



OUTLIERS TO THE KOREAN MULTICULTURAL DISCUSSION: JOSEONJOK PORTRAYED AS THE CONSTITUTIONAL OTHER TO THE KOREAN-SELF

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Synopsis:

This paper will focus on Korean media discourse surrounding the Korean-ethnic Chinese, or Joseonjok and how it relates to beliefs about nationalism and immigration policies. The paper will analyze how Korean films such as "The Yellow Sea" and "New World" seem to problematize the Joseonjok while at the same time bringing attention to a society of moral depravation.

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Outliers in the Korean Multicultural Discourse

Images of Constitutional Otherness in *The Yellow Sea* and *New World*

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Beginning in the 1990s, Korea's rapid development created a demand for immigrant laborers from other countries in Asia in pursuit of a better life, whose necessary presence in Korea poses a challenge to the belief in a pure Korean race. This fundamental national re-configuration is at the heart of the multicultural discourse: the contradiction between globalization and nationalism. Caught in the middle of this contradiction are Korean-ethnic Chinese, or *Joseonjok*. Because they are ethnically-Korean, *Joseonjok* are more often than not excluded from the multicultural discourse. However, as will become apparent throughout this paper, *Joseonjok* are also considered by Korean society to be outsiders; their restricted legal status perpetuated by a media discourse of problematization.

In *The Yellow Sea and New World*, the process of problematizing the *Joseonjok* is apparent through two discourses. Yang states Korean media discourse presents *Joseonjok*'s migration to South Korea as having destructive effects on the family unit, as well as on traditional culture and customs in the area of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture—an area of China that is: part of Korea's historical geographical makeup, most densely populated by *Joseonjok* and also symbolic of a link to what Koreans consider their pre-modern ethnic identity (231). This pre-modern identity association has

carried over into media portrayals of Joseonjok as unrefined or stuck in the past. At the center of *The Yellow Sea*, is a Joseonjok taxi driver named Gu-nam. The destruction of Gu-nam's family in the film begins with his wife's economically motivated immigration to Korea. Gu-nam stays in Yanbian—darkly shaded with urban decay; void of traditional culture or customs.

Secondly, Yang states that Korean media often portrays Joseonjok males as illegal immigrants and/or morally deprived criminals or gamblers (194). Yang also exposes the “Korean Dreamer” discourse, in which Joseonjok give up an agricultural lifestyle—and with the lure of make-money-quick-schemes—come to Korea, ultimately falling victim to the decadence of Korean society (219-223). His family's economic needs cause Gunam and his wife to become dislocated from each other; and in his solitary lifestyle, he incessantly dreams of his wife as he accumulates gambling debt. However, a solution to his three-fold problem—gambling debt, providing for family, separation from wife—is proposed by Myeong-ga, a Joseonjok crime leader and hired killer. He orders Gu-nam to carry out a contracted murder of a Korean professor and retired-Olympic athlete named Seung-hyun Kim. Until the film's conclusion, Gu-nam is ignorant to the fact the murder was ordered by Seung-hyun's wife and her lover. He simply progresses the story through illegal activity conducted on the edges of Korean society, his exclusion from Korean society cemented by the perpetuation of fundamental difference through physical appearances.

As soon as Gu-nam arrives in Korea, he is recognizable as an outsider. Gunam's identity is formed by the image against which Koreans view themselves. This idea of

externally based identity formation is what Stuart Hall describes as, "...the self as it is inscribed in the gaze of the Other...[a notion that]...breaks down boundaries between those who belong and those who do not" (48). The four Joseonjok characters in the film *New World*, who were also hired to commit murders are also immediately sets them apart from their Korean counterparts. These characters also align with the Korean Dreamer discourse as their anticipation of societal decadence is expressed with awe-struck facial expressions made as soon as they step foot into Incheon International Ferry Terminal. One of the men begins scolding the others:

"You think people don't already know where we're from?"

"Its not good to stand out so much in the eyes of the South Koreans."

"Do you have any idea how fast South Koreans can tell you apart?"

"They already know where we're from!"

This unrefined images is perpetuated when Myeong-ga from *The Yellow Sea* is shown beating men to death with a large bone. This image of Joseonjok as barbarian-like, has also been transported to larger TV-viewing audiences through the Korean comedy show, *Gag Concert*, where each week an actor appears on stage, lampooning Myeong-ga—bone in hand, wearing a fur coat. Both the Joseonjok characters in *The Yellow Sea* and its parody on *Gag Concert* are also represented with barbaric elements through the act of ravenously consuming food.

Eleanor Ty explores the meaning of food to minorities in film who move to the modern world, that food and the ability to obtain food are connected to survival and struggle, and communal dining is linked to ethnic identity and tradition (Ty, 62). The scene where Myeong-ga and his associates feast from a large pot of boiled horse must be

viewed by the audience through this lens; as consumption linked to survival, and consumption linked to an ethnic identity that is apparently uncivilized.

The barbaric nature of consumption functions in Korean media discourse of Joseonjok as a parallel image of Korean ethnicity stuck in the past, not-yet-modernized, and more occupied with basic means of survival than their modernized counterparts. To frame this notion in terms of Edward Said's discussion of Orientalism where—
 "...European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self..."—South Korea is analogous to dominant and superior half European culture, and Joseonjok to that of the uncivilized-parallel self of the Orient (3).

However, when comparing the Joseonjok male is portrayed through Gu-nam as the perpetual outsider, the characterization of Korean society insiders are portrayed as far more lacking in moral values. In *The Yellow Sea*, the three Korean male characters form cross-intersecting relationships of adultery with the same two women, ultimately leading them to self-destructive acts of murder, and revenge. In order for Korean men to dominate their adulterous affairs, they import Joseonjok migrant workers to commit illegal acts. Kim Kyung Hyun describes Korean films as portraying male characters who have found themselves—in a new global capitalistic modernity—completely de-masculinized; forced into contradiction by a "...tightly-sealed social system still dictated by [the paternalism of] Confucian decorum..." where they seek to re-define their individuality (re-masculinize themselves) through the domination of social relationships and adulterous affairs (15).

Through privileged social and legal status, the Korean characters have the power to partake in activities that allow them to fulfill their desires, which are nearly always immoral—sexual, adulterous, jealous, and revengeful. In this way, *The Yellow Sea* is suggesting that desire within Korean society is predominantly an immoral force enabled by power. Thus, without this power of legal representation the Joseonjok characters' are similar to the peasant class of France of whom Marx claims, "...identity of their interest fails to produce a feeling of community...*they do not form a class*" (Marx). Gayatri Spivak posits that because of an inability to form a unified object of interest, they also have no unified object of desire. Thus, their desires are always subject of the dominant society, who have the right to represent them. (Spivak, 68). This lack of unity in for Joseonjok migrant workers in Korean society is apparent in one scene, where Gu-nam is forced to kill other Joseonjok men, not because of an innate desire, but in self-defense.

Thus, what is the criticism that this equation—desire = immorality—proposes to the audience about modern-day Korean society? Kim Kyung Hyun would call the portrayal of modern-day Koreans functioning within their native society in *The Yellow Sea*, an image of ethnic/cultural Korean identity becoming obsolete: globalizing society causing the destruction of not only traditional national culture, but of the native identity itself. The obsolescence of the "native" within a globalizing Korea is signified in the *Yellow Sea* by the Korean men who must import Joseonjok workers and their death is what Kim ultimately posits is the desire to free themselves from familial responsibilities and institutional repression, and personal anxieties. (X Introduction)

If Korea has become an immoral wasteland, if the "native" has become obsolete, then what resolution does the film propose to the "rapidly vanishing" national identity?

The final scene of the film, in which Gu-nam's wife—whom it was implied was murdered by her Korean love—reappears as the sole passenger exiting a night train onto an empty platform seems to initiate a discourse that involves what Kim Kyung Hyun describes as the tendency to seek an escape from the impurity of the Korean urban landscape within the dangerous belief that beauty can be recovered outside of the ugliness of modernized Seoul (25). Through a dreamlike homecoming, that recovery is what Yang associates with the Yanbian area functioning as a sort of ethnic community of Korea's pre-modernity in the Joseonjok discourse; its occupants the eternal protectors of traditional culture lost in Korea's rapid development into a capitalist nation state. As stated earlier, this discourse's logical end is that Joseonjok, unable to keep pace with Korea's advancements—are ultimately part of the realization of Korean superiority (231).

In his discussion of minority representation in Korean media discourse, Sookyong Kim divides minority groups into two categories: those who can be and those who can't be trusted to contribute to national interests (668). Because *The Yellow Sea* commits itself to a portrait of Korean society where personal interests are so ubiquitously immoral, they become inseparable from national interests. The most important condition of Joseonjok's contribution to Korean national interest, of course, is that they, "stay out of other people's affairs". In this sense, Joseonjok are portrayed as having detrimental effects on national interests. Gunam's voiceless image, broadcast nationwide, as the wrongfully accused murderer of Seung-hyun ultimately poses the risk of exposing Tae-won as adulterer and murderer. After becoming entangled through false accusation and exposure, Gunam's survival in Korea does no more than pose a threat to the private lives of Korean characters,

whose immoral personal interests can perhaps be seen as representative of national interests.

The Yellow Sea, when viewed as a critique of modern Korean society offers an ambivalent position on the morality of the motivations that cause Joseonjok's illegal activity in the country. However, the final dreamlike scene of the film is still is implicative of Korean supremacy discourse that portrays Joseonjok through images transported from the past. As many scholars and Joseonjok themselves argue, the current discourse does little more than distract the public from more pressing issues such as citizenship rights for migrant workers or inclusion of Joseonjok and Korean-Russians to quasi citizen rights. In this sense, *Yellow Sea* is only another layer of distortion which hinders Korea's progress towards becoming a multicultural society.

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