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The Courtesan's Daughter Chunhyang: A Transnational Symbol of Koreanness

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Abstract

This article makes the case for Chunhyang as national myth which has risen to transnational significance through the global popularity of Korean films and television series retelling the legend in the 21st century. I primarily analyze three specific 21st century Korean projects retelling the story of the courtesan's daughter and her secret husband Mongryong. Why is this young woman of a low class so useful to think of in terms of Korean identity? Risking death, she stands up to a powerful official who wants her as a concubine. I argue that meanings shift over time. Early oral versions support the imported Chinese teachings of Confucianism in 14th century Korea emphasizing loyalty and chastity for women. The latest versions have a nationalist interpretation after independence from Japan in 1945, the development of the Korean economy and use of national myths to support an identity as a strong and independent culture.

Keywords: Chunhyang, Korean film, Korean identity, national myths, transnational culture

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article I make the case for Chunhyang as a national Korean myth which in the 21st century has risen to transnational significance through such means as the use of the Chunhyang story in a Japanese *manga* (1992-1994), and the world-wide popularity of *Chunhyang*, a 2000 Korean film directed by Im Kwon-Taek. Unless I specifically mention North Korea, post 1945 Korea refers to South Korea. In both Korea and the rest of East and Southeast Asia popular versions include a contemporary reworking in the 2005 Korean tv series *Sassy Girl Chunhyang*, and the popular 2010 feature film *The Servant*. When one thinks of East Asian national myths which have transcended their national boundaries we often think of somewhat generic, unnamed males such as the Japanese samurai or Chinese Shaolin monks or other martial artists who are well-represented especially in films from Japan, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. To complicate this view, I chose to focus on a named Korean female example told in Korea for over three centuries. Chunhuang is in the lowest class as a courtesan's daughter when her beauty attracts the noble Mongryong. They secretly marry, but while he is away the magistrate imprisons Chunhyang for rejecting his advances to remain loyal to Mongryong. Her loyalty is rewarded when Mongryong returns as a high official, punishes the magistrate, and reunites with Chunhyang. Why has this low class woman been so useful to analyze, criticize, and praise Korean society? What is the appeal of her story and example outside of Korea?

First I present the case for over three centuries of continual use of versions of the Chunhyang story in Korean cultural production, next an overview of Korea's history of subordination to outsiders, and finally three specific 21st century Korean projects: the historical melodrama feature film *Chunhyang* set in the 18th century and directed by Im Kwon-Taek in 2000, the 17 episodes of the television series *Sassy Girl Chunhyang* of 2005 set in contemporary Korea with 18th century framing vignettes at the beginning and end of each episode, and *The Servant* (*Tale of Pangja*) a 2010 romantic film also set in the 18th century telling the story through the experience of Mongryong's servant who falls in love with Chunhyang. I analyze these visual materials as a cultural historian, rather than a film specialist.

Each of these versions has a lot to say about women, gender relations, and class stratification, but, building around these three factors, my primary focus here is on the expression of Koreanness. That is the manipulation of the Chunhyang legend to express a strong, proud and independent Korean identity based on an interpretation of the past and a choice of tradition.

1.1 CHUNHYANG AS KOREAN NATIONAL LEGEND

As the daughter of a courtesan *(kisaeng*) and a *yangban* (a member of the Korean aristocratic class of landlords and officials), Chunhyang (meaning Spring Fragrance) was educated in the arts and poetry, so is more literate than most of her lower-class female contemporaries. Her father had been the governor of her home area of Namwon in southern Korea, but died before her birth. Her class is assigned through her mother, who, however, raised her daughter to think of herself as a noblewoman. By the early Choson Dynasty (1392-1910) when the first oral tales of Chunhyang appeared, Korea's family system was becoming increasingly patriarchal and patrilineal. This was due in part to the patriarchal Chinese law codes used as models in Korea. Choson *yangban* committed themselves to Chinese Confucianism and made conscious efforts to instill such hierarchical Confucian virtues as filial piety, loyalty, and wifely deference. The type of Confucianism advocated was Neo-Confucianism, a stricter form of reinvigorated Confucianism with claims to universal relevance developed in China by the 12th century. Though accepting Neo-Confucianism with its patrilineal teachings, Korea did not go as far as China in the patrilineal direction and maternal kinship mattered, so Chunhyang's class status is determined by her mother's. Especially relevant here are Choson regulations that a man married to a courtesan, or a son of a *yangban* father and a courtesan, could not take the civil service examinations (also imported from China). As in China, only men were allowed to take the exams, and passing them meant wealth and social status through an official career. Lee Mongryong, the governor's son, so a young man of the *yangban* class, falls for Chunhyang, they secretly marry, and he leaves her for three years during which he successfully passes the exams and becomes an official. The age of the young lovers at meeting is usually given as 15. While Mongryong is away, the new governor insists that Chunhyang is a member of the courtesan class so must become his mistress, but she resists and insists on remaining chaste and loyal to her absent husband. In one of the early versions of the tale she is flogged to death, but in the 18th century version on which the 2000 film is based, the husband returns to punish the governor, the king honors Chunhyang's loyalty by raising her to *yangban* status, and love triumphs. There are even versions that continue the story to tell us that the virtuous wife becomes a mother and is blessed with several children, including the all important son.

What was Chunhyang's appeal? This was a love story between two young people, plus in the 18th century version the poor girl marries the prince. At the risk of death, she insists on remaining loyal to her secret husband and stands up to a powerful official who calls her a prostitute. Early Choson versions of the legend seem to support the newly imported Chinese teachings of Confucianism around loyalty and chastity for women. A *yangban* advocate of Confucianism could point to her example and declare that if even a lowly woman could follow these moral teachings, then certainly males of the *yangban* class should be able to. Since Chunhyang began as an oral tale popular among the lower classes, it can also be seen as a critique of *yangban* actions. The courtesan's daughter is a better exemplar of Confucian moral behavior than the governor (who had passed the civil service exams with their Confucian curriculum) who tries to force a married woman to have sex. He is also overtaxing the locals for his own gain. In the 18th century there was the development in southern Korea of local masked dance dramas in which snooty, clueless *yangban* men are always bested by servants and villagers. Such critiques of the lack of social mobility and the high-handed *yangban* were tolerated up to a point by the government as they served as a safety valve for those in the lower classes.

The 20th and 21st century Korean versions, I would argue, are products of a society which is searching for and asserting its own identity. A society which since the late 19th century has tried to remove itself from the shadow of Chinese cultural influence. And more recently suffered under Japanese domination as its colony from 1910-1945. The contemporary manifestations have a nationalist interpretation as Korea has developed a strong economy, and is reinterpreting its national myths to express an identity as a strong and independent culture.

1.2 HISTORY OF THE TALE OF CHUNHYANG

In Choson Korea elite culture was written down, while lower class popular culture was oral. The first evidence for the Chunhyang tale is oral, while the first written version in 1754 was in the Korean scholarly language of Chinese. By the later Choson dynasty, Chunhyang became part of the repertoire of *pansori,* a form of storytelling entertainment consisting of a storyteller who sings and chants tales accompanied by a drummer.

He, occasionally she, only used a fan and a few gestures to set the scene, so could travel around and set up in villages. The storyteller knew some tales usually passed down in an apprenticeship, and, of course, needed an audience to listen, respond and pay.

"The consensus among Korean scholars is that *pansori* originated in the early eighteenth century in Cholla Province in southwestern Korea as an outgrowth of the narrative shaman song." (Kichung Kim 1996, 199-200) Shamanism existed in other East Asian countries, but became a major spiritual force in Korea where it continues to attract adherents today. Most shamans are female, as are their customers. This female centered interpretation of the world, the role, power, and reliance on female shamans calls into question the dominant Confucian patriarchal social framework which requires subordinate women. (Kendall 1985, 4) The *Tale of Chunhyang* as told in *pansori* performance, is similar to the narratives that make up a shaman's *kut* (ritual). Like the masked dance dramas, shamanism, as a female centered realm, can have a subversive effect on society, but since a main goal of the religion is to appease unhappy spirits and restore order in the family and community, the proposed solutions often uphold traditional conservative folk values.

The number of *pansori* works dwindled to six from twelve by the end of the 19th century, and *The Tale of Chunhyang* (*Chunhyangka*) is one of the works still performed today. (Kichung Kim 1996, 201) In the main version of the Chunhyang story the lower class courtesan's daughter remains loyal to her *yangban* husband, and he remains loyal to her so that by the end of the tale he has returned to rescue her from the magistrate and the king rewards her for her loyalty by raising her to *yangban* status. Perhaps because this was romantic if rather improbable in the highly stratified Choson society, "the story of Chunhyang is the most popular and enduring of classical Korean stories." (Kichung Kim 1996, 122)

In addition to oral versions and a *pansori* version of Chunhyang, there are novels, a Western style opera, television dramas, a manga, and, as we will see in a later section, many films. At this point it is necessary to present some of Korea's history as a small country in northeast Asia in order to understand Korea's search for a contemporary identity, and why the Chunhyang tale might be used to express Koreanness both internally and externally.

1.3 KOREAN NATIONAL IDENTITY UNDER THREAT

Though the Koreans often refer to the existence of an independent Korean state and culture existing for more than a millennium, the actual history is of a more fragile identity. Ancient Korean entities accepted ways of thinking from their powerful neighbor China. This included Confucianism, Daoism, Chinese Buddhism, and the Chinese writing system as Korean was only an oral language. Korea was also part of the Chinese tributary system, which meant that to the end of the 19th century the Chinese were responsible for Korea's foreign relations, and the Korean king had to acknowledge the Chinese emperor as overlord. In *Chunhyang* 2000, we see Mongrong in his study surrounded by scrolls of Chinese calligraphy while studying the Confucian classics in classical Chinese (the language of scholarship) in order to pass the civil service examination to become an official. Although in the 15th century Koreans had developed *hangul*, a Korean alphabet for writing Korean, many officials refused to use it and labeled written Korean as "barbaric." (*Nationalism* 217) Only after China was defeated by Japan in 1895 did a majority of Korean officials realize that China was not a good model for modernization and Korea's ability to continue as an independent nation.

Though the Choson king was a tributary of the Chinese emperor, many Korean scholars interpreted Neo-Confucianism not as Chinese, but as a universal ethical system. Because of this emphasis on Chinese and/or universal values, one scholar has asserted that "The task of creating and developing national consciousness and national culture had to come from the lower orders of society, not the king and his high officials." (*Nationalism* 220)

In addition to being a small country attached to the China mainland, Korean territory was coveted by many of its neighbors. Between the 10th to 13th centuries Khitans, Jurchens, and Mongols invaded Korea, and the Japanese tried to invade from 1592 to 1598. Then as they were gearing up for their successful takeover of China, the Manchus invaded in 1627 and 1637. (*Nationalism* 215) With Chinese military assistance, Korea was able to beat back all of these invaders until the 20th century Japanese. As part of their project of modernity and equality with Western nations, the Japanese embarked on colonization. By 1905 the Japanese military controlled much of Korea, annexing it as a colony in 1910. Korea's colonial experience lasted until the defeat of Japan in 1945.

After liberation, Korea became a pawn of the big powers with U.S. control of the south below the 38th parallel, and the U.S.S.R. and China in control of the north. In 1948 Korea was divided into two countries, the Republic of Korea (ROC) in the south, and the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north with both claiming to be the legitimate government of all of Korea. Then in 1950 the north invaded the south and the deadly Korean War ground on to a stalemate in 1953 with the two countries still divided along the 38th parallel. After the Korean War, South Korea was a third world country about the size of Ohio with both U.S. forces and Korean military dictatorships controlling cultural development.

Clearly, Korean culture has a long history of reacting to foreign influence and control, and South Korea has had to craft an identity in opposition to these outsiders. The growth of nationalism has been a dominant trend in both Koreas since the second half of the 20th century. In the 20th century filmmakers have turned to a reading and use of tradition and specific elements of the Korean past to support an assertion of a long and vibrant independent Korean identity.

2. FILM VERSIONS OF CHUNHYANG

Films are a Western invention of mass culture entertainment that grew out of photography, with the first Western films shown in Korea in 1903. Most scholars date the first Korean film to 1923, while the first sound film came out in 1935. It is not surprising that this first sound film was *The Tale of Chunhyang*. (Hyangjin Lee 2001, 20) And it was a film adaptation of the Chunhyang legend that became "a hugely popular feature in 1955 that was credited with reviving the local film industry after the war." (*Seoul Searching* 2007, 5)

By 2015 there had been at least seventeen Korean films based on the Chunhyang story. Hyangjin Lee analyzes five of these films, three post-war films made in South Korea in 1961, 1976, 1987 and two made in North Korea in 1980 and 1985. (Hyangjin Lee 2005, 67) These films were made as the Koreas were trying to modernize as rapidly as possible. Lee asserts that "a nostalgic approach to filial duty, family honour and traditional marriage in the films tells us about the society's need for these values as a frame of reference to shape its present experiences into a meaningful form." (Hyangjin Lee 2005, 69) Lee mentions, but does not analyze Im Kwon-Taek's adaptation of Chunhyang in 2000, which was shown at the Cannes Film Festival, "the first time that a quality Korean film could compete with other international films at this festival." (74) Though interest in historical romance films has waned in South Korea since the 1970s, it is significant that there have been these three adaptations, the tv series in 2005 and *The Servant* in 2010. Not surprisingly Lee finds the attitude toward female sexuality becomes more liberal in South Korean films by 1987 as society changes and the government removes censorship laws.

In the Communist controlled media of North Korea, there is more emphasis on Chunhyang as a socialist realist heroine who works hard at her proletarian job to ensure the victory of the working class in achieving a classless society. Out of about fifteen historical films made in North Korea, three have dealt with the story of Chunhyang – one in 1959 as well as the ones in 1980 and 1985 that Hyangjin Lee analyzes. (Hyangjin Lee 2005, 74) Though support for reunification has waxed and waned, contemporary interest in Chunhyang gives the divided peoples some common ground to appreciate their shared Koreanness, rather than their political divisions.

There are many reasons that Chunhyang is good to think with. It could be viewed as escapist and a safe choice during both the colonial era and the pre-democratic period. Censorship was heavy during this time and rather than appearing to obviously be criticizing the contemporary state and society it might have been thought safer to focus on a historical topic. Chunhyang's predicament at the bottom of society, as a woman and member of the courtesan class, could be used to stand in for anyone in a subordinate position in a hierarchical relationship. In the past these dyadic relationships could include women to men, slave/commoner to *yangban*, official to king. In the 20th century the subordinate relationships could include Koreans to Japanese colonizers, Koreans to world powers, and post 1945 Korean citizens to their authoritarian governments.

Just like Chunhyang, Korea at the end of the Korean War in 1953 was at the bottom of the world's nations. It was small, divided, and without many natural resources. The south was controlled by a government with a strong anti-communist policy, while the north emphasized an anti-capitalist policy with South Korea portrayed as a lackey of the U.S. Both Koreas censored artistic production to support their political ideologies and their claim to be the legitimate government of all of Korea.

2.1 TRANSNATIONAL POPULARITY OF THE CHUNHYANG STORY IN JAPAN

Especially during the last decade of colonization, which lasted from 1910-1945, the Japanese conducted an ultimately unsuccessful policy of cultural annihilation. Richard Kim's novel *Lost Names* gives a compelling overview of these policies including the end of publishing books in Korean, requiring all education to be in the Japanese language with school children performing daily rituals to the emperor, and, finally in 1940, requiring all Koreans to acquire Japanese names. Through their family solidarity the novel's main characters are able to continue speaking Korean and learning about Korean history at home. Since the Japanese government made it clear that they considered the Koreans to have an inferior culture, it is surprising that there was a Japanese language theater production of Chunhyang. In his dissertation, "Empire and Nation," Serk-bae Sue writes that in 1938 a Japanese-language play *Ch'unhyangjon*, based on Korean classical literature, had successful runs in several Japanese cities and performances in Korea. (Cited by Kyung Hyun Kim 2011, 221n1) Since Japan had also accepted Confucianism as a major part of its ideology, the appeal of the loyal wife is understandable. From the Meiji on there was an emphasis on loyalty to the emperor as the highest value; higher than the overarching value of humaneness and even filial duty in traditional Confucianism. The first Korean sound film mentioned above and made in 1935, *The Tale of Ch'ungyang*, was financed by the Japanese. (Hyangjin Lee 2001, 20)

In her recent article, Nayoung Kwon has assembled some fascinating material to analyze the different interpretations of the Koreans and the Japanese on the meaning of the Japanese language performance of Chunhyang in 1938. She states that "Ironically, imperialist [Japanese] desires for colonial kitsch and nationalist [Korean] desires for a national tradition converged on the same object of desire for contending purposes." (Kwon 2014, 137) The Japanese purpose was more about answering consumer demand for exotic, somewhat primitive colonial Koreanness, while Koreans involved chose this particular story from their tradition to represent their continuing culture in spite of the absence of an independent nation. In a statement equating modernity with Japan, the Japanese director expressed his intent "of severing an essentialized and stagnant notion of 'Koreanness' as content from the dynamic formal level of modern Japan (symbolized by *kabuki* mixed with modern theater)." (Kwon 2014, 129) The Japanese production not only used *kabuki* techniques, but had a female actress play the role of the young hero Mongryong because, according to the director, he wanted to portray his sensitivity. In her analysis of this Kwon finds that "What needs to be artificially staged here is not gender as constructed – but rather colonized race as gendered – the Korean male as effeminized." (Kwon 2014, 130) This assertion of gendered hierarchies of empire and the ethnic other as female agrees with much postcolonial analysis and literature in which the weakness of males and the ravages of the female body stand in for the colonized nation.

Almost a half century after the fall of the Japanese empire at the end of World War II, the Japanese female collective Clamp published three episodes from 1992 to 1994 in a manga version entitled *Legend of Chun Hyang*. The book collecting these three stories is labeled volume one, so there seems to have been a plan to publish more. Except for the setting in Namwon in Chosen dynasty Korea, the stories are very different from the traditional Korean ones. The following are my summaries from the English translation of this volume. Story one features Chunhyang as a 14 year old skilled in martial arts whose mother is a shaman and medicine woman (*mudang*). Mongrong appears and stays with Chunhyang and her mother. The magistrate's son kidnaps the mother who casts spells on the magistrate as he tries to rape her. Then the mother stabs herself and dies. This seems to be a nod to the chastity knives Choson women were encouraged to carry and use if they were in danger of being violated. Mongrong reveals that he is an important official, and allows Chunhyang to exact revenge on the magistrate. Mongrong and Chunhyang leave on his travels together, though there does not seem to be a romance between them.

In their travels in story two they come across a town that has not had rain in a year. Two young shamans have been summoned by an elderly shaman to help bring rain. The young shamans dance, but a male shaman kills one, and the other commits suicide. Mongrong uses his magic to summon a tiger that he and Chunhyang ride into the palace, occupied by a female *yangban* and her male shaman. Mongrong kills the shaman, and tells the *yangban* to await punishment from the king. The rains come so that the water flowers will grow again. This is the main crop of the people, but the evil *yangban* had cornered the market by having rain fall only on the palace garden. Again there is no romance between the two and Chunhyang often calls Mongrong stupid. In a comic element Mongrong loves to eat and samples many local delicacies in their travels. As in the traditional Chunhyang story there is sympathy for lower working class people. Through its many shaman characters, there is resonance with the supposed beginnings of the Chunhyang story in a shamanistic ritual (*kut*).

Story three takes place in Chunhyang's home village of Namwon when she is 6, 8 years before Mongrong arrives there. Chunhyang fights the security forces and the young son of the *yangban*, accusing him of keeping a public field for himself instead of letting all the local children play there. Chunhyang plays on the swing, which is an iconic moment portrayed in written and filmed versions, such as in an early scene in Im's *Chunhyang* (2000). She muses that the field is important to her mother who met Chunhyang's father there; he died before Chunhyang was born. She remembers her mother told her to shop for dinner, jumps out of the swing and runs away. The children say that the *yangban's* son picks on her more than the other children – and that must mean he likes her! The *yangban's* son gets his father to take the field away from the children, but he invites Chunhyang to play there. She is sad and apologizes to the children for angering the *yangban's* son. She apologizes to her mother for losing the field where she met Chunhyang's father. The mother thinks to herself that Chunhyang is becoming more like her father and that one day she will tell her all about him.

This Japanese manga collection starts from the legendary Chunhyang as a paragon of Confucian virtue, but unlike the traditional Korean version in which her greatest virtues are chastity and wifely loyalty, here she is portrayed as a filial child (another Confucian virtue), a martial artist, a defender of the weak, and a platonic travel companion to Mongryong.

2.2 ANALYSIS OF THE 2000 FILM

New Korean Cinema makes the case for a new period of cinema beginning in Korea from 1992. The introduction states "...this volume takes the transition away from military rule *circa* 1992 as the 'break' around which perceptions of contemporary Korean cinema's vitality and newness are structured." (Stringer 2005, 6) In South Korea this meant more freedom and less government censorship of films. There was also a shift in the training of directors who are now mostly university educated, while older directors came up through an apprenticeship system. Another shift in the post-1992 film world was that the Seoul government embarked on a globalization drive which pushed very hard to try to encourage a favorable reception and payment for Korean cultural products abroad. (Jeeyoung Shin 2005, 51-52)

The director of *Chunhyang* 2000, Im Kwon-Taek was born in 1936 and had already directed over 90 films before *Chunhyang*. He is not one of the new university educated directors, but has been able to adapt and continues to direct films that are well-received. Sherman Hollar writes that Im Kwon-Taek has been "dubbed 'the father of Korean cinema' because of his long prolific career and his emphasis on Korean subjects and themes." As Korea continued to modernize Im turned more to topics from Korean history and culture in his films. He has stated that there is something precious in Korean tradition and it still has relevance for Koreans today. Im has raised the profile of Korean film abroad as *Chunhyang* was the first Korean film performed at the Cannes Film Festival. Though the film did not do very well at the box office in Korea, after Cannes, many foreign theaters booked the film. In 2002 Im was the first Korean chosen as best director at Cannes for his film *Chihwaseon* (*Painted Fire*), the story of a 19th century Korean painter. (Hollar)

In *Chunhyang* as in a very popular earlier film, Im uses *pansori*, the genre of Korean musical storytelling made up of a narrator/singer and a drummer discussed earlier. The film uses the device of the *pansori* performance of the story of *Chunhyang*. At the beginning and end of the film we see the two *pansori* performers, and during the film they often narrate the action. This film appeals most to a reworking of the Korean past to present both past elite and mass culture as aesthetically pleasing and very Korean. The point is to honor the Korean past, but also, according to Im, to mourn the passing of so much of this culture from present day consumer oriented culture in South Korea. South Korea is now mostly an urban culture, and many urbanites are nostalgic about the countryside. This film's photography makes it appear as if the countryside is both beautiful and vast. The physical settings are monumental buildings of traditional architecture, and the interiors of the houses are spare but decorated with beautiful art which makes everyday life look appealing. What is distinctly Choson Korean in the film? Certainly the clothing (in particular the Hanbok, the traditional floor length gown), the way in which the characters sit on the floor for most inside activities, the food, architecture, and the *pansori* accompaniment are recognizably Korean. There is beauty portrayed here in scenery, dress, architecture, material culture, and daily rituals.

Early in the film Mongryong escapes from his books to ride out and sightsee. There are other travelers in a pavilion where they stop for lunch. This includes an older *yangban* with an elegantly dressed courtesan. Mongryong's two servants open up a stunning wooden chest with metal fittings and pull out drawers of precisely arranged food and set up porcelain bottles and cups for rice wine. The three sit on the floor for their elegant picnic, and, departing from usual etiquette, Mongryong invites his servants to drink a toast with him, but follows hierarchy by having the older servant drink first.

Right after this scene several young women dressed in elegant silk Hanboks gather around a swing, and soon Chunhyang stands on the swing and flies back and forth against the blue sky and green trees. Mongryong sees Chunhyang and is instantly attracted to her beauty and vitality. The *pansori* singer narrates, making clear that Chunhyang on the swing is part of the earliest versions of the tale. Every film and television adaptation I have seen includes Chunhyang on the swing as our as well as Mongryong's first look at her. This alerts those knowledgeable of Korean traditional etiquette that she is either very young (the film states she is 15 so not young enough), or, not of elite status as elite girls were expected to be hidden away inside their homes at puberty. The servant Pangja reluctantly identifies her in answer to Mongryong's query, and Mongryong states, "A courtesan's daughter. This is good. Bring her here!" His words make his assumption clear that a daughter of a courtesan, unlike a young woman of his own *yangban* class, will be sexually available to him. Chunhyang refuses to see Mongryong and he finally goes to her house. She agrees to sleep with him, but only after he marries her and writes out a declaration in calligraphy on her gown swearing that they are one and that he will never abandon her. A courtesan had no call on the loyalty of her clients, and could be left at any time. There are many lovely scenes of the unknown young actors getting to know one another during their brief time together. The advertisement for the film, shown here, shows Chunhyang playing the zither with Mongryong embracing her.

This is a beautiful film with many elements that appeal to the senses both visually and aurally.

One aspect I especially enjoyed in *Chunhyang* was the portrayal of nature. The film reminds me of a Chinese handscroll, with commentary from the pansori singer, in which the landscape is gradually opened out to reveal the painting. When the camera panned over the landscape it was very reminiscent of how one slowly rolls out and appreciates a handscroll. The film often seems to be made up of static art forms. Nature is an important component, and as in Chinese landscape painting the humans are shown as one small part of the landscape that must fit in rather than overwhelming the natural world. These are traits influenced by Daoism, and through Daoism's influence on its orientation, Zen (Korean Son) Buddhism. Both of these ways of thinking influenced traditional Korean culture. Landscape painting began as a Chinese art form, but was accepted and developed in Korea to become a Korean art form.

Im's film *Chunhyang* emphasizes the beauty of traditional Korean culture. It was important to the prestige of the Korean film industry and soft power when it was the first Korean film selected for the Cannes Festival, won four international film awards, was nominated for two more, and as a result was distributed in several Western countries. The box office in Korea, however, was disappointing as it was more of an art house film rather than a popular romance. Jeeyoung Shin writes about this that "…while those films aestheticizing 'traditional' Korean culture have attracted Western audiences, a majority of Korean films marketed in East Asia, including in Korea, tend to foreground a sense of Asian modernity rooted in hybrid culture." (Jeeyoung Shin 2005, 56)

2.3 ANALYSIS OF THE 2005 TELEVISION DRAMA

This sense of Korean modernity is definitely the orientation and appeal of the 2005 television drama *Sassy Girl Chunhyang* set in 21st century urban, consumer driven South Korea with vignettes at the beginning and end of episodes with the actors dressed in traditional Choson attire.

Sassy Girl Chunhyang is a seventeen episode television adaptation of the Chunhyang story directed by Ji Byeong-hyeon and aired in 2005. In addition to trading on the popularity of the traditional tale, this version also benefitted from the popularity of the 2001 film, *My Sassy Girl*, directed by Kwak Jae-yong. In this film a young woman humiliates and brow-beats a male college student. This actually happened to the author of the screenplay, who first wrote about his experiences on the internet. He received such a positive response that he wrote the script and got it accepted. The film was a mega hit throughout East and Southeast Asia, and in 2008 was remade in the U.S. and in Japan. In 2001 it was the second best-selling film in Korea, which included a list of six Korean and four U.S. films. http://www.koreanfilm.org/kfilm01.html *Sassy Girl Chunhyang* taps into the popularity of a quirky, bossy and at times mean young woman as in *My Sassy Girl*. This definitely speaks to a changing social construction of femininity. As in earlier versions, Mongryong is smitten first, but when Chunhyang accepts she is not pliant, ordering him around. The image on the left below shows the rather hen-pecked nature of their relationship. The one on the right is a more romantic view used in advertising the film. Koreans immediately recognize the ages presented as both actors are in high school uniforms in the photos.

Mongryong is a troublemaker who has been kicked out of several schools for fighting. Rather than a *yangban* magistrate, his father is a police chief who is transferred to Namwon. Chunhyang's mother is not a courtesan, but a widowed, irresponsible and poorly paid cabaret singer. Chunhyang acts as the parent, and has many part time jobs to pay her school fees and household expenses, while Mongryong is portrayed as a higher class, irresponsible only child and pampered son. The mothers do not come off too well. At the beginning of the film we see one of Chunhyang's many money-making ventures when she is dressed as the Choson dynasty Chunhyang posing for pictures with tourists at the Namwon memorial to *The Tale of Chunhyang*. This is illegal and she is chased away by guards. Later she returns to the memorial but in order not to pay the entrance fee she leaps over the wall in one of a few scenes with martial arts' tricks. Mongryong is visiting the memorial and taking cell phone pictures. When Chunhyang leaps over the wall he inadvertently takes photos up her skirt. After she sees them, she angrily breaks his phone. He takes her phone and jumps in a taxi. So their first meeting and reasons to continue to meet are because of technology. The 2005 world is a modern, technologically enhanced one with cell phones, computers, cars, and lots of colorful teenage fashions. It shows a modernized, consumer driven world that shocked North Korean defectors when they watched Korean television in China. (Demick 2010)

The two meet again as Mongryong attends Chunhyang's school, where she is ranked #1 while his rank is #280 out of 300. Chunhyang gets sick after falling out of a boat at yet another job because Mongryong was teasing her. She spends the weekend in bed while her mother travels to a singing job. Mongryong joins a couple friends to visit Chunhyang, gets bored when Chunhyang sleeps and the friends play video games, opens the refrigerator to find a drink, and drinks a large bottle of "juice," which is the mother's homemade wine. The friends leave, assuming that Mongryong has gone home but he is passed out.

When he gets cold he crawls under the quilt with Chunhyang. They are discovered by the mother in the morning, and though nothing sexual has occurred word gets out at school that they have slept together. To avoid a scandal the parents decide that the two should get married, and live in separate bedrooms in Mongryong's house. The young people finally agree to this. Chunhyang becomes a good influence on Mongryong and forces him to study so that he will have a chance to go to university. She wins over her father-in-law who becomes a big supporter. In 21st century Korea both boys and girls are involved in the high stakes university entrance exam, which like the historical civil service exam emphasizes memorization. Although Korea is still a patriarchal society, women have more opportunities to get an education, though most middle class women quit their jobs after marriage and their first child.

The evil magistrate is here the head of a film production company. He is infatuated with Chunhyang who is at least a decade younger. He finds her refreshing and spontaneous, and supports her in starting her own jewelry design business. He seems to have incriminating evidence on Mongryong, so in order to keep him from hurting Mongryong, she divorces him. The marriage has not been a real one, but all concerned have thought it would become a real marriage at some point. After many twists and turns love wins out in the end. There is even a happy ending for the film producer who is engaged to Mongryong's childhood sweetheart who has also worked to break up Chunhyang and Mongryong for most of the series.

The television series shows many aspects of actual life in contemporary Korea. They wear clothing with Disney characters, one character wears a Boston Red Sox jacket. There are also traditional elements. The younger characters bow to their parents and elders, they visit the grave of Chunhyang's father and perform traditional rituals, and at the end of the film there are two wedding ceremonies. The first is in a church with the couple in a white wedding dress and a Western suit. Then, as is typical in Korean weddings today, at the end of the series we see the couple dressed in Korean Hanboks with lucky red circles pasted on the bride's face.

At the end of *Sassy Girl Chunhyang* both main characters have found a way to enter or stay in the middle class. Through her hard work and talent Chunhyang has become an artisan and successful business owner. Education, not noble birth, is the new class marker in contemporary Korea. Chunhyang has pulled herself into the middle class since she was admitted to university, though could not afford to attend, but still plans to study, perhaps abroad, and is self-supporting. When she tells Mongryong that she is thinking of going abroad, he remarks that she can do that after they marry and she has three children. At the end then there is still a fairly conventional view of a woman's role in society. Mongryong gets into university off the waiting list, his parents pay his tuition, and he becomes a lawyer and district attorney. After high school both main characters move to Seoul, but there is no mention of Mongryong's compulsory military service, or living near a nuclear armed North Korea. Both young men and women spend much of their free time consuming: clothes shopping, eating out, and drinking alcohol. As young, urban and middle class Koreans, they have similar interests and goals to the audiences for Korean film and television in Tokyo, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. The view of Koreanness that the series presents is of a modern, fairly egalitarian society, which still practices certain traditional values – a hybrid culture. This is a Koreanness that exudes self-confidence as an equal, or even a cultural leader, among nations.

2.4 ANALYSIS OF THE 2010 FILM

The final example is the 2010 feature film *The Servant* or *The Tale of Pangja*. This film tells the Chunhyang tale from the point of view of Mongryong's servant, Pangja, who enters into a sexual relationship with Chunhyang. (The 2007 two-episode television drama *The Story of Hyangdan* is a retelling of the Chunhyang story in which her maid, Hyangdan, attracts the love of Mongryong.) *The Servant* references an alternate mass culture to build a view of a Korean past. It has less emphasis on aesthetics, for example it does not include the use of *pansori* to accompany and narrate, or the sweeping views of the Korean countryside as in *Chunhyang*. *Chunhyang* was not on the bestseller list in Korea, while *The Servant* was 6th on the Korean and 8th on the all films list for 2010 (a combination of Korean and U.S. films). http://www.koreanfilm.org/kfilm01.html *The Servant* spends more time letting the characters speak, in fact in flashbacks the servant, Pangja, is telling his story to a famous novelist so that the novelist can write it. The director seems to be like the novelist, writing a new version of an old Korean story which will be useful in the 21st century. But the director is also like Pangja because it is Pangja who is deciding how the story should be told. Pangja tells the writer the details of the story, including how Mongryong tried to drown Chunhyang because she insists that Pangja travel with them although Mongryong knows of their affair. Pangja saved her and carried her away and hid her from Mongryong for years. At the end of the film Pangja brings the writer to his house where he meets Chunhyang. Her brain was damaged in the attempted drowning, and she is now child-like and Pangja takes care of her. But rather than having the writer give the true ending to their tale, Pangja insists that the story must state that Chunhyang remained faithful to Mongryong, and that he came back after passing his exams and saved her from the licentious magistrate, and the two lived a long happy married life together.

This version has more emphasis on *han*, that is the enduring Korean emphasis on suffering over a long period of time. By focusing on a romance between a servant and a courtesan, the film creates a different view of the past, in which the have nots of society were shown as human beings with desires and agency. When over 30% of the population to the end of the 19th century were slaves, this seems like an important reworking of the Korean past.

Chunhyang here is a sexually active woman who does not let oppression stand in the way of her sexuality. Courtesans in the Choson period were looked down on and rarely able to attain the social status of becoming good wives and mothers. When Chunhyang makes love with Pangja for the first time she states that they are of the same status, so nothing will change for them. She ends up loving him and enjoying a physical relationship with him, but is also practical and wants to improve her social standing by getting the *yangban* Mongryong to marry her. This Chunhyang is a lot more calculating than the young teenager in Im's film. This is a rereading of the life of a courtesan who was to provide physical pleasure for men, but not expected to be able to marry and have a family.

3. CHUNHYANG AS TRANSNATIONAL SYMBOL OF KOREANNESS

Korean film and popular culture enjoyed a surge in popularity around Asia in the decade until 2005. Since then the popularity of Korean film has slowed, but there is still much interest in Korean pop groups and television. Korean film audiences are mainly young and middle class just like in Tokyo, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong so there are similar interests of pan-Asian audiences. (*Seoul Searching* 2007, 91)

If the three main 21st Century examples analyzed here, the 17 episode television drama *Sassy Girl Chunhyang* attracted the widest transnational audience. This series received high ratings in Korea, but was also aired in Taiwan, the Philippines, Japan, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. An Indonesian remake of the story was aired in 2006-2007. There are several versions of the Korean series on Youtube with subtitles in English and Indonesian. I watched the 17 episodes on a site called DramaFever which provides subtitles in English. One can subscribe for a monthly fee or watch for free with frequent interruptions of the programs with advertisements in English for U.S. products. Since these advertisers paid to be on this site they clearly thought that Korean television would attract enough of a transnational audience to make it worth their while.

In this article I have engaged readings of three media adaptations of the Korean legend of Chunhyang. I have shown that Chunhyang continues to be a potent national symbol in Korea for developing interpretations of Koreanness. Because of the advanced production values and the creativity of Korean popular culture, these media adaptations of the story of Chunhyang have attained status as a transnational symbol of Koreanness in Western capitals and throughout Asia.

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