the anti-Japanese struggle: *Leaflet*, *On Behalf of Father*, *Euk-soe*, and *Brave Children's Unit* (39). Unlike earlier works, all of them explicitly praise Kim Il-sung, a sign of state intervention in the industry. But what "children's animation" meant was not immediately settled. Though all of them are about child soldiers, they lack the fairytale element of socialist realism that would target them as children. In *Leaflet*, fighting against the Japanese is portrayed in such a realistic way that a real gun is fired at one point, interrupting the animation (40). Rather than the abstract moral lesson of *Amazing Peach*, the children at the end of *Brave Children's Unit* directly pledge allegiance to Kim Il-sung.

Hyper-politicized, realist animation briefly brought North Korea close to the animation of Cultural Revolution era China. In fact, the initial declaration of the Socialist Education Movement in 1964, the precursor to the Cultural Revolution, brought the two countries closer than ever. China produced *The Clever Duckling* with a folded paper technique and North Korea would immediately follow with *Kite, Fly!* Using the same technique (Hong 2018, 33). But North Korea would soon diverge from both the USSR's "right-wing revisionism" and China's "ultra-

left adventurism” (Hong 2020, 37) as the cultural revolution accelerated and Chinese animation production ceased entirely. Though justified with references to Korean unity against this dual foreign threat, the real cause was domestic.

Kim Il-sung had long ago purged his foreign-aligned enemies but in 1967, a new domestic challenge appeared within Kim’s own faction. Behind the ideological struggle over “Stalinism” in 1956 was a more fundamental question on socialist development. There were three interrelated issues. The first was what Khrushchev called the “international socialist division of labor,” or the economic relationship between socialist countries. With the USSR at the head of a socialist bloc of countries that were not only ostensibly free of imperialist relationships but in the process of integration into a single system, it was logical to think of each element in that system specializing in its relative comparative advantage. For the USSR, this was no different than regions of the union specializing in wheat and others in heavy industry. But for socialist countries newly emerged from colonialism, this was a reconstitution of underdevelopment under Russian chauvinism. Second was the internal emphasis on heavy vs. light industry and long-term developmentalism vs. immediate living standards. Stalin had heavily emphasized long term development of heavy industry, and Khrushchev turned towards light industry and increased living standards as a rejection of his predecessor and a utopian belief that the long-term developmentalism of the early USSR had been accomplished and communism was imminent. Struggles over this question impacted every socialist country as well, with the USSR pressing its thumb down strongly on the side of light industry and consumer goods. Third was the ideological nature of development. Should material incentive or political incentive guide investment? Should the party have control over production or should technical experts? What was the balance between state centralization and firm autonomy in planning? Bundled in these

economic questions were larger questions of “socialist democracy” and “workers’ control” which had played out in Stalin’s rejection of Yugoslavia from the Cominform in 1948, gained new life in the Sino-soviet split, and were raging globally by 1967 as the Chinese cultural revolution resonated globally.

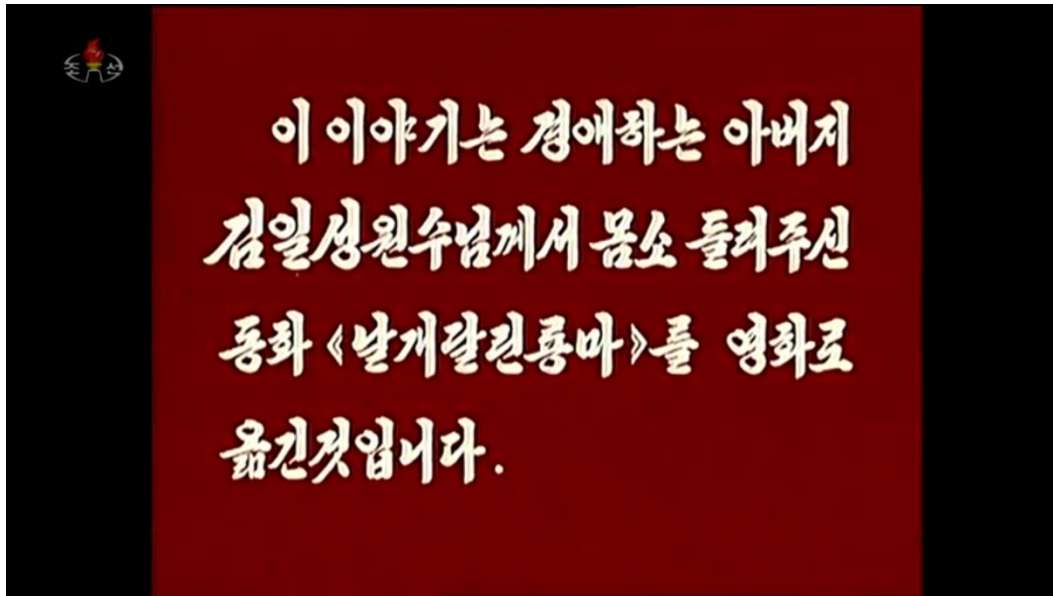
Though everything in the DPRK was filtered through the language of “juche,” it too had proposed solutions to these universal problems. Kim Il-sung had emphasized heavy industrialization and rapid collectivization of agriculture, the opposite of Khrushchev’s advice. But this was a centralized, party-controlled process, very different than the vacillations in China that culminated in criticism of the party itself in workplaces and on agricultural communes. In the middle of the Soviet emphasis on managerial autonomy and the Chinese attempts to rethink the nature of socialist management through experimental structures like the three-in-one combination, the DPRK proposed the “taean work system” in 1961, an attempt to establish harmony between workers, managers, and the party. Though the party was at the nucleus of the system and had the final say, in practice this was closer to the managerial system of the USSR which incentivized individual managers to go beyond quotas rather than follow the total plan as it came down to them. But at the level of individual incentive, morality was emphasized through the “chollima” movement. Named after a mythical Chinese horse who could travel 500 kilometers a day, individual workers were supposed to work beyond all capacity for the sake of the nation and find motivation in praise and honors rather than material rewards. Echoing the Soviet Stakhanovite movement under Stalin, it was really contemporary with the Chinese cultural revolution and the larger “anti-revisionist” global reaction to the material self-interest and moral decay that appeared to be hollowing out Soviet and Eastern European socialism in the 1960s. Finally, to mediate these contradictory tendencies was the “byungjin line,” which

developed the military and the economy simultaneously. In practice of course this meant developing the military and the militarization of society at the expense of economic development and socialist democracy, and as the heavy industrialization model began to mature and managerial autonomy undermined the basis of economic planning and long-term growth, a crisis broke out about the future of the country with Kim Il-sung as the symbolic center of the current line: the Kapsan faction incident.

The incident represented the final purging of the opponents of Kim Il-sung, this time of guerrillas who had fought with Kim and backed him during all previous factional disputes but challenged the cult of personality that had formed around him as well as the basic economic model of heavy industrialization and militarization of society. Kim Il-sung won and emerged without any challengers left, not all that different from previous party purges. But increasingly distant from the economic model of Eastern Europe and the politics of Cultural Revolution era China, the victory of Kim-il Sung in this instance meant the isolation of the basic political and economic model of the DPRK from the rest of the socialist world. An ideology needed to be created to match and “juche” was formulated in the period afterwards, culminating in its codification in the constitution in 1972 (Suh 2012, 13).

In contrast to the straightforwardly propagandistic period of Kim’s final ascent post-Kapsan, his victory saw North Korea’s animation again retreat to folktales and socialist realism, but this time with the façade that these were Kim Il-sung’s personal tales according to the opening title card [Fig. 35]. *The Piggy Who Lived Idly* (1969) is a tale told by Kim Il-sung to children during his guerrilla days of animals who work hard for their owner being rewarded and a lazy pig being caught and eaten (Hong 2020, 50). What followed was the golden age of North Korean animation. Kim Il-sung’s fairytales became long running television shows such as

Squirrel and Hedgehog from 1977-2012 and the *The Boy General* from 1982-2019 as well as the 20-minute film *The Butterfly and the Rooster* (1977) and the aforementioned *A Swift Winged Horse* (1983).



[Figure 35 – The title card that appeared before *A Swift Winged Horse*. It reads: “This story was adapted from an old tale “A Swift Winged Horse” told by the great leader Kim Il-sung into a movie]

The Contradictions of Socialist Animation

The golden age of “juche” animation’s hand-drawn fairy tales corresponded to the golden age of the North Korean economy, in which by the late 1960s, “markets disappeared almost completely” and “beginning from around 1970 virtually everything—from grain to socks to apples—was handed out via an elaborate public distribution system, with monetary payment being largely symbolic,” a central-planning that was unique in the world in its comprehensiveness (Lankov 2006, 110). The fusion of party, military, and economy seemed to be

working, a remarkable accomplishment for a small rump state surrounded by massive nations in a state of ideological and sometimes physical war.

Additionally, North Korea and China, united in a political critique of “revisionism,” no longer saw themselves as behind the Soviet Union but ahead of it on the road towards communism, both economically and culturally. North Korean animation doubling down on socialist-realism was not a regression to Stalinism and Asiatic despotism, as the USSR fearmongered about Maoist China during the height of the cultural revolution (McGuire 2001, 11), but resistance to Soviet cultural decadence and capitalist restoration. This was not entirely wrong. When pressed on the cultural revolution’s destruction of Chinese culture, the Soviet Union did not point to any achievements of socialism but “progressive” bourgeois artists like Beethoven, Shakespeare, and Pushkin (McGuire 2001, 12-14). It appeared that, for the Soviet Union, the “true purpose of Soviet cultural activity [was] to educate the masses so that they can appreciate the masters of bourgeois culture” (14). Faced with Gorki’s “nightmarish vision—Russia, following the East,” the USSR offered only a paternalistic Eurocentrism which elevated Russia’s cultural Europeaness and “West to East was leader to follower” (25).

But as we have seen, North Korea combined a cultural and political “cultural revolution” of its own with a Soviet economic model, leaving it de-facto isolated from both. Juche as self-reliance was the ideological response but what was the material one? Ironically, North Korea was forced to turn to the capitalist world for trade and technology just as it was dismissing both the USSR and China for deviating from the socialist path. At the height of Juche, “Western Europe and Japan’s share of North Korea’s trade grew accordingly from 3 per cent in 1962 to 14 per cent in 1970, and reached a peak of 41 per cent in 1974” with an even stronger bias against socialist countries in technology and equipment (Gray and Lee 2021, 115). This was not unique to North

Korea; all the socialist countries that strove for independence from the USSR other than China and Albania turned towards trade with capitalist countries and foreign debt to sustain the increasing contradictions that emerged from the “revisionist” economic reforms pioneered by Yugoslavia and then Khrushchev, although North Korea continued to political experiment that paralleled the cultural revolution to increase labor productivity (116), relying on moral over material incentive (at least at the level of the average worker rather than the managers who retained autonomy).

This economic and cultural bubble of socialist superstructure on a capitalist foundation was unsustainable. A trade surplus of “US\$ 20.6 million with the non-socialist countries in 1971...turned into a trade deficit of US\$ 73.1 million in 1972, and by 1975...US\$ 229.6 million... to a large extent financed by the commercial loans from Western Europe and Japan” (120). Debt built into more debt, and the returns on heavy industry did not manifest for a variety of reasons: the products were still backwards compared to the capitalist system, there was a market glut from every peripheral and semi-peripheral country pursuing the same policy, the objective limits of the small North Korean economy could not be overcome even with technological upgrading, the half-way point between market incentive and socialist planning created mounting inefficiencies in both, the capitalist world system was shifting away from heavy industry towards R&D based technology, and the global oil crisis made previous investments and debts unsustainable for the resource-poor economy. “By 1976, North Korea’s total outstanding debt to socialist and nonsocialist countries is estimated to have reached US\$ 2.4 billion” (121) and the vision of an independent, technologically advanced socialist economy crashed into the reality of an economy that was still heavily dependent on exports of raw materials, the only exports Japan and Western Europe were interested in (121).

This provoked a variety of responses. Most of the non-socialist Third World countries acquiesced to IMF reforms which destroyed any remnants of their “import-substitution” regimes. Romania infamously imposed a decade of austerity on its population in order to pay back foreign debts without any IMF intervention necessary. China, equally infamously, opened to foreign investment and became the “workshop of the world.” Even the USSR, the advanced center of the socialist world, relied more and more on natural resources to make up for its technology lag with the west and eventually became the resource periphery that it remains today.

North Korea fell behind on its debts and in 1975 Japanese and Western commercial bank creditors halted lending (120). Facing the deterioration of its credit worthiness and a lack of a socialist united front against Western debt, it vacillated between a “defiant posture” on repayment of debts (Eberstadt 1999, 4) and attempts to reschedule and delay repayments. However, failing to repay loans to Japan after rescheduling in 1976, 1979, and 1983, “the DPRK unilaterally terminated the final agreement in 1984, still owing Japan \$600 million” (Armstrong 2009, 8). It stopped paying interest on loans to Western Europe, having never paid back the principle, and was declared in default in 1987. Though the Bolsheviks had defaulted on Tsarist Russia’s debts in 1917 and the PRC had defaulted on the prior regime’s debts, default for a country on its own accumulated debts was unheard of, and North Korea “soon had the dubious distinction of being the first communist country to default on its debts to the West” (8). As it became isolated from global financial markets and commercial debt institutions, it continued to owe billions to the socialist world, with Russia writing off 90% of North Korea’s \$11 billion debt in 2012 (Dyakina and Kelly 2012). North Korea continues to owe debt on 1,000 Volvos to Sweden, part of a \$131 million trade package in 1974 that has now ballooned into \$328 million through interest in 2017 (Kim 2017).

At the same time, North Korea was opening to foreign investment and experimenting with internal market reforms (Gray and Lee 2021, 123), created a joint venture law in 1984 for global investors, and in that same year “proposed a five-year (1986-90) economic cooperation agreement with the USSR” (Eberstadt 1999, 4). But these were unsuccessful given North Korea’s continuing state of “virtual default” (6) and the USSR’s economic crisis and internal reforms, particularly political reforms which North Korea would not follow.

The peak of Juche was ironically the peak of North Korea’s integration into the global marketplace and the success of its careful balancing act of the socialist world, the non-aligned Third World, and the capitalist West. As it abandoned central planning and dreams of communism and opened internally and externally to marketization, it was more isolated than ever before. What did this mean for animation?

Socialist-realism in animation always contained the contradiction between a capitalist form and socialist content. The USSR had taken the technology and ideology of Disney and applied it to appropriately socialist fairytales. North Korea took this a step further. On the surface, *A Swift Winged Horse* contains none of the richness of *The Humpbacked Horse*. The story is a typical socialist-realist fairytale, with a father sending his three sons to tame the mythical Winged Horse of North Korean Stakhanovite fame. The third son, without special talent but industrious and simple, succeeds where the others fail, and retrieves a magical drum stick to defeat the invading Japanese pirates on behalf of the village. Backgrounds are lush, the animation combines hand drawing and rotoscoping for smooth movement, and in two episodes combined into a full hour, it is one of the few feature-length North Korean animations. Compared to North Korean animation of the past it is impressive but in the 1980s, it was technically limited and unlikely to impress Disney animators as the 1947 Soviet film had done.

Even compared to *The Humpbacked Horse*, the confines of Juche's version of socialist-realism constrict the plot.

Unlike the capricious Tsar, there is no satirical element to the Japanese enemies and the failure of the other brothers is not rooted in any fundamental character flaws. Rather, the third brother overcomes nature, personified in an angry cloud and unrelated to the Japanese. The cloud eventually acknowledges him as the true master of the horse because of his love of family, village, and people, but the other brothers also love these things equally. In the end they all reunite to defeat the Japanese, merely acknowledging the younger brother as a worthy rider without reflecting on their own insufficiency. The only real twist is the younger brother being chosen as the village protector over his older brothers according to Confucian tradition, but this is quickly sidelined for a final dance and reunion between the youngest brother and a village girl.

A Swift Winged Horse is the stubborn front North Korea presented to its creditors, an image of labor discipline and Juche ideology at a time when both were in decay. In 1985 the film was shown at the Bulgarian animated film festival (Kim 2019, 17) and it has been uploaded to YouTube by multiple North Korean accounts, one even with English subtitles to show off the important works of Juche cinema and animation to a global audience. But behind the scenes, just as North Korea's economy was heading for collapse, something else was happening. In 1999, it was exported to Mondo World, an Italian animation distributor, and butchered into a 20-minute television episode in the series *The Great Book of Nature* (1999-2000). The re-edit contains none of the original Juche elements. The Japanese become generic pirates, the subplot of the three brothers is eliminated, the youngest brother succeeds because the cloud gets tired of his stubbornness, and the Horse becomes a "Pegasus" with no reference to Korea. Arguably North

Korea's greatest triumph in animation becomes one of 54 episodes, all of which were re-edits and re-dubs of older North Korean animations.

The division between capitalist technology in form and socialist ideology in content, always implicit in socialist-realist animation, became explicit and North Korean animation became simultaneously a strict follower of Juche socialist-realism for a domestic audience and purely an export-industry for the global marketplace. Though the North Korean economy collapsed in the 1990s as the socialist bloc disappeared, fundamentally this was a continuation of the stagnation that had begun in the 1980s, and the "arduous march" continued a process of marketization and opening to globalization that had already begun. Mondo TV became famous for rip-offs of Disney films, such as *Pocahontas: Princess of the American Indians* and *Simba, the King Lion* which were animated in North Korea by SEK studio (Scientific & Educational Film Studio of Korea), the April 26 Children's Animation Film Studio, renamed in 1997 in order to participate in the French Annecy animation festival. In the world of socialism destined to surpass the capitalist west, the nature of socialist animation as distinct from cinema was unclear. This unclarity was reversed as "reform and opening up" changed the nature of both Chinese and North Korean animation. Increasingly it was the purpose of cinema that was unclear and animation which became the predominant export-oriented industry, particularly in North Korea.

Animation Reform and Opening Up

In the mid-1980s, North Korea began actively courting Western European animation studios for outsourcing labor. The first major result was the famous French surreal animator René Laloux's final feature-length film *Gandahar* (1987). Though the film itself is an anti-fascist parable, for both parties the issue was economic and, in that regard, it was an immense success. The film was acquired by Miramax for \$5.5 million with famed sci-fi writer Isaac Asimov

working on the American screenplay and released in 1988. Though it failed critically and commercially in the U.S. market, for both North Korea and Western Europe it was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship.

SEK studio would go on to receive many more contracts from around the world, by its peak in the mid-2000s “employing 1,600 staff working with state-of-the-art equipment” making around 60 films a year (Lee 2006). Unlike more unscrupulous methods of acquiring hard currency, SEK was globally competitive and legal and attractive to France and Italy which had always maintained a relatively independent economic policy towards the socialist world. As a French film producer said of SEK studio in 2003, “in terms of the relation between the quality and the price, it’s one of the best in the world” (Petitpas 2003).

Foreign companies worked directly with SEK, as is portrayed in Guy Delisle’s graphic novel *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* (2007) where the main character acts as a liaison between a French animation company and SEK. Delisle runs into an animation producer from Lafabrique, a “small fry” from a “remote corner of France” and points out that even the Chinese are concerned about being outcompeted by North Korean animation. Though the graphic novel is primarily a negative portrayal of North Korean society, even Delisle is forced to acknowledge the talent of North Korean animators and its meritocratic standards of production.

Global companies also worked with North Korean companies in China, both through an official SEK North China Regional Office in Shijiazhuang and various shell companies. North Korea even did work on American animations during the nadir of the arduous march and despite sanctions thanks to its skill in hiding such work through shell companies and extended chains of subcontracting from America to Europe to China to North Korea.

But the most radically new result of North Korea's animation outsourcing was a period of collaboration with South Korea, its mortal enemy. Though the division of Korea is often considered the last remaining conflict of the cold war, after the democratic struggle in South Korea overthrew the military dictatorship and the socialist world collapsed, North and South Korea began to explore political, economic, and cultural cooperation with the future goal of peaceful unification despite the de-jure persistence of the Korean War and mutual denial of each other's sovereignty. Known as the "Sunshine Policy," the photogenic crossings of the DMZ in 2000 by Kim Dae-jung to meet with Kim Jong-il was matched by a system of outsourcing in special economic zones. A tourist zone around Mt. Kumgang, the culturally significant Korean mountain, was matched by an economic zone in Kaesong for outsourcing South Korean manufacturing to North Korean low-wage labor.

A few efforts to combine culture and economics were made, such as *A Bold Family* (2005) a live action film in which a dying man's grandchildren try to convince him that the Koreas have been reunified. The film shot footage in North Korea for nearly a week and ends with real footage of tours to Mt. Gungang. But the film had no production input from North Korea and was not shown in the country, ultimately portraying an "essentialized North Korea" to South Korean audiences (Tilland 2020, 227). *Hwang Jin Yi* (2007), a South Korean production based on a North Korean novel, also gained permission to shoot at Mt. Gungang and was much more successful among South Korean audiences. In buying the copyright to the novel, the film established a capitalist exchange relation between the two Koreas and was part of even closer cultural-economic collaboration such as *Sayuksin* (2007) a TV drama co-produced by South Korea's KBS and North Korea's Korean Central Television, which not only was created through a division of labor between the two Koreas but used South Korean digital technology and

equipment in a North Korean production (Chung 2007). The drama had been delayed 5 years after production difficulties encountered political ones and instead served as a swan song to the Sunshine policy, which had already been losing its luster after a bribery scandal between the two Kims, a tourist being shot at Mt. Gungang, changes to the international environment after the Iraq war, increasing global political pressure on North Korea's nuclear program, and ultimately the defeat of the progressive Roh Moo-hyun administration and the new hard line of Lee Myung-bak. Ultimately, economics never matched cultural and political objectives. The executive of Hyundai who had pushed the Kaesong industrial complex committed suicide in 2003 after discovery of bribery to win the project and its abandonment left Hyundai with "combined losses of \$367 million in the past decade" (Park and Yang 2018).

The most ambitious and economically rational industry for inter-Korean cooperation was in animation. South Korea, which had served as a major source of animation outsourcing labor for decades, was looking to move up the value chains it was already immersed in. Nelson Shin was the perfect person to pursue it.

The Making of Empress Chung

Nelson Shin was born in North Korea in 1939 and came to the South with his family in 1951. After working in the Korean animation industry with both Shin Dong-hyun and the CF industry, he moved to California in 1971. Working at Burbank studio DePatie-Freleng Enterprises, an independent studio opened by former Warner Brothers animators after the closure of its studio in 1963 that leased Warner Brothers' former office, Shin did in-between animation and other background work. But Shin's entrance was well timed. In the wake of the end of the animation studio system, Shin was at the center of two major events that created an animation renaissance: the rise of VFX and the deregulation of US television. After working for a decade

on *The Pink Panther* show (1969-1980) and *Dr. Seuss* television specials (1971-1982), Shin was approached to work on the Lightsaber effects on *Star Wars* (1977), which required rotoscoping animation. Shin suggested the layering effects that give lightsabers their distinctive glow as well as the sound effects made using a degausser. Though he did not migrate to Lucasfilm, Shin nevertheless was on a path to moving up in the world of animation. Shin moved to Marvel in 1980 and the following year Roland Reagan allowed television shows to be based on merchandise. This created an explosion of animated television shows based on toys such as *The Transformers*, *G.I. Joe*, and *My Little Pony*. Shin worked on all of them, moving up from animator to animation supervisor, sequence director, and eventually director of *Transformers: The Movie* (1984). Shin moved back to Korea to get in on the boom of outsourcing work, founding AKOM productions in 1985 and using his connections to do the animation on *My Little Pony: The Movie* (1986). The latter film also had work done by Toei animation, but Shin knew which way the wind was blowing. As Japan moved away from animation outsourcing into a domestic animation boom, AKOM took on many lucrative and long-term projects for American companies, such as the decades-long animation on *The Simpsons*, *Arthur*, and *Spider-Man*.

Shin's path was not without hiccups. Both *Transformers* and MLP lost millions of dollars and AKOM was kicked off the production of *Batman: The Animated Series* for poor work. Though *The Transformers Movie* has become a cult classic for its mature themes, AKOM's animation on the film and the television series is infamously poor. Even with the continued success of AKOM's work on *The Simpsons*, the supposed slave-like conditions of Korean animation studios became the butt of a joke, almost causing Shin to quit the show^{lii}. But, as chapter five explained, in the wake of the defeat of the American animators' union, nothing stood in the way of outsourcing and certainly not quality concerns. By the 1990s, South Korea had

become the animation outsourcing capital of the world and every American studio wanted a piece of the action.

Shin, having been involved in every part of the animation process throughout his career and with an emotional attachment to his homeland (that also happened to be highly lucrative), was the perfect mediator of South Korea's opening to American animation and North Korea's opening to South Korean animation. Though eventually cast in Korean nationalist terms, initially it was the shift away from South Korea to Southeast Asia and China in OEM production that motivated Shin to look for a story that could serve as a Korean animated production (Shin 2015, 427).

Despite North Korea's earlier attempts at outsourcing, North Korea's infamous capriciousness made a South-North collaboration difficult. It was Shin who approached the North Korean animators at the Annecy film festival in 1997 (441) with little to show for it, and when Shin approached the animators' booth in Singapore the following year to say "I am an overseas Korean living in Los Angeles," he was met with "kill all Americans!" and then blocked by a bodyguard from further communication (443). Before the arduous march, that probably would have been the end of things. But by the late 1990s, North Korea was more welcoming of foreign capital even if North Korean representatives abroad had not gotten the memo. Eventually, an agreement was worked out through the North Korean representative at the UN and Shin went to Pyongyang in 2001 to begin working on *Empress Chung*.

Though Shin sees the film as a personal work, reflecting his own relationship to his father and even includes his pets (552), North Korea has its own version of the tale of Shim Chong, which was made into a traditional opera (changgeuk) and a 1988 theatrical grand performance in the style of "pibada," or revolutionary opera (KBS 2021). In this version, Shim Chong's

aristocratic background is downplayed as is her blind father's isolation from the community. Instead, she is a working-class woman and receives help from the peasant village, and it is the noblewoman Lady Jang who is criticized as insincere and patronizing.

Shin Sang-ok's North Korean film version does not differ from these core aspects. What made it notable was the production values, part of a cinema of spectacle of the 1980s. This is most apparent in Shin's version of the tale of Chunhyang, another pansori folktale which is more explicit than Shim Chong in its class critique. But rather than the typical Juche representation of class in Joseon Korea, as in the 1980 film version of the story, Shin's *Love, Love, My Love* (1985) focuses on eroticism and featured North Korea's first on-screen kiss. The film was hugely popular among North Korean audiences, surprisingly mirroring the South Korean 3S cinema of erotic spectacle of the 1980s following *Madame Emma* (1980). As North Korea opened to the world, it absorbed global standards of cinematic spectacle and mass-pleasure (Chung 2014, 204). But it was not just themes that were becoming globalized; production was as well. The special effects team from *The NeverEnding Story* (1984) helped with Shin Sang-ok's *The Tale of Shim Chong* (1985) and much of the filming was done at Munich Bavaria studios (99).

Though Shin Sang-ok fled to the United States in 1986 and then South Korea in 1994, the cinema of spectacle continued throughout the 1990s, peaking with *Souls Protest* (2000), North Korea's attempt to mimic the success of *Titanic* (1997) in the Korean market. Though unsuccessful in South Korea, its release was evidence that North Korea could still be allured into cultural production for international markets despite the economic collapse of the 1990s. If anything, cultural production was even more important as an industry that could use the idle human capital of the North; *Souls Protest* for example used 10,000 extras from the Korean People's Army (Schönherr 2011). The stage was set for *Empress Chung* to show off North

Korea's technical prowess in animation and represent a desire for unification within the confines of socialist realism. To what extent does the film follow this tradition?

Empress Chung

Empress Chung is not lost. It can, in fact, be watched in the National Library of Korea in Seoul. However, it is in the North Korean materials section, meaning one cannot make a copy of the film, take pictures or video, and one must provide their passport or government ID, an intimidating experience considering the lack of political content in the film. The two available versions were actually made for international release and only ended up in the library of Seoul later, where they were retroactively given the political aura of censorship. The film has hardcoded English subtitles and even has a character say "oh no..." in English, a common occurrence in South Korea but near heresy in North Korea.

In this version of the story, Shim Chong's father was a minister of the King who was betrayed by a conspiracy of evil ministers. Rather than a helpless blind man, the father is a capable warrior who fights off assassins before his wife is killed and he is blinded by the main villainous minister. The scene takes place in and around a burning house and the animation is lush and smooth, particularly the fire and swordplay.

Shim Chong is presented as a Disney princess. An early scene introduces Shim Chong through her shopping trip in the village for her father. There are echoes of the scene that introduces Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, where the life of the village metaphorically centers around Shim Chong including the animals and she seems to know everyone and everything. Once blinded, her father is portrayed closer to the original story, but the king who will eventually become her father-in-law (in this version she marries the handsome and personality-less prince)

is a chubby, harmless, and buffoonish figures, similar to the king in *Aladdin* (1992). Shim Chong also has various animal friends who can talk to each other (and the audience) but not to her.

Shim Chong shares her father's martial prowess, doing a front flip when village children try to trip her. Distinct from Disney, at the end of this scene showing her empowerment as an individual woman, she also breaks into tears when thinking of her father's pitiful situation, and cries throughout the film. This is not an undermining of her independence or independence, but instead is part of a trans-Korean melodramatic tradition (Kim 2014, 261) given a North Korean twist in which "emotive power become an essential characteristic of a genuine revolutionary for both men and women" (260).

The story follows the main beats of the original. Unlike the operatic version, Lady Jang is portrayed kindly. The villagers are also kind, sometimes causing the plot to strain against the narrative. For example, a scene in which Shim Cheong's father goes shopping to buy dress shoes for her sets up a potential conflict between the profit motive of the merchant and the father's blindness and goodhearted naivete. However, the merchant gives him good shoes without any tension or temptation to swindle, giving the scene no purpose. Further, despite the selfishness of the sailors who buy Shim Chong as a sacrifice, they are not portrayed as evil people but rather as desperate workers, and their scene shows off an impressively animated shamanistic ritual, associated in Korea with the masses. The only characters subject to class critique are the Buddhist monk who told Shim Chong to get 300 bags of rice and the woman who made the deal happen; both are chastised by the father for their selfishness and greed when they try to take the rice for themselves. Within the triad of Shamanism-Buddhism-Confucianism, all are subject to critique. The sacrifice of Shim Chong is mocked by the Sea King as superstitious ignorance of his real desires. Meanwhile, the king on land is portrayed as harmless but incompetent, with the

evil ministers being the real power behind the thrones for years. But these critiques are always partial, with the essence of both royal institutions remaining untouched and, despite their ignorance, religious practices achieving their desired result. Shim Chong's father is cured of blindness, although this is a reward for his daughter's selflessness rather than the offering. The sea monster does die, although this is the result of a bolt of lightning and the efforts of Shim Chong's turtle friend to summon all the creatures of the sea to fight. And in a rushed ending, the evil minister is quickly disposed of after Shim Chong's father reveals his true identity to the king.

Such rushed efforts at social critique show that, as in Shin San Ok's earlier spectacular cinema, the real substance is the action. Thanks to his own duck friend, the still blind father gets a final action scene, fighting off wolves on his trip to the capital after the summons by the king to all blind men. Even the duck gets an empowerment scene, finally finding the courage to fly to survive a freefall and properly guide them to Seoul (Hanyang).

Fitting all these fight scenes into a complex story and a cast of marketable characters leaves things on the cutting room floor. The most notable are the scenes in the sea kingdom, which barely show anything of the mythical kingdom. Though there is not much to work with in the original story, the advertising for the film emphasized the fantastical nature of the sea king and sea creatures. The film's posters and merchandise shows off the part-fish and part-human sea king and his maidens [Fig. 36].



[Figure 36 – Theatrical Poster for *Empress Chung* highlights the Sea King and animal friends]

While advertising its market friendliness, the film’s merchandise also showed off its traditional costumes in a sticker book [Fig. 37]. Though this book is unlikely to sell in North Korea, it is nevertheless a trace of the commonalities with North Korean Juche animation *Empress Chung* had to find.



[Fig. 37 – Pages from sticker book for “*Empress Chung Dress Up Avatar Book*”]

North Korean socialist animation seems to have found a way to absolve its animation of any ideological substance for the foreign market while maintaining the stringent standards of children’s Juche culture for the domestic audience. *Princess Chung*, unique in its inter-Korean political function and simultaneous release, perhaps shows the limits of this balance in a single work of media and the inevitable strains of North Korean animation’s split existence.

Conclusion

Is *Empress Chung* a socialist animation? Can North Korean animation in general be called socialist after its market revolution? What struck me in viewing the film was the difference between the formal requirements for viewing and the attitude of those working in the North Korean section of the library on the actual act. As most Korean scholars know, doing research on a tourist visa is easier than going through formal procedures. But this made it impossible to make an account with the Korean national library which requires a foreign registration card, making it impossible to make the necessary reservation ahead of time. Even worse, I did not think to bring my passport to the library. Nevertheless, after some negotiating, the workers at the library were mostly excited that anyone was interested in this forgotten work, especially a foreigner and I was allowed to see this “lost media” with little hassle. Not being able to take a video or make a copy was presented more as a tragic bureaucratic consequence rather

than an ideological necessity. Despite lingering anti-communist laws and attitudes in South Korea, it is a long way from Cold War animation like *General Tteoli*, and even Yoon's turn to the right has not been accompanied by a return to cold war obsession with North Korea among the majority of South Koreans.

North Korean animation is also a long distance away from the confidence of *A Swift Winged Horse* and the anti-revisionist political allegory of *Squirrel and Hedgehog's* first episode. But this is not necessarily a distance from socialist animation, which has always had an ambiguous relationship to the decadent products of the capitalist world. *Empress Chung* is no different, and its closeness to Disney animation in a skin of Korean folklore is closer to the socialist confidence of Stalin or Kim Il-sung than the aesthetic experimentation that corresponded to Benjamin's and Eisenstein's early theories of animated surrealism. In the history of socialist animation, the aesthetic boldness of Yuri Norstein's Soviet production *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975) or the Czech *Invention for Destruction* (1958) which inventively combined animation and live action to great commercial success, in the end did not correspond to a revolutionary socialist culture. Kim Il-sung would have considered such efforts a sign of "revisionism" and a lack of confidence in socialist-realism for children, and given the collapse of socialism in both countries, it is hard to disagree.

If the relationship between socialist ideology and socialist culture is complex and contradictory, going back to Lenin's initial attempts to distinguish the technologies of Taylorism from their ideological content (Lenin 2002) and the crossover between Disney and Stalin, North Korean animation lived this contradiction longer than anywhere else. Though nearly unsustainable in the era of "market socialism," as the logic of the production of value took on a life of its own, North Korean "socialism" proved to be quite adaptable, and can even thrive under

the most hostile of conditions. It may be that North Korean animation in the end reproduces the history of South Korean animation even more effectively, all while leaving traces of Juche animation behind.

ⁱ The lost media wiki discusses the film here:

[https://lostmediawiki.com/Empress_Chung_\(partially_found_Korean_animated_film;_2005\)](https://lostmediawiki.com/Empress_Chung_(partially_found_Korean_animated_film;_2005))

ⁱⁱ Released only in 1958

ⁱⁱⁱ Covered in detail in chapter eight.

Chapter Seven:

New Korean Animation, Webtoons, and Platform Imperialism

New Korean Animation: Attempts at a Style

Wonderful Days was one of many attempts to develop an animation aesthetic that would stand out as Korean in the early 2000s. *My Beautiful Girl Mari* (2002) by Korean indie filmmaker Lee Sung-gang used a simple, flat style which highlighted the contrast between cel layers rather than naturalizing them. *Oseam* (2003) on the other hand emphasizes naturalistic backgrounds to tell a story of Korean buddhist monk children in the countryside, at times resembling the watercolors of *Hong Gildong*. *Aachi & Ssipak* (2006), a bizarre adult-themed action film, echoed 1990s Nickelodeon animation like *Ren & Stimpy* (1991) and Japanese anime like *FLCL* (2000) but with more emphasis on 3D backgrounds and CG for its action scenes. *Life is Cool* (2008) was Korea's first fully rotoscoped feature film, following the techniques pioneered in Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006). But none of these experiments found success in the Korean animation market, reeling after the collapse of the bubble and unsure of its demographic target. 2011 saw the release of three films that hinted at the rebirth of the industry: *Green Days: Dinosaur and I* was an independent production completed after 11 years of hand-drawings, the children's adventure film *Leafie: A Hen in the Wild* at last saw some domestic box office success, and *The King of Pigs*, Yeon Sang-ho's feature-length adult animation, was the first Korean animated film screened at Cannes (Lee 2012).

Yeon Sang-ho's path was also part of this experimental period of Korean animation. His first works as a student, *Megalomania of D* (1997) and *D-Day* (2000), are surrealist shorts made

using stop motion animation. Feeling the limits of the form and the hierarchy of the official path, Yeon went on to major in art rather than animation. Still determined to make animation independently, after graduating he worked for Hanshin Corporation, an outsourcing studio for American companies for several years. Yeon soon started his own studio, Studio Dada Show, and made *The Hell* (2004), a 10 minute short using rotoscoping. The film was submitted to a film festival but failed to advance and, feeling despondent after a night of drinking, Yeon decided to post it online. Surprisingly, it received a positive response there and Yeon was invited to Japanese film festival, giving him the confidence to produce a longer sequel *The Hell: The Two Kinds of Life* (2006). Though rotoscoping saved on budget, its limits also enabled Yeon's creativity, and gives the two films an aesthetic ugliness that his later animated work is known for. Yeon early career took place during transition moment between the old system and the new, just in time to find funding and industry experience while having the ability to produce and distribute his own work in new ways.

Yeon would go on to make *Love is Protein* (2008) now with KOCCA funding, formalizing his animation style and themes of social critique. The 20-minute film shows three friends order chicken and their interactions with anthropomorphized animals. Getting change to pay for the food is represented as cutting open a small piglet with a box cutter and coins spilling out like guts. The deliveryman is an anthropomorphized pig who, seeing the piglet writhing in agony on the desk, must humiliate himself by continuing to act politely to his customers as social superiors. Despite this show of inferiority, a chicken follows the pig and intrudes into the meal, showing the three humans in tears that the chicken they ordered is his deep-fried son. After a melodramatic flashback of the son wishing to fly with his father involves one of the humans in the scene's happiness, another cruelly eats the chicken and the delivery pig takes the chicken

away. The human who showed kindness reflects on what happened and walks down the streets, where scenes of homelessness and the cruel indifference of regular Korean adults to class difference are shown. He tries to buy a stuffed toy that looks like the chicken's son at a festival game but has no money and is rejected. The friends then draw a picture of the son on a yellow balloon and give it to the father, along with the son's ashes, and all the characters come to an understanding. A slow zoom on the ass of the human who ate the son shows him expelled in ghostly form as gas.

Love is Protein is simultaneously heavy handed with its metaphor and complex in its rejection of simple metaphorical readings. It establishes Yeon's "bodily realism" (Kim 2023), in which twisted bodily suffering and twisted, inhuman facial expressions exceed metaphorical reading. For example, the melodramatic flashback is so cliché that it seems to make a farce of the cruel situation, only for the viewer to be shocked back into reality by the explicit charred body of the chicken son, shown in grisly detail for five seconds of silence. Contrasted with the logo for the chicken restaurant, Yeon contrasts not only the simple, pop-art aesthetic of advertisement with the violence against nature and humanity that makes it possible but both against the Korean cinematic modes of representation that seem to no longer speak to the condition of late capitalist competition and social atomization.

Constantly undermining itself before achieving a satirical form, it seems to lack the confidence of Yeon's feature-length work. Discussing *The Fake* (2013), Kyu Hyun Kim describes the final scene in which "the emotional expressions are presented as a series of portraits that emphasize corporeality (copious amounts of tears, deep furrows and bared teeth)" creating an aesthetic of "dismantled and reconstructed bodies" (113) that express emotions as they are felt in the viewer, resisting the distancing of criticism of a film's message and its

characters symbolic functions. *Love is Protein* is in some ways simpler than *The Fake* and *The King of Pigs* (2011). The chicken-eating human also has the same contorted face of Yoon's later work: an ugly, crudely animated face with a wide, toothy inhuman smile, unblinking, beady eyes, and sunken cheeks [Fig. 37].



[Figure 37 – Yeon Sang-ho's Aggressively Ugly Animation in *Love is Protein*]

But in Yeon's later works, this face becomes expressionistic (109), a "faciality" in which the duration of the close up opens the face to multiple readings without determination (Deleuze 1986). For Yeon, the cruelty of humanity lies in this face, confronting the viewer with their own complicity as emotional beings in the films' cruelties. In *The King of Pigs*, two students are bullied as "pigs" by the "dogs" at the top of the school's social hierarchy. A lower-class student stands up to the bullies and, in becoming friends with the other pigs, becomes their "king." Now facing bullying as well, he eventually slashes the "dogs" with a knife. But, when forced to back down in the face of his mother's pimp inflicting violence on her, he stands on the edge of the

school roof, threatening suicide as part of a revenge plan. The twist of the film reveals that one of the pigs pushed him off after he had backed out and showed emotional vulnerability, failing to live up to his role as king. The climax afterwards is composed almost entirely of close-up shots of two of the protagonists, now as adults, as the sin of one is revealed and the other begins choking him [Fig. 38]. The faces contort with movement and the emotions of the characters are told as much through the changing faces as the narration.



[Figure 38 – Yeon's faces become contorted by emotion in *The King of Pigs*]

The King of Pigs shows a world full of unaccountable, structural violence. Parents abuse their children, men abuse women, owners abuse workers, seniors abuse juniors, and ultimately friends abuse each other. The film starts with the two pigs as adults, one having murdered his wife and the other beating his girlfriend without any immediately clear reason, limiting any sense of sympathy from the onset, and the violence of class and status is ever present.

Yeon uses two stylistic elements to achieve his realism of faces. The first is “dummy animation,” in which 2D animation takes place on a 3D model. This gives faces simple characteristics, reducing them to abstractions of lines and flat surfaces. This gives every face a sameness, making them and their sins interchangeable. On these simple surfaces, eyes bulge and teeth take a life of their own, facial lines drawing attention to animalistic snarls. The effect is similar to Yeon’s earlier rotoscoping work, with facial features vanishing in movement and jittery lines, an animated uncanniness that straddles realism and abstraction.

The second is pre-recording, in which animation is modeled on already recorded dialogue, giving voice actors more freedom to speak naturally and change dialogue as many times as they want. For *Love is Protein*, Yeon sought voice actors through acquaintances who would take the work seriously and have chemistry in the studio, something rare in the animation industry at the time. Bringing out the realism of their interactions, mouth and facial movements were matched after the fact, a practice he continued even as his voice actors became more famous. After an entire movie of near-constant child abuse and violence, *The King of Pigs* needs its voice actors to sell the final twist and express the flood of emotions pent up by childhood, and in doing so let the audience feel catharsis without any moral resolution. The closest thing is the last surviving pig (the wife-killer having jumped off the roof to his death) crying on the phone with his girlfriend and apologizing, realizing that he had spent his life until then reliving his childhood trauma.

Whether one accepts this misogynistic reduction of women to objects of abuse and then forgiveness as a moral lesson or not, Yeon’s voice actors go beyond it. The final scene zooms out to show the city of Seoul and the voice actor, in a completely calm voice, condemns it as a heartless and moribund place. *The King of Pigs* tries to overcome the cliché elements of a

bullying story through sheer brutality, sometimes directed at women and mostly directed at the audience. The film was in fact “one of the few animated features outside pornography designated as adults-only by the South Korean ratings board” (Kim 2023, 107), taken even further in *The Fake* (2013) which adds a plot of sexual abuse to an equally violent and misanthropic story.

There are two directions to go from here for Yeon to escape becoming a cliché of his own, a possibility he was acutely aware of (108). One is to expand the range of criticism. This is what he does with *Seoul Station* (2016). The film shows the beginnings of a zombie outbreak in Seoul Station, the subway station where homeless people congregate at night. The zombie theme allows him to escape the confines of his previous two films. Instead of a school or a small village (in *The Fake*), *Seoul Station* shows the collapse of Korean society as a whole and touches on a range of more explicitly political themes: police violence, government corruption, and class conflict. Further, the protagonist is a prostitute who, though subject to sexual violence, gets her revenge on her father who tries to rape her when she becomes a zombie and consumes him. *Seoul Station* seems to pick up where the previous films left off, giving women more autonomy and using the readings of the film’s social critique more explicitly. Unlike the brief images of homeless people in *Love is Protein*, Yeon confronts society with the “invisible [and] unworthy” homeless population that do not fit into Korean society’s self-image (Song 2009, 73). And yet, *Seoul Station* would be Yeon’s last animated film, serving as the prequel to the blockbuster live action zombie film *Train To Pusan* (2016). The film, full of melodramatic clichés, clear moral arcs, allegorical combinations of characters from different social classes, Hollywood action scenes, and South Korean nationalism, reflects an ideological exhaustion of Yeon’s animated work. In fact, in the wake of the film’s success, Yeon would seek to make his previous animated work retroactively live action: Netflix’s *Hellbound* (2021) used *The Hell* and its sequel as a

prequel and *The King of Pigs* would be remade as a live action drama in 2022 under a different director.

To account for this aesthetic break while maintaining thematic similarities, Kim argues that Yeon's live action work is a kind of animation, using VFX to explore bodily realism beyond the capacity of dummy animation's limits (2023, 114). But this reading is only possible if abstract expressionism is bereft of meaning, as the aesthetic is used in one instance to undermine genre cliché and on the other to reinforce it. For example, in *Train To Pusan*, the film ends with the wife and daughter of the protagonist arriving at the Pusan perimeter. The metaphor of the Korean war is obvious and the soldiers, seeing the two female figures in their sniper scopes, are about to shoot until the daughter begins singing the Hawaiian folk song "Aloha 'Oe," which she had failed to sing at the beginning of the movie because of her father's absence from the school performance. The culturally vacuous choice of song serves the function of reconstituting the nuclear family unit through the father's sacrifice and proving that the zombies are fundamentally not human because they cannot sing or feel love. In the jump from animation to live action, we are a long way away from *Seoul Station*'s gender and class revenge zombie empowerment.

Whereas *The King of Pigs* and *The Fake* problematically reduce their female characters to objects of violence or materialistic bearers of sexuality, *Train To Pusan* regresses even further into a patriarchal fantasy. The other main character, played by Ma Dong-seok, exudes a calm, powerful masculinity and never wavers in his attempt to protect his wife and then other weaker characters. The film was his breakout role, turning him into a Korean blockbuster action hero. But behind calm masculinity is muscular violence towards those who threaten it, and the zombies as dehumanized other to be subject to it was not lost on Korean audiences. Ma's greatest subsequent success came in a series of gangster films in which he inflicts violence on purely evil

villains, most problematically (and popularly) in *The Roundup* series (2017, 2022, 2023, 2024) where this violence is initially inflicted on Chinese-Koreans, Korea's ethnic underclass subject to discrimination and racism.

Finally, though there is continuity between animation and VFX, both as industries and conceptually, Yeon's animated work emphasizes the realism of emotions while holding the audience accountable for the work of such emotions in making invisible hierarchy and injustice. It is a targeted realism, sacrificing visual realism for a communicative expressionism. VFX in *Train To Pusan* and in subsequent works like *Jung_E* (2023) instead emphasize VFX as a technological nationalism, in which the ability of a Korean film to make zombie crowd movements realistic or robots look lifelike through mo-cap. As the "making-of" feature for *Jung_E* says, Yeon wanted to make "the most Korean sci-fi" which would show that Korea has "reach a certain level" of technological and story-crafting development. The irony of measuring Korean accomplishments against others is that this was produced by Netflix and the actors are forced to say "see you on Netflix" in English to the audience (Netflix 2023). Arguably Korean animation's only auter, Yeon not only abandoned Korean animation aesthetic possibilities but the industry's development, submitting to the leadership of American streaming monopolies in the pursuit of VFX realism.

There is another possible path that Yeon could have taken. *Love is Protein*, in its parodic self-deconstruction, seems to preempt the subsequent path of Yeon's animation.

Love is Protein is an adaptation of a manhwa by Choi Gyu-seok, part of a larger collection *Dinosaur Dooly: A Sad Homage* (2003). The "homage" presents Dooly, Korea's most famous children's cartoon character, as a depressed adult. As a satirical response to the government presenting Dooly with an honorary resident card on his 20th birthday, Choi presents

him as unable to gain a card on account of not being human, instead living as a de-facto foreign factory worker in precarious conditions. Losing his finger to a machine, Dooly can no longer perform magic, and reflects on the reality of life as he meets other characters from the cartoon who have also fallen into hard times and been made abject.

Choi's comic is part of a larger movement of satirical comics that came out at the end of the 1990s-early 2000s. Unlike most cultural forms which suffered from government persecution and economic neglect during the Chun dictatorship, manhwa actually flourished in the 1980s. During the 1970s, a monopoly distribution system had nearly killed the industry, prioritizing quantity over quality and conforming to cultural censorship which saw comics as, among other things, "harbingers of muck" (Yecies and Shim 2021, 32). Despite the monopoly on distribution, consumption took place in "manhwabangs," independent places where one could read comics for a small fee or rented to read at home. These places were as demonized as the comics themselves, with media narratives imagining them as overcrowded, dirty, smoke-filled, and all around tempting for children to fall into sin (37). Even worse, manhwa creation suffered from similar perverse incentives to animation, where it was significantly cheaper and easier to pirate or copy Japanese manga for state-protected monopolies.

The 3S policy^{liii} allowed comics to break free of their reputation by the 1980s, and "a wider mix of genres and creative expression" led to "an expanding readership and increased sales and profits" (37). De-facto government approval led to the adaption of multiple sports-based live action films based on comics (39). Further expansion came with the fall of the military dictatorship and the loosening of censorship laws and state-capitalist collusion. However, with democracy came liberalization, and despite the continued legal ban on Japanese cultural

products, Japanese manga became de-facto legalized for distribution to conform to international IP standards. By 1992, “Japanese-inspired comics” were 50% of the market (42).

Already politicized by this neocolonial conquest of the Korean market, comics faced a double crisis: the Youth Protection Committee and newly promulgated Juvenile Protection Act (1997) which re-censored comics (44); and the IMF crisis, which caused the collapse of the manhwabang system of distribution and the independent magazines that broke the production monopoly in the 1980s. Steadily decreasing in the 2000s, by 2011 only 7 magazines remained (Park 2011, 65-66) and manhwabangs declined from a peak of around 20,000 in the 1970s to less than 5,000 in the early 1990s and less than 3,000 in the early 2000s (Yecies and Shim 2021, 44).

Radicalized and facing extinction, the Korea Cartoonist Association mobilized and protested government persecution on November 3rd, 1996, now Korea’s Comics Day (44). The struggle peaked after government persecution of Lee Hyun-se, a 1980s “golden age” comic artist, for supposed pornographic content. Lee was found guilty and fined 3 million won in 1998 (44), but refused to pay the fine and became the center of a multi-year struggle. This struggle was led by the president of the Korea Cartoonist Association Kim Soo-jung, creator of *Dooly*. Lee finally won his case in the supreme court in 2003, the same year as *Dinosaur Dooly: A Sad Homage*’s release. Thus, despite any expectation of the original creator’s disapproval for the comic that satirized his work’s mainstream acceptance, Kim actually approved of its official release, initially seeing an affinity with his original comic prior to its cleanup by KBS as a cartoon (though later disapproving). Despite *Dooly*’s squeaky-clean image today, it too was initially subject to government criticism^{liv}.

The persecution of Korean comics under the democratic government was in direct contrast to other media forms, and the main demand of comic artists initially was to be treated

the same way as the film industry (Yecies and Shim 2021, 44). More generally, as government policy began to develop a state-backed cultural promotion policy, manhwa were left behind even compared to animation. *Love is Protein*'s satire is unusual in the Korean animation industry but a direct continuity with the manhwa industry's highly political existence and a larger culture of underground, independent comics. As an industrial product, it is a lost promise of a Korean animation that adapted manhwa in the way manga is indispensable to Japanese anime. In fact, Choi Gyu-seok would continue to work with Yeon Sang-ho for his animated works, designing the characters for *King of Pigs* and *Seoul Station*. If Yeon's work lost its satirical and increasingly political content, when did these two worlds become detached?

Since Japanese manga were technically still illegal and associated with the colonial past, they were a convenient target for both comic artists criticizing government policy and the government criticizing the comic industry's content. The specific accusation of the government against comics was that the Japanese manga encouraged school bullying and school gangs: "Morita Masanori's boxing-themed high school comic series *Rokudenashi Blues* (1988–1997)" was targeted as encouraging the formation of "Iljin Association (Iljinhoe)" gangs based on the manga (43). A media "moral panic" led to the general labeling of school gangs engaged in violence, bullying, and turf wars as "Iljinhoe and Iljin" (43). Yeon and Choi's breakout feature length film was therefore not an isolated representation of school bullying but a reproduction of government rhetoric and media panic. Though it came out beforehand, the film immediately became contextualized by the suicide of three students in rapid succession at the end of 2011 to the beginning of 2012. The first student blamed bullying in his suicide note and the game *Maple Story* was soon blamed in the media after it was discovered the bullies had forced the victim to play it for them (2011). And because the film's characters are reminiscing about the past, the

school bullying takes place during the late 1980s or 1990s, which the background also gives context clues for that Korean audiences would recognize.

At the same time as *King of Pigs*, a satirical style of social critique continued the tradition of manhwa in the webtoon industry and saw similar persecution. In the wake of the student suicides, right wing media blamed *Furious Elementary School Students* (2008-2012) for vulgarity and violence. Most of all, it was blamed for “the light-hearted way it portrayed school bullying” (Yecies and Shim 2021, 63), part of a larger satirical style “Byeongmat” [stupid taste], in “television dramas, live entertainment, and music” that became popular in late 2000s-early 2010s (63). Picking up from *Dinosaur Dooly: A Sad Homage*, the genre’s “dark humor and satirical critique of Korean society” spoke to a generation of youth “at the mercy of unstable and limited employment opportunities” (64).

As chapter four pointed out, *Wonderful Days*’s postindustrial and postmodern plot and setting are alien to Korea’s continued political and industrial reality. The same is true of *King of Pigs*’s existentialist expressionism. In a world where *Dooly the Little Dinosaur* is in direct conflict with government censorship, what appears as a humorous if gruesome satire in *Love is Protein* to foreign audiences is in Korea a directly political effort. There is no contrast between the satirical humor and criticism of social immorality and class exploitation as long as humor still has a subversive function against an unhumorous state and a staid civil society. Two decades later, Korea finally got its own “underground comix” like *Fritz the Cat* (1972) and *Howard the Duck* (1973) and government censorship to match, extending into the 2010s and becoming part of the larger subversive, ironic culture of the internet. On the other hand, *King of Pigs*’s critique of human cruelty and social dysfunction was absorbed by the state and corporate culture, paralleling the story of the conclusion of the struggle of Korean manhwa. Redeemed by the law,

Lee Hyun-se was awarded the Presidential Award at the Korean Popular Culture and Arts Awards, co-hosted by KOCCA, in 2016, and the government apologized to him in 2017 (Yecies and Shim 2021, 45-46) with comics becoming part of the government's promotion of global Korean popular culture (47). But this was at the expense of manhwa's existence, which died in the face of Japanese competition and the collapse of the manhwebang distribution system. In its place webtoons emerged, christened victorious by the return of Lee Hyun-se's banned *Mythology of the Heavens* as a Naver Webtoon.

Choi Gyu-seok continues to work with Yeon Sang-ho on his live action work. It was his suggestion to use "Aloha 'Oe" in *Train to Busan* (Jeong 2016) and they worked together on the webtoon based live action *Hellbound* (2021) and the upcoming *Revelation* (Lee 2023) based on a manhwa. Choi also continues to publish politically informed webtoons, such as *Songgot* (2013) about workplace abuse and *100°C: South Korea's 1987 Democracy Movement* (2023) about one family's struggle against the Chun military dictatorship, and in fact these are also published as manhwa and "graphic novels" for export.

One would therefore expect webtoons to take up the mantle of manhwa as both a site of political struggle and creativity. Reading Brian Yecies and Ae-Gyung Shim's celebratory *South Korea's Webtooniverse and the Digital Comic Revolution* (2021), this is exactly what one finds. Webtoons are "creator-owned" content (7), pioneers of a "profit sharing model" that "benefitted both the platform and its artists" (92), "[push] the envelope of avant-garde creativity and antiestablishment sentiment" (63). But, alongside Yeon's transition to live-action, webtoons have nearly universally been adapted as live action films and television dramas, including *Songgot* (2015). Even Yeon's remade *King of Pigs* (2022) as a live action drama, changes the original story into a contemporary revenge drama that better conforms to the structure of a k-drama and

its tropes. The collaboration between Yeon and Choi has not led to the politicization of the former's work or the reestablishment of Korean animation based on manhwa or the larger Byeongmat webtoon culture. *Love is Protein*, rather than the beginning of a Korean animation auteur's career, was instead the end of a potential Korean animation with real political content rooted in Korean social reality.

If Netflix produced live action serves the state and techno-nationalism, what of the webtoons it adapts? Webtoons have the opposite problem: retaining their satirical, political function, they instead serve the corporate valorization of "content creation" in their function as the most successful of Korea's "platform economies." The end of Yeon's animation career is ultimately the failure of Korean animation to serve either as an industry of techno-nationalism or a subversive form of grassroots content creation. With the collapse of manhwa as a political movement and cultural industry, these two functions split. Animation and manhwa were both left behind.

Webtoons: Domestic Monopoly Capitalism

Webtoons are arguably as close as Korea has come to regional hegemony in cultural production. The two main platforms, Daum/Kakao and Naver/Line, emerged out of Korea's early innovations in internet technology. Both are mergers of Korea's major search engines, both prior to Google's rise, with its most successful chat apps, forming huge monopolies that had the capital and market control to reproduce the silicon valley model of speculative investment in the Korean market. Initially offered for free (or "freemium") to consumers, large investments absorbed the best of manhwa culture and subsidized content creation and consumption, with webtoons as a loss-leader for their entire existence (Yecies and Shin 2021, 93) to the present in which Naver webtoon lost 29.1 billion won in the second quarter 2022 (Yoon 2022) and Kakao's

entertainment subsidiary lost 13.8 billion won annually in 2022, largely due to a 228.2 billion won loss on Kakao's launching of Tapas Entertainment, a U.S. based webtoon and web novel platform (Park 2023).

And yet, in true Silicon Valley fashion, Naver Webtoon is seeking an IPO in 2024 at a valuation of 4 billion USD and Kakao Entertainment seeking an IPO valued at 6 trillion won (4.37 billion USD). What justifies these outrageous sums? Among other things, Line, a subsidiary of Korea's Naver corporation, is the most popular chat app in Japan. While also pushing for the US market through the popularity of for BTS's BT21 Line characters, Korea's dominance of the Japanese market while maintaining its own domestic monopoly is remarkable given the history of the two countries. In addition, Naver Webtoon is the most popular webtoon platform in Japan, with its only competition being Kakao's Piccoma. Dominance in the webtoon space has led to further opportunities, with both services hosting digital manga and Line integrating manga/webtoons into its messaging app. Japan was slow to move and Korea's first mover advantage seems to have entrenched itself. With 70% of manga sales now digital (Handjaja 2024), Piccoma has reaped the rewards: it had the highest consumer spending out of any mobile app in Japan in the first six months of 2023, including mobile game apps, and controls more than 50% of the market (Handjaja 2023). It is no coincidence that Piccoma is seeking its IPO in the Tokyo Stock exchange while Naver Webtoon looks to be listed in the US NASDAQ. More abstractly, Webtoons, "perfect" for the "vertical format" of the smart phone (Cho 2016) in a way manga is not, seem to have limitless potential against the aesthetics of Japanese media and American comic books developed for a physical medium.

This regional dominance leads analysts to argue that webtoons transcend theories of imperialism and western domination. For Jeon, theories of "cultural imperialism, cultural

proximity, and cultural odorlessness” with “one single master plan” do not explain webtoons (Jeong 2020, 77). Marc Steinberg even implies that Kakao and Line potentially “threaten” the dominance of Google and Apple (2029, 221) and portend the end of the era of “platform imperialism” (211), replaced by “transnational contents diffusion” (212). Though not going as far as Lamarre to deny the relationship of this content to capitalism entirely (216), Steinberg nevertheless proposes East Asian platforms as a “form of regional coproduction” characterized by “dialogue...mutual replication and copycatting” (219). These utopian accounts in scholarship bring to Korea what is already common in American neoliberal ideology, where Silicon Valley corporations combine new left utopian, anti-corporate ideology and libertarian, laissez-faire capitalist ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996, 52) to promote a post-capitalist “virtual class,” that everyone can belong to. Practically advocated to hype startups and attract venture capitalist speculative finance, Steinberg does the work of Naver and Kakao in combining this ideology with Korean techno-nationalism to make webtoon IPO valuations as speculative as Tesla or WeWork.

In order to compete with global platforms, one must function like them. The celebratory rhetoric of Yecies and Shim, if there is truth to it, fetishizes the early period of platformization, in which huge sums of investment allow monopolizing previously disparate or non-digital (or even non-commodified) industries at huge losses. Part of this inevitably means undercutting competitor prices and wages through subsidies, in the case of webtoons allowing favorable profit sharing agreements with creators as well as free access to content for consumers. Now seeking public offerings Naver and Kakao have both followed the path of Facebook, Amazon, Uber, Google, etc. what Cory Doctrow calls “enshittification” (2023). Naver Webtoon has seen all the symptoms: a rising inequality between top and the large mass of creators, the fracturing of

creator revenue among more people in the production process (Yoon 2022), as general decline in incomes for all creators despite rising company revenues (Pyo 2024), the degradation of working conditions and increased competition (Park 2022), and rising prices for consumers and sponsors. Though Naver Webtoon makes more money from advertising revenue and Kakao from subscriptions (Yecies and Shim 2021), both rely on the same system of leveraging unequal market power to valorize “competition itself... extended into the domain of unpaid amateur labor” through which “any meaningful act underlying the production of Webtoons cannot be separated from the dynamics of capital” (Kim and Yu 2019, 7). Thus, while artists are not powerless and new challengers are emerging in the webtoon space such as Lezhin comics, these dynamics only reaffirm the “systematized method of profit-generation” that characterizes the “platform centric economic model” (7, 8).

As previously theorized, this system of monopolization at the top of the value chain and race-to-the-bottom competition at the level of production is imperialism, or global monopoly capitalism. It is because Korea has created a system of valorization at the domestic level that mimics the global mechanisms of capitalism that Webtoons, and Naver in particular, can rival the global platform monopolies. However, this does not mean that within regional or international competition, imperialist rivalry has been replaced by cooperation or coproduction. As the career of Yeon Sang-ho shows, manhwa and manhwabang were displaced by the much greater potential profits of webtoons and platforms and animation was displaced by the techno-nationalism of live action television and cinema, which the Korean animation industry lacks the foundation for. Given an increasing share of revenue for creators comes from selling their IP as adaptations, falling revenues in other areas creates a direct pipeline between webtoons and live action adaptations that becomes harder for animation to break into every day. This system of self-

reinforcing incentives mystifies many observers of Korean animation, both because Webtoons are already often animated in their original form (Yecies and Shim 2021, 129) and because the Japanese manga-anime has been so successful.

But what is lacking domestically exists elsewhere, and Naver/Line's Japanese connections has led to another potential source of webtoon-animation: Japanese coproductions. A series of coproductions between American streaming service Crunchyroll, Japanese animation studios, and Naver Webtoon help us interrogate the very concept of "coproduction." As chapter five noted, coproductions are an ideological concept that suited regimes of regional capital accumulation at different times. The same is true of coproductions today which, in an echo of the past, once again present themselves as harmonious relationships between nations.

Crunchyroll Coproductions

The visual highlight of *God of High School* (GOH), the 2020 anime based on the South Korean webtoon of the same title, comes in episode 10, when main character Jin Mori's Taekwondo faces off against Park Ilpyo's Taekkyeon for the chance to reach the tournament finals. The two fighters' styles are distinguishable thanks to the beautiful and laborious animation, which combines hand drawn animation, 3D CG animation, and motion capture to give the fight a sense of weight and depth. This scene is intercut with a pungmulnori, a traditional form of Korean musical performance, that summons giant floating demon hands to fight. The Korean traditional music flows into a more modern musical soundtrack as it becomes the background for the martial arts fight but retains Korean features, such as the whine of the taepyeongso, a Korean traditional flute, and the call and response of the drummers [Fig. 39]. The leader of the performance pulls out "national treasures" including a bow and arrow, guns and rocket launcher, a bottle of soju that is spit out, and a hahoetal mask.



[Figure 39 – A close up on a pungmulnori performance in *God of High School*'s action climax]

This scene is highlighted in the making-of video episode. The director films professional fighters wearing motion capture suits kicking into the camera himself and even comes close to getting kicked in the face while filming a separate action scene (Crunchyroll 2020). For the director, motion capture gives a sense of realism lacking in most anime these days, and it is further implied that this level of realism shows “passion” for the project from the director and the whole staff, thereby justifying the immense amount of labor that went into the show [Fig. 40].



[Figure 40 – The Korean Director of *GOH* gets involved in mocap taekkyeon]

What is further implied throughout the special episode is that this realism and passion involves a Koreanness imbued in the action itself by the Korean director, the presumably Korean Taekkyeon fighter, and the original webcomic by a Korean creator. Taekkyeon is an obscure martial art compared to Taekwondo, something commented on by the audience within the anime itself, and the episode functionally serves as an advertisement for Korean martial arts diagetically and extradiagetically. The Korean cultural performance, interspersed with multiple simultaneous fights, is a kind of easter egg of Korean culture, recognizable to Korean audiences and those interested in the source material.

However, *God of High School's* Koreanness is buried within a multinational, globalized commodity. Based on a Korean webcomic running since 2011, it is part of a new series of Japanese-Korean-American anime co-productions designed for a global audience. *Tower of God*, *God of High School*, and *Noblesse*, all released in 2020, are Japanese anime based on Korean

Webcomics. All combined production by Crunchyroll, an American anime streaming app, animation by a Japanese anime studio, and elements of Koreanness. *Tower of God*'s opening and closing songs were by K-pop group Stray Kids while *Noblesse* had its opening and ending songs performed by Kim Jae-joong and Oh My Girl. Both were announced at Seoul Comic Con 2019 and both premiered in Korea on Naver Series On, Naver's web video service, before the US and Japan. *Noblesse* had been animated previously in 2015 by Korean Studio Animal as an OVA and then in 2016 as an ONA by Japanese studio Production I.G. Though *God of High School* and *Tower of God* had VFX done by Japanese Sola Digital, its producer Joseph Chou is Korean.

Though all three webtoons are long-running and famous in Korea, *God of High School* is notable for having a Korean director, Sunghoo Park, who was also involved in storyboards and key animation work, something the studio and the director himself emphasize as lending Korean authenticity to the project. Out of all the titles based on webcomics produced by Crunchyroll, *God of High School* emphasizes its Koreanness the most, taking place in Seoul rather than a fictional world with identifiers of the city, Korean writing visible everywhere, and references to Korean food, culture, and even politics. Nevertheless, the show is globally broadcast in Japanese (with a Korean dub released afterwards accessible to Koreans only) with English and Korean subtitles, has an American opening song coupled with a K-pop ending, and has a generic tournament storyline similar to many other Japanese shonen anime.

God of High School advertises its own co-production in the show itself. The tournament uses a ring covered in advertisements for Crunchyroll and Naver Webtoon. Aesthetically, the show looks like a Japanese anime, but the characters stand out as a style distinct to Korean webtoons. More abstractly, the show combines 2D animation with CGI creating virtual camera motion through a 3D space. Though this has become more common in Japanese anime,

particularly after the work of ufotable on *Demon Slayer* (2019), the director is still correct to highlight the unusual use of mocap in a 3D space not subordinated to the “flat” anime style that even *Demon Slayer* prioritizes.

What is unmentioned in the making of episode is that, because of the amount of work required to animate Episode Ten, CG work was outsourced to a studio in Thailand, Studio Rockets. In its commitment to portraying Korean martial arts authentically, embodied in Korean people and envisioned by a Korean director and producer, *God of High School* was forced to outsource most of the animation labor that is now too expensive to do in Korea and leaving Thailand without its own cultural imprint or national element in the final product. This is visualized rather clearly in the credits. For decades, “the names of Korean animators or in-betweeners were often replaced with fictitious Japanese names in the credits of animated series broadcast on television in the 1980s” (Kim 2014, 93), with Korean names only appearing in the mid-1990s in the credits of Japanese anime or not appearing at all except for a singular mention of the Korean outsourcing studio (93). In *God of High School*, director Park’s name is written in Japanese, equivalent to the Japanese names in the credits but also preserving anime’s “made in Japan myth” by avoiding hangul (93). Regardless, it is now the romanized Thai names that stick out in the credits, taking the place of Korean names that are romanized in Japanese anime when they do outsourcing work. Though “special thanks” are given to the staff of Naver Webtoon, Koreans whose names are also romanized, creating a linguistic imperialism of English and Japanese absorbing everything else. The director may consider himself and his vision Korean but, within the division of labor between national capitals that came together for the co-production, he is Japanese. Regardless, if *God of High School* represents Korean animation on equal terms with Japanese and American, it is only at the expense of the many new “Koreas” in

the world like Thailand and Vietnam (which also did work on the show), following the advice of the World Bank to mimic Korea's development path of export-oriented industrialization.

Rather than catching up to Japan, the show is rather evidence of the degradation of the Japanese anime industry's conditions of labor to a Korean level. In the making of video, the director points out that the action scenes he envisions require a lot of work, pointing to the Japanese producer and saying "that's why he dies every day" at which the producer awkwardly laughs. Though immensely profitable and globally popular, the conditions of labor in the Japanese anime industry are near the point of superexploitation. Lower-rung illustrators earn as little as 200 USD a month (Dooley and Hida 2021) as part of a complex system of subcontracting and freelancing. Even higher-rung animators earn half what they would in the United States for significantly more work. Labor conditions in the Japanese anime industry are so infamous that an anime came out about it, *Shirobako* (2014), in which an illustrator collapses with fever in the first episode and the "cliffhanger ending hinges not on her health but on whether the show she is drawing will be finished in time to air" (Dooley and Hida 2021).

Anime's production committee model, in which a group of companies contribute some funding to a show and receives returns based on its input, socializes risk but also reduces profits. It allows companies like Naver Webtoon with a large amount of capital to participate as an equal in anime production even if Korea as a nation has much less wealth than Japan. But rather than a sign of equality between Japanese and Korean animation, Japanese anime production itself is being subordinated to Japanese monopoly capitalism, in this case the façade of Crunchyroll as an equal partner rather than a globally dominant monopoly born of a corporate merger.

Crunchyroll: Accumulation of Fan Labor

Crunchyroll began in 2006 as a small video hosting site for uploaded anime fansubs. Relying on a “compulsory” donation to access high quality streams (Lee 2011, 245-246), Crunchyroll also turned fan labor on its forums into a source of potential revenue, not only in fan subtitles and translations but points and badges for quality contributions to the forums and even the labor of moderators and admins to regulate the site and conduct market research on the general userbase. Crunchyroll quickly capitalized on this starting in 2008 with a \$4 million investment from venture capital firm Venrock and a \$2 million dollar investment from GDR, corporate parent of Japanese anime production company Gonzo, which led to the first simulcast in anime history (Ristola 2024, 159). Remarkably, during this time Crunchyroll continued to host pirated content on its site, and most of its content was blatantly pirated (147), thus creating an ironic situation in which Gonzo was investing in a pirating service that had helped to nearly bankrupt it in 2009 and which it had condemned for ruining the industry in 2007 (159). Crunchyroll, in monetizing fan labor and fandom community ethos, eventually eliminated pirated content from its site as part of an agreement with TV Tokyo for a \$750,000 investment before eventual acquisition by media industry holding company Chernin Group, with a further investment by Chernin in 2015 of \$22 million to justify a valuation at around \$100 million (Hodgkins 2013). The jump in numbers appeared outrageous but was retroactively justified by Crunchyroll being further tossed around by increasingly large players in the American media industry: ATT which acquired Time Warner to become WarnerMedia and eventually Sony’s billion dollar investment.

What justified such massive growth at the same time as the anime boom was collapsing and anime sales from 2007-2009 remained a fraction of those from 2001-2003? Though the anime industry recovered eventually, valued in 2019 at \$24 billion with nearly half that amount

from the global anime market (Hodgkins 2020), this was in the far future. What really interested these companies was the structural shift represented by streaming and the valorization of “participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). Like Walmart, which controls the entire value chain through monopolization of distribution of a massive network of producers, Crunchyroll built value out of control over the distributor of the fruits of the entire online fan production network: translating, encoding, uploading, moderating, and even advertising, which were all done for free by anime fans. Crunchyroll did not only abandon fansubs and pirating for licensed content but persecuted them, making the mass of American anime fans rely on Crunchyroll for anime and former fansubbers low-wage employees of the new monopoly (Ristola 2024, 158). Though offering a new model of “simulcasting” shows on Japanese TV and a convenient app, it was this valorization of piracy that was key in order to accumulate the initial capital to buy expensive Japanese anime licenses against existing competitors. Thus, initially the legacy distributors of Japanese anime, Funimation and Bandai Entertainment Inc., called Crunchyroll’s tolerance of piracy “an epidemic that will undermine the future of the anime business in Japan and the United States” when it received VC funding (Loo 2008), condemning its very business model. In 2021, Funimation and Crunchyroll merged and in 2024, Funimation ended its streaming service, with only Crunchyroll emerging the final victor, now charging a much higher price.

As it grew, Crunchyroll got investments and distribution and production agreements from Kodansha (for Crunchyroll Manga), Sumimoto, Kadokawa as well as American competitors VIZ and Sentai, further centralizing American anime distribution and unifying it with Japanese anime production. This culminated in its acquisition by Sony in 2021 for \$1.175 billion. After having initially acquired a 95% stake in Funimation in 2017 for \$143 million, Sony could now “create a unified anime subscription experience” (Plunkett 2021), i.e. a monopoly. After decades of a

relatively hands-off approach by Japanese anime producers to the American market, Sony now sought to become the sole distributor of Japanese anime for the American market, setting its sights on other media monopolies like Netflix which control the entire production and distribution process including Netflix “original” anime.

Despite the middling success of 2020’s webtoon-based “Crunchyroll Originals” including *God of High School*, Sony/Crunchyroll clearly believed in the potential profits of further Japanese webtoon based anime adaptations. It was instrumental in getting *Solo Leveling* (2023) made, an anime based on a webtoon by Chugong distributed on KakaoPage since 2016. Not only did it bring it to Japanese studio Aniplex and co-produce it, it also bought billboards in Times Square and produced a *Solo Leveling* documentary *The Leveling of Solo Leveling* (2024) (Nwaenie 2024). In the documentary’s trailer, the emphasis is primarily on the international importance of the webtoon: “it’s no exaggeration to say that *Solo Leveling* pioneered the international webtoon market” is followed by Koreans, Japanese, and Americans mentioning it in their respective languages (IGN 2024). Though also receiving middling reviews, the show has been far more successful than its predecessors, both because of greater promotion by Crunchyroll and the platform’s much enhanced ability to shape fan discourse post-merger. During the pandemic, Crunchyroll grew to 100 million registered members, including 11 million paid users in 2023 (Kim 2023) and has set its sights on the global anime market, in particular India, where it plans to broadcast a television station “Crunchyroll TV” and fight against the piracy that gave birth to it (Bharadwaj 2024).

Webcomics and Korea’s “Advantage”

As previously mentioned, Yeon Sang-ho’s, *Hellbound* (2021) was based on a Korean webtoon. It was promoted by Netflix in the wake of the massive success of 2021’s *Squid Game*,

which made the company 900 million USD in value according to its own internal metrics. Though the success of the show was unanticipated, the economics behind it were clear. CNBC estimated that to make *Squid Game* in the United States would have cost 5 to 10 times more given higher union wages, less working hours, government incentives, intellectual property rights, and the costs of Hollywood actors (Sherman 2021). At 2.4 million USD an episode, *Squid Game* cost 1/4th Netflix's *The Crown* (10 million USD per episode) and 1/10th Disney+ shows *WandaVision* and *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (25 million USD per episode). But not only is the extreme profit margin of South Korean television production attractive to Netflix, it is able to leverage its market power against the Korean nation. As *Squid Game* creator Hwang Dong-hyuk pointed out in an interview, he is paid according to the original contract, without any bonus or renegotiation based on success. Netflix does not even pay Korea ISPs for bandwidth, outsourcing both labor costs and infrastructure development to South Korea and any other country competing in for Netflix's patronage (Choe 2022). Though this is currently in South Korean court, Korea's only leverage is the value of its cultural products vis-à-vis other countries' products, a "hallyu" monopoly that Netflix can break with similarly outsourced productions like Spain's *Money Heist* and France's *Lupin* in a race to the bottom. *Hellbound* also cost around 2-3 million USD per episode to make, webcomic creator Choi Gyu-sok get a small fraction in return if they get anything at all. For a previous adaptation, he earned "3 to 4 times" a yearly salary (average 41,000 USD a year), giving him "freedom so I didn't have to immediately begin the next work" (Lee 2021).

Naver Webtoon is arguably the only Korean media conglomerate which can compete as a monopoly with platform monopolies Sony/Crunchyroll and Netflix. Naver's Line is so dominant in Japan that in 2019, it split ownership of both Line and Yahoo! Japan with Softbank. Yahoo! is

Japan's most popular search engine and Softbank owner of the largest technology-focused VC fund in the world. In 2024, the Japanese government intervened to try and force Naver to sell its shares in the holding company, provoking a diplomatic crisis (Kim and Lester 2024). In the era of inter-imperialist crisis, cultural industries are a weapon of the greatest importance. Each nation is in a rush to find new methods of extracting the maximum surplus from its own national cultural industries. But as this dissertation has traced throughout the history of Korean animation, this takes place in a given institutional structure of state developmentalism and industrial technonationalism.

Soon after the broadcasting of *Tower of God*, the most popular of 2020's three webtoon based anime, creator Lee Jong Hui (pen name S.I.U. tellingly short for "slave in utero") took an indefinite hiatus from his weekly publishing schedule, citing a neck and back hernia he developed, a wrist injury, as well as the mental toll of creating weekly content. Having started *Tower of God* in the military, which he called "physically exhausting" (Coats 2020), S.I.U. burned out despite being one of the few webtoon creators successful enough to have assistants for coloring, backgrounds, and 3D modeling, and popular enough after 10 years to not simply have his spot taken by a competitor.

Nevertheless, despite the financial success of *Tower of God* as a webtoon and anime, S.I.U. was compelled to return from his hiatus after a year despite not only continuing to have health problems. He went on hiatus again in 2022 for health reasons. In both instances S.I.U. released blog posts apologizing to his fans and blaming himself, unsurprising given the large majority of webtoon artists feel stressed about malicious comments they receive from fans (KOCCA 2021). Sure enough, after these long hiatuses, the popularity of the webtoon plummeted in the US and Korea, only partially recovering with the return of weekly updates.

Though S.I.U. brings a Korean military masculinity to webtoon production, Naver Webtoon artists are 66.5% women (KOCCA 2021), the underbelly of Korea's industrial development and subject to double oppression. A 2017 government study (Lee 2017) found that female writers made 1.66 million won (1,485 USD at the time) per month on average compared to 2.22 million won (1,968 USD) per month for male writers (12). The highest incomes went to male cartoonists with 2.33 million won (2,084 USD) per month and female assistants made 690,000 won (617 USD) per month. Similar gendered differentials applied to illustrators at an even lower average wage (13). But what stands out are the abysmally low wage levels for all Koreans and their shared brutal labor conditions. *Solo Leveling*'s artist "DUBU" died of a brain hemorrhage in 2023, which the Korean webtoon association linked to overwork (Park 2022). Such conditions, which are widely known and condemned online, are nevertheless immunized by the structure of the platform from the collective political resistance manhwa provoked. That is the triumph of webtoons over manhwa.

Conclusion

Why have webtoons not translated into success for the Korean animation industry? The question is backwards: it is the retreat from production that has characterized the success of the platform capitalism of Naver Webtoon, Sony/Crunchyroll, and Netflix. *God of High School* and other webtoon-based anime did not elevate Korean anime to Japan's level but "Koreanized" Japanese anime, its Korean director subjecting Japanese animators to the demands of Crunchyroll's "fables" production model. Though anime has been reliant on outsourcing to China and South Korea for decades, with veteran animator Irie Yasuhiro estimating that 80-90% of inbetweening was outsourced (Nippon, 2017), this has not saved key animators and even creative leads from getting less and less as platforms monopolize the industry. The production of

Lookism (2022) as well as Studio Mir’s continued work with Netflix as discussed in chapter four means that Korean animation will continue to experiment with webtoon adaptations, and Crunchyroll may even try to cut out the Japanese middleman as it expands globally, having already done so in China with “donghua” [Chinese animation] adaptations like *Heaven Official’s Blessing* (2020), produced by bilibili and animated by Haoliners Animation League and distributed in America by Funimation (and then Crunchyroll after the merger) and Netflix. But this will not make Korean or Chinese animation competitive with global animation monopoly capitalism. Lenin’s ultimate point was the “parasitic” nature of imperialism as the final “stage” of capitalism. Capitalism cannot create, it can only consume what is given to it by the human brain and hands. As Marx says in *Capital*, “what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality” (Marx 1976, 284). The age of monopoly capitalism, realized more completely in the platform, furthers this separation of human labor and the realization of profit to an unprecedented degree.

Webtoons emerged out of the creative explosion that accompanied Korea’s political revolution and the opening of decades of autarkic development to the world market. Naver, and by extension Korea, may be able to valorize this into a global industry. Animation, which as this dissertation has shown was always-already too late to history, again missed this chance in the limits of Yeon Sang-ho’s animated vision. But as in *Love is Protein*, animation is the ass that releases the ghost of webtoons and all their pretensions to stand for the nation in the competition for monopoly production. If even Japanese anime is being stripped for parts, what chance does Korea have?

ⁱⁱⁱ As discussed in chapter five.

^{iv} As discussed in chapter five.

Chapter Eight:

Conclusion - Korean Animation as Told by *The Simpsons*

Split Screen (1999-2001), a documentary show hosted by famous film producer John Pierson, interviewed many prominent American directors and actors during its three-year run including Spike Lee, Wes Anderson, Edward Norton, and Matt Damon. One episode stands out for being about neither film nor American media: *The Simpsons in Korea* (1999) visits AKOM studios in Seoul to learn about the conditions under which *The Simpsons* is produced. Pierson, believing at first that “Korean animation” is like a “Nike sweatshop,” visits the studio to find out the “real deal.” This stereotype was not born of ignorance; a scene in Season four’s *Itchy & Scratchy: The Movie* (1992) portrayed Korean animation studios as sweatshops under military bayonet [Fig. 41], offending Korean studio DR Movie so much that “overseas animation supervisor and studio creator Gregg Vanzo initially refused to do the work” (Gilboy 2019, 229). *Split Screen* gave Korean animation a chance to redeem itself as well as assuage the moral guilt of American animators. After all, this “Korean” studio had been founded by Americans, just like Nike, during South Korea’s military dictatorship and now only a few years removed from it. It was not clear whether the offense was caused by the portrayal being false or being true.

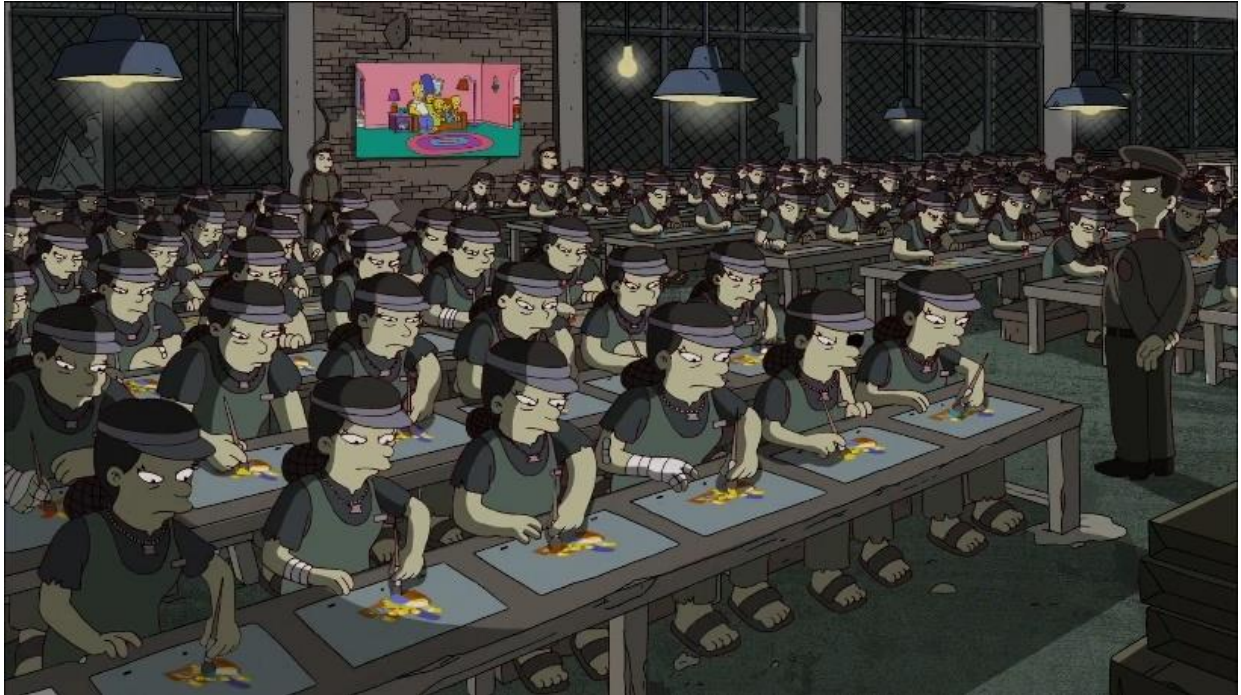


[Figure 41 – Korean Animation Studio portrayed in a 1992 episode of *The Simpsons*]

The episode begins by introducing, Frank Shin, director at AKOM productions and son of “godfather of Korean animation” Nelson Shin, who introduces the studio and how animation outsourcing networks came into being in South Korea while the production manager takes the American visitors around the studio and shows off the actual labor of animation. Various employees at the studio discuss the differences between Korean and American culture and the difficulty in translating American humor into a Korean context, particularly Homer’s recurrent choking of Bart. Given that *The Simpsons* is for American audiences with American humor and most importantly American capital investment, the Korean production manager is frank in discussing the role of Korean animators: “we try to follow exactly what they want and we try to refuse to put our creative mind on it,” something American animation studios ensure by sending specific instructions to Korea for every aspect of production and even sending an American production overseer to make sure animation goes to specifications. The main area of dispute is

Homer repeatedly strangling Bart, something the animator says is incomprehensible to Korean culture. Though pointing out it is funny, and Homer still loves his son, the reason still seems to elude both the animator and supervisor, something Shin reaffirms by pointing out that Koreans understand “a little bit” but not “one hundred percent” of American culture. Immediately following, a reference to a “video Christmas card from Tupac Shakur” underlines how incomprehensible some of the references are in *The Simpsons* to Koreans, who are nevertheless tasked with animating them.

Filmed in 1999, the episode presents the peak of the outsourcing animation bubble, as previously discussed in this dissertation. But through the rise and fall of this bubble, Korean production on *The Simpsons* would remain remarkably consistent, continuing for three decades so far. The Simpsons would therefore return to Korean animation, through humor indexing what remained the same and what changed. *MoneyBART* (2010) would take the brief joke in *Itchy & Scratchy: The Movie* and turn it into an extended opening by artist Banksy. It portrayed South Korean animation studios in black and white as hellish, slave-like factories in which children dip animation cels in vats of acid among piles of bones and cats are ground up into stuffing for Bart Simpson dolls [Fig. 42].



[Figure 42- Banksy's 2010 rendition of the Korean animation studio]

This time, Nelson Shin, the English-speaking CEO of AKOM, openly protested to the American animation studio to have some of the more offensive aspects removed and expressed his disappointment to *Time Magazine* (Cain 2010). Since the previous mockery, Korean animators had grown bolder. The 2000's had seen the rise of Chinese, Vietnamese, Indian, and Filipino competition for animation outsourcing, and AKOM and Rough Draft had remained part of the show's production by moving up the value chain. *The Simpsons Movie* (2007) and the *Futurama* movies (2007-2009) had used a combination of 2-D and computer animation pioneered by Rough Draft, an American innovation that nevertheless required the Korean studio's close involvement and expertise (Strike 2007; McLean 2007). Nevertheless, the Korean studios were the butt of the same joke, albeit more over-the-top to compensate for its distance from reality.

Between the two episodes, it was clear something had changed. Season 16's *Fat Man and Little Boy* (2004) was even more explicit, name-dropping Korean animation. Attempting to build a nuclear reactor for Lisa's science fair project, Homer asks himself "how hard could it be to build a reactor? Korea did it and look at the quality of their animation." His mouth then goes off model [fig. 43]



[Figure 43 – *The Simpsons* mocks both North and South Korea in 2004's *Fat Man and Little Boy*]

But in tying the joke to a nuclear reactor, which Korea was being referred to was ambiguous. In 1992, though the criticism of Asian outsourcing was common enough, the reference to Korean animation, was an inside joke for the writers and particularly knowledgeable fans. Even *Split Screen* had begun with Janet Pierson, executive producer and John Pierson's wife, guessing incorrectly that the show was animated in California. By 2004, the North Korean nuclear crisis had brought global attention to the two Koreas. Though few knew that North Korea

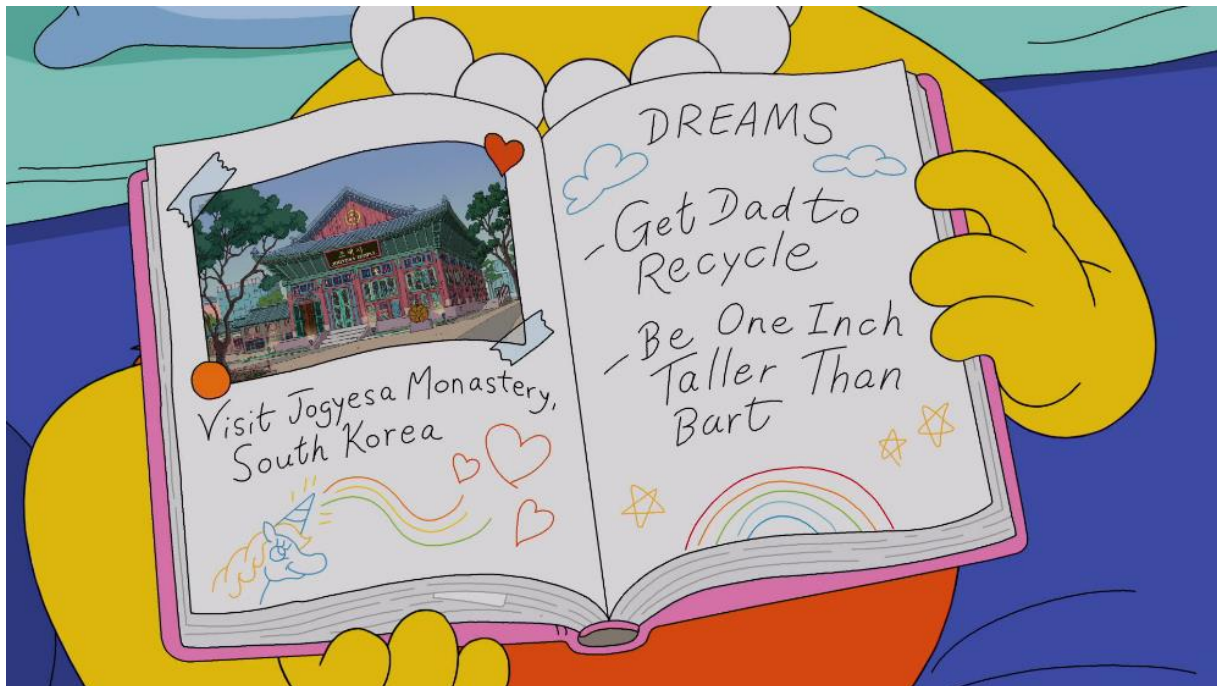
had also become a major destination of animation outsourcing, a year after *Pororo* (2003) and Guy Delize's graphic novel *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* (2003), about working in North Korea as an animator, this fact was well known in the industry. The new joke is therefore more ambiguous in which Korea it is referring to. Even the title is a potential pun on the leadership transition from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il, a joke made explicit in *The Falcon and the D'ohman* (2011), in which a side character was forced to make a musical comedy about Kim Jong-il's leadership while imprisoned in North Korea with title "Being Short is No Hindrance to Greatness." Just as the musical chorus sings about "just the North part," *Time* made the connection explicit: "even if Banksy's gag was unfair to South Korean animators, a real-life model for his satire may still be alive and well — their neighbors to the north" (Cain 2010).

With North Korea the butt of jokes, South Korea was now cool. In Season 24's *The Day the Earth Stood Cool* (2012), part of a montage of Homer trying to be cool is seeing a Korean action film festival, implied to be obscure and contemporary. For the first time, a reference to Korea in *The Simpsons* features hangul prominently and Homer is the butt of the joke, not Korea or the Korean animators [Fig.4 4].



[Figure 44- The Simpsons uses Hangul to present Korean film as cool in 2012]

By the time of 2019's *E My Sports*, "Gangnam Style" (2012) had gone viral and Korean popular culture had exploded in global popularity. Rather than a throwaway joke, the Simpsons family would visit South Korea as the *E My Sports's* main plot. Though centered around *League of Legends*, an American game owned by the Chinese company Tencent, the popularity and success of the game's e-sports league is widely associated with South Korean professionals, making a trip to the country necessary for Bart's e-sports team managed by Homer Simpson. In what appeared to be an authentic representation of Korean culture at last, Lisa Simpson revealed she also wanted to go to South Korea to visit Jogyesa temple, named in the show [Fig. 45].



[Figure 45 – Lisa shows Marge her desire to go to Jogyesa in 2019's *E My Sports*]

Lisa would continue to reference Korean culture throughout the show, such as season 34's *From Beer to Paternity* in which Lisa and Homer sing Blackpink's "Lovesick Girls" (2020), provoking a response on Instagram from group member Jisoo. In this new world of Korean

popular culture and global communication, rather than a hidden shame, Korea was proud to be associated with *The Simpsons*, and all these references have been uploaded to YouTube with fan made Korean subtitles.

But even in this animated episode centered around Korean culture, Korean animation only gets a brief joke: the airport bus passes by the “Simpsons animation studio and casino.” That the joke is insulting without being particularly funny or coherent only proves the irrelevance of the Korean animation studio to American audiences compared to the subject of the episode [Fig. 46].



[Figure 46 – *E My Sports*’s incomprehensible joke about Korean animation]

The animation studio joke has Korean traditional music playing in the background and the Simpson family does go to Jogyesa as promised. But somehow, they create sand mandalas in the temple, a feature of Tibetan rather than Korean Buddhism. Finally, the show ends with a riot breaking out which then is quickly put down by riot police as the M*A*S*H theme plays, an

image of the military dictatorship era of South Korea and even the Korean war, thus ending the arc of the episode with the same joke from 1992.

Similarly in the American animated television show *Family Guy*, also animated in South Korea, *Candy, Quahog Marshmallow* (2016) centers around the characters going to South Korea to finish watching a Korean drama. It ends with a k-pop music video with no mention of Korean animation at all even though the sequence was animated by Digital eMation, a Korean studio. A separate mention in the next season's *Passenger Fatty-Seven* (2017) only brings up Korean animation to make a joke about the "Korean sweatshop animator [earning] his nickel" animating the show. If e-sports, Kk-pop, Korean dramas, and Korean cinema have become global cultural icons worthy of a full episode of *The Simpsons*, why is animation stuck as the butt of a joke despite being one of the first Korean cultural industries to globalize and one of the most heavily invested in at its peak?

Returning to *Split Screen*, Frank Shin concludes on a hopeful note: "unconsciously we put our style in this show" with Frank Shin summarizing the lesson of the episode over hopeful music and a scene of children playing in *The Simpsons*: "Korean people are certainly not robots...there's an intangible feeling, intangible movement that has been proscribed into the actual animation that maybe American audiences don't realize is there."

Rather than an exclusive Korean soul of the animated commodity, Shin anticipated a more general condition. In responding to the controversy over the Banksy opening, the American executive producer of the show Al Jean joked "this is what you get when you outsource" (Halliday 2010), the implication being the artist Banksy was the outsourced labor rather than the Korean animation studio. Jean's statement is more revealing than it might appear. By season 22, *The Simpsons* was far from its prime, and while the older jokes about South Korea would no

longer be acceptable today, the newer jokes have not helped the show rise above the many other animated television shows that follow the formula it pioneered. Homer even stopped choking Bart, referenced by Homer in Season 35's *McMansion & Wife* (2023): "I don't do that anymore. Times have changed," provoking a controversy over whether the show had been "tamed" (Kanter 2023) as part of a larger controversy in the wake of the white voice actor for Apu, the Indian store owner, stepping aside for an Indian in 2020. This culture war made into a conspiracy the more banal explanation: the Korean market (and Indian market) matters.

After decades of outsourcing, pioneered by Korean animation, South Korea's "free market Stalinism" (Harvey 1997, 15) had led to what David Harvey called "geopolitical democratization" (14). Because the free flow of capital had rapidly developed capitalist production in East Asia and, consequently, they had accumulated large currency reserves (the opposite problem of the Third World debt crisis of the Fordist regime) "it became harder for any core power to exercise discipline over others and easier for peripheral powers to insert themselves into the capitalist competitive game" (14). Harvey is anticipating "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics" (Harvey 2005, 120), turning a combination of "authoritarianism and the capitalist market" (120) into the foundation of the global capitalist system. Offending Korea or China is not just a matter of cultural sensitivity, though it is cast in those terms to give ideological content to the non-humanity of market forces; it is bad for business.

This dissertation has traced the history of Korean animation from the foundation of the South Korean developmental state in the Japanese Empire, through the military dictatorship period, into liberalization and democratization, to the present era of global K-pop export. Al Jean's comment, which brings together Banksy's art and South Korean animated labor into a common form of exploitation, echoes Harvey's general point about prospects for the left under

neoliberalism: “the relatively privileged position of the working classes in the advanced capitalist countries has been much reduced relative to the conditions of labor in the rest of the world” represented by the “reemergence of sweatshops as a fundamental form of industrial organization” in the United States (Harvey 1995, 12). Banksy’s point, as offensive as it was to Koreans, was nevertheless an attempt to imagine a common form of labor in the US and Korea. The final image of *MoneyBART*’s opening is 20th Century Fox as a concentration camp, bring the image back to American soil [Fig. 47]



[Figure 47 – The end scene of Banksy’s *MoneyBART* brings the message back to America]

In describing the rise of monopoly capitalism and the impossibility of the global periphery, including South Korea, to transcend the limits of imperialism, this does not mean those doing “creative” labor are safe at the top of the value chain. A basic tendency of capitalism is the absolute growth of the proletariat and the concentration of the bourgeoisie, as well as the absolute shrinking of classes superfluous to this Manichean division. While the vast growth of

the global proletariat allowed Korea's cerebral/manual dichotomy" (Kim 2014, 91) to become a general condition and a whole class of managers, distributors, and advertisers to grow on the back of this system, ultimately the proletariat will continue to grow at the expense of every other class, particularly in the present era of inter-imperialist conflict and deglobalization. If Banksy can be outsourced labor, everyone can, and it is in Korean animation one begins to imagine a universal proletariat that wishes to reclaim the "intangible feeling" it gives to each commodity it produces.

The alternative is the long history of Korean techno-nationalism that, in the new era of late capitalism, identifies with the nation-state, the family, and "culture" to fill the void of neoliberalism's empty form of territorial democratization. The production manager tries to do exactly that. Unlike in *The Simpsons*, she claims that "we Koreans don't talk bad things about our country, or our family, or the company we are working in." Of course, any student of Korean history knows this is the opposite of reality. Nevertheless, she is accurately describing a certain logic of political empowerment. After *E My Sports* was released, *The Korea Times* brutally criticized it in English, put in business terms: "I don't think it helps our tourism, nor hurts it... a missed opportunity, a big zero" (Dunbar 2019). It then recreates the original deferral of orientalism onto North Korea: "Next time: perhaps the Simpsons join a Young Pioneers tour to North Korea, which ends badly after "El Barto" graffiti appears around the city" (2019). These are the terms of K-pop nationalism, which this dissertation began by questioning. Nor will one find an alternative ideology in this American documentary show, meant to advertise Korean animation to American audiences and where every interaction with the animators is watched over and translated by supervisors. Nevertheless, there is a glimpse of the universality of Korean animation labor. In an interview about the working hours ("10AM-6:30PM"... "not bad"

according to the American interviewer), one sees a group of colorists in the background, all women. Behind one who briefly looks up at the camera is a poster for *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995), the foundational show of the modern “otaku” sense of identity in Japan, America, and Korea [Fig. 48].



[Figure 48 – Evangelion Poster in the Background of AKOM studio]

Chapter three discussed in detail how otakudom defeated Korean animation developmentalism and chapter seven discusses how it has been captured by global platforms for new and more brutal forms of exploitation. Throughout all the chapters, Japan took Korean animation as an object of imperialist exploitation and a source of cheap labor from the colonial era to the present. Nevertheless, in this moment one can imagine this woman’s love of animation beyond the hierarchical world system and the conflation of people and nations. One can imagine her personal motivations for working in the animation industry at a time when Japanese TV animation was still banned in Korea and animation labor conditions remained brutal and

underpaid. Overcoming language barriers, one can imagine any fan of animation having a conversation with her about *Evangelion* at Seoul or Busan Comic World.

To return to Spivak, Korean animation still cannot speak. Even this anonymous Korean animator, who never talks to the camera, can only speak through Japanese anime to an audience of an American cartoon which makes her the butt of a decades-old joke. Nevertheless, if Korean animation remains silent, that is because more of the world is losing its voice as well. When this episode of *Split Screen* premiered, it was still possible to be ignorant of global outsourcing and imagine production still taking place in California. Today, its hard to imagine anyone not aware of Japanese anime, Korean smartphones, Taiwanese semiconductors and Chinese manufacturing and the political issues centered around them.

As this dissertation has insisted, no amount of delving into the production process of animation can unveil the abstract labor contained within it. Further, globalization is not an evening out of global value but a generalization of the fundamental split between monopoly and non-monopoly capitalism. But if there is one thing to learn from this anonymous, voiceless Korean animator, it is that the working class wants to speak even if it cannot. The globalization of culture has flattened the hierarchies of communication and cultural consumption even while accelerating the hierarchies of production, the furthest centralization of monopoly capitalism yet realized. Perhaps it is in Korean animation's long history of images of proletarian struggle and from the Korean workers who make animation possible across the world that one will find the solution to that contradiction.

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