

The reemerging figure of the Empress from burning flames symbolize for the viewer that the queen *lives*; the production concludes that the queen, the good Mother, has been sacrificed so that “we” may live on. Under such a holy icon, the people should unite and dream of the eternal Korea. By visualizing the reincarnating figure of the queen, the ending graphically illustrates how her ghost remains eternal and how the nation regenerates under such a presence.

To be sure, the theme of the queen’s reincarnation is hinted at throughout the video. As it begins, viewers encounter a portrait of Empress Myöngsöng (Figure 4).



Figure. 4. A portrait shown at the opening of the music video, which reads “Empress Myöngsöng.” The dates imply that the Empress (who actually died in 1895) has been reborn with this production (2001).

On the portrait, a caption in Chinese characters reads “Myöngsöng Hwanghu (Empress Myöngsöng)” in bold, red letters. Above the letters a date, “1896-01,” suggests that the queen was re-born in 1896, even though she was assassinated in 1895; the year given for her death, 2001, is the date of the video’s release. This reconstructed timeline indicates that this video production has conjured up and re-imagined both the queen’s death and post-death, according to the underlying idea that the queen is a source of (regeneration) reincarnation, survives despite her historical date of death, and still exists in her people’s minds. Nonetheless, despite this representation of the queen as a source of her country’s

regeneration, her figure is tightly bound within a characterization of the grieving, sacrificed woman.

On one level, the video remolds her figure into a grieving spirit, the disquieted un-dead. In the closing scene, the queen's solemn, grim narration is voiced over the visualization, via still camera, of her figure re-emerging from the leaping flames: "I am the Mother of Chosŏn. Although my body burned down to ashes, roaming around the earth, lonely, through winds and rain—how can one say this is the end of me?" The final caption, noted above, attempts to stimulate domestic viewers' hope and desire to regain the nation's strengths and to leap into the status of a world-class nation—under the fanciful, beautiful image of the ill-fated, sacrificed, grieving mother of Chosŏn.

DEATH PERFORMANCE #3:

KANG WOO-SUK (KANG U-SŎK)'S *HANBANDO* (KOREAN PENINSULA)

If Empress Myŏngsŏng as visualized in *The Lost Empire* is analogous to the traditional image of pure, pathetic, ethereal womanhood, the empress dramatized in *Hanbando* (played by Kang Su-yeon) is closer to a figure of a loyal warrior who grandly sacrifices her life for her country. I suggest that director Kang Woo-suk's nationalistic intention of reclaiming Korea's once-failed history results in an overemphasis upon Empress Myŏngsŏng as the heroic signifier of Korea. Here, the spectacle of the Empress' grand death performance has been recreated so that viewers may see her vivid, sublime martyrdom being conflated with the Korean national body. However, women are not actually present behind the film's grotesque representation of the Empress: in this particular scene, dressed up in extravagant royal attire, her body is invoked through the process of re-masculinization and the desire for national development. Through the ambivalently presentation of the body of the Empress (both as a woman and a warrior), the male characters in *Hanbando* mend their ruined history and pursue their patriotic dream of Korea's success and re-unification. The idealized feminine, symbolized by the figure of Empress, merely accommodates and nurtures the projection of this "masculine" version of femininity, or "patriarchy in drag" (Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 77). This nationalistically expressed theme is synonymous with legitimization of the extremely

macho production style.

In order to succeed as a “Korean-style blockbuster,” *Hanbando* attempts to recreate or even fantasize historical traumas (Kang Woo-suk, Interview).⁸ In this case, the director juxtaposes a century-old incident (the Japanese assassination of Queen Min and the fall of Chosŏn) onto an imaginary present where Japan anxiously interferes with South Korea’s imminent re-unification. The fictional plot centers on a Japanese governmental claim to North and South Korea, starting with the rights to the newly constructed railway between Seoul and Sinŭiju (a northern city in North Korea), supposedly granted by Kojong, the last king of the Chosŏn dynasty, in a hundred-year-old contract. When the South Korean president (played by Ahn Sung-ki (Ahn Sŏng-gi)) refuses to comply, Japan threatens (another) takeover. To resolve the situation, the president hires historian Ch’oe Min-jae (a poor, unemployed scholar who has nothing but his passionate commitment to Korean history, played by Cho Chae-hyŏn) to search for Kojong’s true Imperial Seal (apparently Kojong had a fake seal made for all documents pertaining to Japanese-Korean relations, which would of course void the 1905 Protectorate Treaty that resulted in Japan’s annexation of Korea). Eventually this situation evolves into a replication of Kojong’s dilemma as the modern-day Korean president faces a potential international conflict as well as a challenge from his prime minister (played by Moon Sung-keun (Mun Sŏng-gŭn)), who is characterized as a Devil’s advocate in contrast to the firmly nationalist president.

This film attempts to rebuild a sense of Koreanness as well as to concretize the theme of national solidarity via the queen’s death performance, in which she wears highly formalized traditional attire (Figure 5).

⁸ In an interview, director Kang mentions that filmic representation of historical traumas is essential for producing a successful “Korean-style Blockbuster” because it resorts to “uniquely Korean sentiment” that grabs people’s attention.



Figure. 5. Empress Myöngsöng (Kang Su-yeon (Kang Su-yön)) in her traditional royal attire.

In the previous sequence, she has commanded one of her servants to prepare the royal attire[taeraebok], which foreshadows her approaching death. Here the queen's character has been dramatically molded so that she could resemble a figure of warrior, commanding an aide to fetch her armor as she prepares for death. Indeed, with some use of extreme long shots, the camera emphasizes the overall suspense while it captures the queen marching toward her enemies and delivering her final tribute to the king (Figure 6)



Figure.6. The Empress leaves her last words to the king and performs her death before her assassins and her people in the film *Hanbando*.

Bowing formally, kneeling down in the middle of the palace courtyard, the queen addresses King Kojong (held inside his own quarters):

Your Majesty! I cannot continue assisting you, please condone such disloyalty!

However, you must not forget.....who the real owner of this land is, who will be living in this land, a hundred, two hundred years later. Although we seem to fail right now...you must remember...this land is not fated to be violated by these thieves! As the Mother of this country, I am dying by the hands of these thieves called Japan! Do not forget, my blood, shed by the Japan's evil sheath, has been spilt in this courtyard...Your Majesty, please do make my blood worthwhile....(the Japanese assassins stab the queen and she dies bleeding). (Kim, 82-85)

This monologue illustrates how the film participates in visualizing a sublime virtue of the national tradition out of the queen's performance as her presence is maximized by her royal ceremonial attire (Figure 5). Rather than disguised as one of her servants, she wears both the gigantic headpiece and a bright, extravagant-looking costume used for special occasions. Such extreme Korean royal decor, visualized through the queen, functions as a fetish object. The extravagant visuality of the Empress, together with her solemn death ritual (strongly rooted in her patriotic faith) remotely compensate for the experienced/imagined emasculation of "Chosŏn."

CONCLUSION

Since the musical's premiere, the specter of Empress Myŏngsŏng has been repeatedly shaped and reshaped by various South Korean media outlets. Similar to the way the musical's epilogue stages the ghost of the Empress, such productions prominently represent her as an oracle-figure mediating the nation's tragic past and its present-future. Two additional points remain in these analyses of how the Empress's death as it is shown in these cultural products illuminates South Korean society's transformation into the global arena.

First, the emblem of Empress Myōngsōng, as a character, promises her national subjects a successful future in this global era, a phenomenon resulting from her appeal to Korean public fantasy and global desire, combined with the sense of nationalism and Korean identity her figure imparts. Media representations of Queen Min in the moment of her tragic death are repeated as fantasy versions of historical trauma, aimed to appeal to domestic audiences. The Empress' presence during the finale evokes and accommodates South Korean audiences' anxiety and desire to be a world-class nation. The spectacle of her wounded, martyred self is meant to call for national solidarity. The ghost of the nation's Mother repeatedly reassures her people (and contemporary domestic viewers) that they have overcome their nation's traumatic past, and thereby guides them to the present-future where they can dream of immortality as they long for and fantasize about a unified nation. At the same time, the mutilation of the Empress is implicitly used cathartically, as psychological release through which Korean audiences purge the fear and guilt they bear from collective historical memory.

Second, these spectacles of regicide survive as the Empress' self-sacrificing image, circulating through different cultural venues. Specifically, these popular media texts reproduce the double strategy of simultaneously erasing and elevating the feminine associated with the spectacle: even as the scenes discussed here retrieve the daring, bold, proactive image of the Empress, they also mythologize images of self-sacrificing, pure, ethereal womanhood. Similarly, out of the Empress' female body, these productions also invent and solidify the sublime beauty of the national tradition. This iconic image of female self-sacrifice is assimilated into a symbol of South Korea's struggle for survival in the global era.

Relying upon a conflation of the patriotic, martyred image of the Empress and that of the national body, South Korea's nationally expressed desire for global advancement is redeemed as a progress equally pure and honorable. However, as the Empress faces her death in these spectacles, she is dramatized to reenact the image of glorious, self-sacrificing womanhood, intended to elevate her death on an emblematic level. In other words, the scenes apparently keep emphasizing that her death was solely her own,

gloriously made through her own choice. However, as such scenes tragically repeat one of the only heroic gestures allotted to feminine virtue, these dramatizations actually render the queen's death not the consequence of her own choice but one that is imposed upon her.

The ghost of Empress Myōngsōng remains undead, undergoing various forms and styles of death-performances enacted by the popular media: the ghost of the Empress disappears from our sight in order to reenter the spectacle. Both as a historical figure and a fictional representation, she “disappears only to hover; [she] promises or threatens to reappear, albeit in another shape or form [...] she stems from the way performances tap into public fantasies and leave a trace, reproducing and times altering cultural repertoires” (Taylor, *The Archive*, 143-44).

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