

## ROYAL RAGE: *THE FATAL ENCOUNTER* (*YŏNGNIN* 逆鱗) AS A HISTORICAL FILM

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This article evaluates *The Fatal Encounter* (*Yŏngnin* 逆鱗) as a historical film. Drawing on the work of Robert A. Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin, it asks whether or not the film offers a historical interpretation and examines its use of artistic license. It concludes the film is a work of history that engages with historical sources and data, offers a narrative interpretation, and engages in what Rosenstone has termed “true invention.” The exercise of dramatic license is acceptable for a film of this type, the big-budget blockbuster, and it remains in the realm of history, unlike works of “faction” such as *Roaring Currents* (*Myŏngnyang*) or costume dramas such as Zhang Yimou’s *Hero*. The article compares *The Fatal Encounter* to *Roaring Currents* in order to highlight the differences between a historical film and a work of faction apart from the films’ respective merits as works of art. Within the limitations of its format, *The Fatal Encounter* presents a reasonably authentic view of its historical setting and offers an interpretation that includes aspects of history not typically presented in popular works of Korean history.

Keywords: *The Fatal Encounter*, *Roaring Currents*, Chŏngjo, historical film

Can film serve as history? Can a film serve historical functions that other forms of historical presentation—scholarly monographs, articles, lectures, museum exhibits—cannot? This article examines 2014’s *The Fatal Encounter* (*Yŏngnin* 逆鱗) (dir. Lee Jae-Kyoo) as a historical film. Focusing mainly on the portrayal of King Chŏngjo (r. 1776–1800), it evaluates the film as history according to the criteria set out by Robert A. Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin: Does the film communicate a feeling for a different time and place? Does it offer a historical interpretation? Or does it take advantage of artistic license to the extent that it is not a historical film but a work of “faction” that freely mixes fact and fiction, or a costume drama that uses a “historical” backdrop to tell a completely unhistorical

tale? The article evaluates *The Fatal Encounter* with a comparative angle, building on Kim Kyu Hyun's analysis of another blockbuster historical film released the same year, *Roaring Currents* (*Myöngnyang*) (dir. Kim Han-min). It concludes that, while both films are artistically and esthetically successful as blockbusters, *The Fatal Encounter* belongs to the realm of history, while *Roaring Currents* does not. It then discusses how a good historical film like *The Fatal Encounter* can serve as a useful tool that both makes history more meaningful and is itself made more meaningful as part of a larger effort to do history.

## 1. THE HISTORICAL FILM

Bruno Ramirez has noted that there is no consensus, either in history or in film studies, on the best methodological approach to historical film.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is not even clear that either discipline accepts that there is such a thing as a historical film. The most extreme historical approach is radically skeptical that anything in film, especially blockbuster films on the Hollywood model, can be considered historical. This is the approach of a number of essays written by historians in the collected volumes *Tudors and Stuarts on Film* and *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. As an example, Christopher Haigh, in his chapter from *Tudors and Stuarts on Film* on Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998), calls the movie "great drama, but poor history" that is more concerned with appealing to contemporary audiences than in trying to portray history accurately.<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to the same volume, Thomas S. Freeman quotes Simon Schama to lambast makers of historical films for getting right "pedantically correct costume-and-décor detail" but missing "the dramatic core" and "true feeling for the period"; that is, getting sets and costumes accurate but showing people thinking and acting in anachronistic ways. Freeman himself criticizes filmmakers for touting the historical accuracy of their films until that accuracy is challenged, at which point they invoke artistic license to excuse the liberties they take with the facts.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 2014), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Haigh, "Kapur's *Elizabeth*," in *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives*, eds. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 134.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas S. Freeman, "Introduction," in *Tudors and Stuarts on Film*, *ibid.*, 5–13.

Freeman had in mind filmmakers such as Zack Snyder, who in the course of a single interview said that his film *300* (2006) was “90 percent accurate” and that he had “shown the movie to world-class historians...[who] can’t believe it’s as accurate as it is,” while also saying the film is “more like an opera than a drama. That’s what I say when people say it’s historically inaccurate.”<sup>4</sup> Freeman argues that it is not pedantic to assess the historical accuracy of films that are mere “entertainment” because they have an impact on how people, who expect historical films to get their facts right, understand history,<sup>5</sup> and so it is historians’ duty to call out the non-historical aspects of popular films that represent themselves as historical. Greg Dening notes that some critics of later film versions of the mutiny on HMS *Bounty* lambasted those versions for historical inaccuracy when they failed to include certain details invented by the older 1935 film! In that sense, then, fiction had become history for the film-going public. As for the 1935 version itself, Dening notes that its creator proclaimed that being historically accurate “might have confused the issue.” Echoing Freeman, Dening laments that historical accuracy is “a prop man’s concern rather than a script-writer’s.”<sup>6</sup> Bettina Bildhauer agrees that accuracy is reflected in clothes, weapons, and architecture rather than “an accurate portrayal of the mentality, human behavior and world view of the time.”<sup>7</sup> John Aberth laments that major feature films, those that are widely seen, are the abusers of history while “[t]his sad fate of worthy historical films—to fade away into oblivion until they are rediscovered by film historians—seems destined to continue.”<sup>8</sup>

At the opposite end of the spectrum sits Robert A. Rosenstone, perhaps the historian most engaged with film criticism and supportive of film as history, including major studio films. For Rosenstone, film is another way of doing history, neither better nor worse than professional scholarly writing of history, with its own strengths and weaknesses. Thus, for him, historians who criticize film for being unable to replicate scholarly historical writing are off the mark. Film is not empirical, as a scholarly monograph is, but a historical vision that “give[s] a context of meaning to data,” and so the historical film’s success “has little to do with how the screen conveys data [as compared with a monograph] and everything to do with how well films create and interpret a meaningful and useful

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in “300 Trivia, Albino Giants, Sequel Chances—and Sienna Miller,” accessed April 12, 2016. <http://www.mtv.com/news/1554534/300-trivia-albino-giants-sequel-chances-and-sienna-miller/>

<sup>5</sup> Freeman, “Introduction,” in *Tudors and Stuarts on Film*, *ibid.*, 5–13.

<sup>6</sup> Greg Dening, “Mutiny on the Bounty,” in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, eds. Mark C. Carnes, et al. (New York: H. Holt, 1996), 100.

<sup>7</sup> Bettina Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 20.

<sup>8</sup> John Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 302.

history, how adequately they embody its ongoing issues and insert themselves into the ideas and debates surrounding a historical topic.”<sup>9</sup> Films, therefore, must not be judged as if they were scholarly monographs rendered in visual form but as dramatic works or visual metaphors. As Rosenstone points out, both historical films and written history are interpretive, in that they use facts to create history, “a text that attempts to explain vanished people, events, moments, and movements to us in the present.”<sup>10</sup> Robert Brent Toplin concurs that “cinematic history cannot deliver an exhaustive treatment of all major facts” as a scholarly monograph may attempt to do. Instead, “one of cinematic history’s greatest attributes [is] its potential to explore the psychological dimensions of an experience”; in discussing *Titanic* (1997, dir. James Cameron), he notes that the film “delivers an emotional punch that is frequently absent in books on the 1912 event.”<sup>11</sup> For Toplin, the very attention to detail in props and sets that Freeman, Denning, and Bildhauer lament is a requirement for the historical film, because if these details are obviously wrong, audiences will view the production as phony.<sup>12</sup> For both Rosenstone and Toplin, film is another way to represent history, and lambasting it for not conforming to the standards of one’s preferred method of representation is counterproductive.

What makes a good historical film, then? Rosenstone and Toplin acknowledge the limitations of film and insist that it be evaluated according to that understanding. Simply toting up a film’s accuracies and inaccuracies when compared to the historical facts (as established by professional historians in our professional writings, of course) will not do. Not to mention that, in this author’s opinion, such historical list-making makes for tedious reading: “So-and-so was born in this year, not that year. That type of chair was not invented until year X, so person Y could not have been sitting on it in year Z.” Who desires to read works that present a historical film as a balance sheet with historical debits in one column and credits in the other, and what they get out of those works, this writer cannot begin to imagine. Historians who wish to deal with historical films outside the art house have to accept that films portray history as the story of individuals, within a closed and complete narrative framework of beginning, middle, and end, and in a way that is personal, emotional, and dramatic, rather than the messy, ongoing

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<sup>9</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, “Introduction,” in *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*, ed. Robert A. Rosenstone (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), 6–7.

<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Reel Joan of Arc: Reflections on the Theory and Practice of the Historical Film,” *The Public Historian* 25:3 (2003): 65, 73.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2002), 65, 68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

amalgam of personal and impersonal, pedestrian influences that comprise real history.<sup>13</sup> Historical time must be condensed and re-ordered, characters and events invented, and omissions made. So then what remains of history in our hypothetical good historical film?

The best historical film is not the one with the fewest inaccuracies but the one whose “creative adjustments” to history are, in Toplin’s words, “not employed cavalierly; they are not designed solely to enhance the movie’s entertainment value.” Toplin’s prime example is *Glory* (1989, dir. Edward Zwick): “Most of [*Glory*]’s distortions serve the purpose of communicating broader truths about the Civil War experiences of African Americans.”<sup>14</sup> Non-historical films make changes purely for the sake of drama; they may succeed in being more dramatic, but they lose their history. A non-historical film is populated by “one-dimensional stereotypes, simplistically heroic figures who exhibit almost no shortcomings in terms of skill, motivation, or moral character. These individuals do not resemble real people; they are dramatic icons.”<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that a film populated by such figures cannot be effective as a film—*Roaring Currents* is a prime example, being a rousing, perhaps even mythically epic, action film—only that it is not a historical film. Nor does featuring characters that do behave in historically believable ways make a film an artistic success. To put it another way, what do the filmmakers intend with their fictions and inventions in the film? Do they serve “to give unbridled liberty...with the primary objective of making the film more attractive to viewers’ tastes and more likely to score commercial success? Or as a narrative device in the service of the most expressive art form in ways that may enrich a portrayal of the past while at the same time enhance its understanding?”<sup>16</sup> These are the criteria Rosenstone and Toplin use to view the historicity of film. Given all this, then, how do *The Fatal Encounter* and *Roaring Currents* measure up as historical films? Do they communicate broader truths about late eighteenth century Korea? Or are they populated by dramatic icons swamped in unbridled historical liberties?

## 2. HISTORY AND DRAMA IN *THE FATAL ENCOUNTER*

Produced on a budget of approximately \$9.6 million, *The Fatal Encounter* tells the story of the 1777 coup d’état (*chōng’yu yōkpyōn* 丁酉逆變), an attempt on the life of

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<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 55–61.

<sup>14</sup> Toplin, *Reel History*, 202–203.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>16</sup> Ramirez, *Inside the Historical Film*, 9.

King Chǒngjo (r. 1776–1800) about a year after his accession to the throne. That throne was not entirely secure. The king was the son of Prince Sado, who was executed by his own father, King Yǒngjo (r. 1724–1776). Afraid of the repercussions of this act on the Yi dynasty (r. 1392–1910)—who justified their hold on the throne on the grounds that they were morally superior to their subjects—Yǒngjo went through some pains to protect his grandson’s legitimacy. First, he adopted a Rube Goldbergian method of execution, ordering that Sado be sealed inside a wooden rice chest and left to die “naturally” instead of using any of the traditional execution methods of poison, strangling, or decapitation. Second, he had Chǒngjo adopted by his already-deceased older son so that Chǒngjo was no longer legally the son of Sado and therefore (Yǒngjo’s thinking apparently went) did not bear the stain of Sado’s crimes and subsequent punishment by the state. (Wives and children were punished for the crimes of close male relatives in Chosǒn Korea.) The debate over exactly why Sado was executed does not concern us here,<sup>17</sup> but in any case there was apprehension among those who supported the execution (known both at the time and in modern scholarship as the Intransigent Faction [Pyǒkp’a 僻派]) that the son of Sado would wreak vengeance upon those whom he perceived as his father’s killers once he became king. Thus, there were a number of attempts on the king’s life, particular early in his reign when he was young and insecure on the throne.

*The Fatal Encounter* is a dramatization of the roughly twenty-four-hour period surrounding an assassination attempt on Chǒngjo on July 28, 1777. The film depicts the king’s struggles with the Intransigents, led by Yǒngjo’s second wife Queen Dowager Chǒngsun 貞純王后 (Han Ji-min), who seek to replace him on the throne with his half-brother. The Intransigents are dangerous to the king because they have the support of Ku Sǒn-bok (Song Young-chang), a powerful general portrayed as having control over much of the military. Two other stories run alongside these court struggles, though it is gradually revealed that they are all intertwined. In the first of these, Chǒngjo’s mother Lady Hyegyǒng (Kim Sung-ryung) separately plots against the Queen Dowager to protect her son. In the second, two nameless boys orphaned at birth—eventually revealed to have given themselves the names Kap-su (Jung Jae-young) and Ŭl-su (Jo Jung-suk)—are brutally trained as assassins. The elder, Kap-su, is planted in the palace as a eunuch and grows up alongside the king, becoming his close confidante, while Ŭl-su is shown to have grown into a capable and merciless killer. The film climaxes

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the controversy surrounding Yǒngjo’s motives for ordering the execution, see chapter 5 of JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Confucian Kingship in Korea* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001), 166–233.

with Ŭl-su leading a group of assassins to murder the king, only to find that both his fictive elder brother Kap-su and Kang Wŏl-hye (Jung Eun-chaeh), a palace maid and daughter of one of the key conspirators, have betrayed the plot. Armed with this forewarning, Chŏngjo has already personally confronted Ku Sŏn-bok and turned him back to his side, and the assassins are walking into a trap set by the king, who engages his would-be murderers himself with both bow and sword. All the assassins are killed, though Ŭl-su is ultimately defeated as much by the emotional impact of Kap-su's betrayal as by force of arms.

Compare this rousing story of personal intrigue and heroic combat to the comparatively brief account of the assassination attempt as recorded in the *Veritable Records of King Chŏngjo* (*Chŏngjo sillok*), the official government account of the king's reign compiled shortly after his death in 1800:

Brigands entered the Inner Palace. The king made a habit of reading books late into the night every day after finishing court. On this night he was reading books by candlelight in the Hall of Respect for Worthies, with a single eunuch [attending him]. The eunuch received a royal command to go and check on the night shift of the palace guards, and so there was no one around the empty [hall]. Suddenly the king heard the soft sound of feet running toward him from the Precious Chapter Gate in a northeast direction along a corridor. They came into the inner palace quarters and threw roof tiles and rocks, causing such a racket that he could not determine what was happening. The king listened silently for a while and saw that there were intruders making an attempt on his life. He called for the eunuchs and the Inner Palace Guards and held aloft the torch to look for them in the inner palace quarters. The tile, gravel, and earth flew in disorder, as if [the brigands] were scrambling to escape. There was no doubt they were assassins. The king called in Chief Royal Secretary Hong Kuk-yŏng and told him what happened. Thereupon Hong said to the inner palace attendants, "You are but a short distance from the foot of the throne that is protected by the one hundred spirits. How can those goblins have gotten so close? There must be a secret plot to overthrow the king. In All-under-Heaven from ancient days to today, has there ever been such a thing? They are not birds that fly or beasts that walk, so they certainly did not vault over the walls. I request a thorough search of the palace grounds." The king assented to this. Hong at that time was the commander of the Capital Garrison and at once took direct command of the guards at the Spreading Harmony Gate. The shock troops of the Three Garrisons were called in to patrol both inside and outside the wall around the inner palace, and they set up armed guards at all its entrances, taking special precautions with martial arts. They searched all through the palace. The

time was late at night, making the grass and trees dark. After four searches, in the end nothing was found.<sup>18</sup>

Needless to say, the film expands greatly on this account. The *Veritable Records* record no deaths or even any direct confrontation and give no hint of who was responsible. King Chǒngjo does not fire his bow or engage in a sword duel with any orphan assassins, nor does a eunuch reveal himself to be in on the plot. Unlike the historical king, the film's Chǒngjo never once cries out for aid but immediately proves his action hero credentials by taking the fight to the intruders personally. Is there any way that *The Fatal Encounter* can be considered historical? Yes.

The film opens with a shot of rain in the palace. The camera moves inside and a quotation attributed to Chǒngjo from February 5, 1775, when he was still Crown Prince, appears on the screen: "I was so afraid, I would rather have been dead." The text is in Korean, eliding the fact that the source for the quotation, the *Record Illuminating Righteousness* (*Myǒng'ūirok* 明義錄), is written in Literary Sinitic. This is followed by more Korean text, the famous "slip of the tongue" of Chǒngjo's uncle Hong In-han: "The Crown Prince [Chǒngjo] need not know anything of the Patriarchs or Disciples [political factions], nor need he know who the Minister of Personnel or the Minister of War is, much less the affairs of the court." Hong was executed for making this statement almost immediately after Chǒngjo became king, since it was construed as an attack on his moral and intellectual fitness to rule. A third quotation then appears, also from the *Record*, recorded as spoken by King Yǒngjo to the Crown Prince (Chǒngjo) on November 20, 1775: "Do not be disturbed by what the high officials say. Just obey my instructions. This is filial piety." The film omits the intervening sentence, "I rely on you, my grandson, and you rely on me, so what need is there for formality between us?" Having established the setting, we see more shots of rain on the palace, then running feet, and then a number of bodies lying dead in the courtyard. The date July 28, 1777 and the time 11:15 p.m. appear on screen to the sounds of fighting and swords clanking, though the combatants are not seen as the shot fades out with the camera still hovering above the palace grounds.

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盜入大內。上每罷朝。覽書至夜分以爲常。是夜御尊賢閣秉燭展書。傍有小黃門一人。承命往視扈衛士之直宿者。左右虛無人。忽聞腳踏聲。自寶章門東北緣廊上。隱隱而來。至御座中雷。擲瓦投礮。縱縱錚錚。不可模狀。上靜聽良久。察其有盜試之也。親呼宦侍掖隸。舉火搜索於雷上。瓦礮沙土。縱橫奮亂。如人蹴踏然。爲盜無疑也。遂命都承旨洪國榮入侍以告之。故國榮曰咫尺殿陛。百靈呵護。安有魍魎之屬乎。必是凶孽輩包藏禍心。潛謀作變也。古今天下豈有如此變怪乎。渠非飛禽走獸。則決無超越宮牆之理。請卽遍搜闕中。上可之。國榮時帶禁衛大將。事且急。命以信箭。領率延和門宿衛士。三營踐更軍守備垣內外。以武藝別監。把立閣門。而遍搜禁中。時夜黑草茂。四索終無有也。 *Chǒngjo sillok* 4:25a—b [1777.7.28]



On a black screen more text appears, this time in the original Literary Sinitic with a Korean translation: “The son of a traitor cannot be king,” though no source is given for this quotation. Then, the audience hears the voice of Hyun Bin as Chǒngjo, speaking the first words the king is recorded in the *Veritable Records* as having spoken upon his accession to the throne, “I am the son of Prince Sado.” We then cut to Chǒngjo doing push-ups and other exercises in the Hall of Respect for Worthies (Chonhyǒn’gak 尊賢閣) while a caption informs us it is twenty hours earlier, 3:00 a.m. He also wears a harness weighted with dirt under his voluminous court robes, while dialogue with his eunuch, the aforementioned Kap-su, establishes that the king must keep these physical strengthening measures secret. For Kim Chi-mi, the camera’s lingering shots of Chǒngjo’s straining, sweaty body, muscles rippling, are primarily meant to show off star Hyun Bin’s post-Marines physique.<sup>19</sup> (*The Fatal Encounter* was Hyun’s first film after he completed the two years of military service required of all Korean men, which he chose to complete in the Republic of Korea Marine Corps, generally regarded as the “toughest” branch of the military and open to volunteers only.) But the opening scene also serves a character-building purpose. The sweat and determination of the actor serve as a visual expression of Chǒngjo’s dedication to reform. The remarks about the importance of concealing his preparations and the hidden weighted shirt reflect on the difficulties the king faced in acting against his opponents in attempting to building his power base. The weighted shirt serves double symbolic duty, as it also visualizes the burden of his father’s death that Chǒngjo has taken on.

The portrayal of Chǒngjo’s character is largely in accord with the views of historians such as Yi Tae-Jin (Yi T’ae-jin) who have read the *Veritable Records* accounts of his reign and his voluminous writings as contained in his *Collected Works* (*Hongjae chǒnsǒ* 弘濟全書) and regard him as a reformer concerned with society’s downtrodden. One scene has the King demanding that the officials at the Royal Lecture come to the next lecture ready to offer concrete solutions to problems of contemporary Chosǒn. Not just any problems, but problems that did concern the historical Chǒngjo, namely, the plight of slaves and of the sons of *yangban* fathers by their concubines. The Intransigent officials respond by refusing to attend the lecture, a common method in Chosǒn of expressing official disapproval of a royal decision. When the court discovers that the eunuch Kap-su is a traitor, an assassin planted in Chǒngjo’s court to be activated when needed, Chǒngjo personally ends Kap-su’s torture and expels him from the palace rather

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<sup>19</sup> Kim Chi-mi. “P’yǒnhwa toen sesang ūl wihan tongsang yimong: *Yǒngnin kwa Kundo: Millan ūi sidae*” [Different goals for a changed world: *The Fatal Encounter* and *Kundo: Age of the Rampant*], *Hwanghae munhwa* 84 (2014): 360–361.

than executing him in the most horrific way possible, which would have been the standard punishment. The historical Chǒngjo was widely known both in his lifetime and afterwards as lenient in criminal punishment, frequently commuting execution to banishment.<sup>20</sup> The film also effectively conveys Chǒngjo's obsession with his father's memory, primarily through dream imagery: the rice chest, the child Chǒngjo's attempts to reach it, the haunting image of Sado's corpse when the chest is opened. The historical Chǒngjo probably never saw his father's corpse, and almost certainly not in the way the film portrays him picturing it in his mind, but it is not unlikely that the actual man dreamed such a scene despite having not witnessed it. Further, the film artfully portrays Chǒngjo's efforts to connect with people outside the highest social classes. The historical Chǒngjo did this primarily through the petition system and by making frequent royal processions outside the palace. Neither of these can be readily addressed in the film's timeline of less than twenty-four hours, in a film that takes place almost entirely inside the palace, so it is done by showing the king's concern for his eunuch Kap-su. Nor does he hesitate to act on information provided to him by Wŏl-hye, a mere palace maid, and indeed as Kim Chi-mi reminds us, he escapes assassination precisely because he trusts these two lower-class characters.<sup>21</sup>

Ch'oe Min-sŏng casts a dissenting vote on the historicism of Chǒngjo's portrayal in *The Fatal Encounter*, unfavorably contrasting it with that of *Everlasting Empire* (*Yŏng'wŏnhan cheguk*, 1995, dir. Park Jong-won). Ch'oe argues the latter is closer to historical fact. He remarks that Hyun Bin looks more like the modern vision of Chǒngjo than like the actual man, as evinced by what Ch'oe calls his real portrait in the *Sŏnwŏn poryak*, which is that of a large man with an intimidating countenance and not the thin-faced benevolent king of modern portraits.<sup>22</sup> But the portrait Ch'oe cites is not very detailed, the body (of which little can be seen) least of all, and is stylized to portray Chǒngjo as a ruler. It is difficult to make firm judgments about how Chǒngjo "really" looked from this sort of drawing, to say nothing of how he may have looked at different times in his life.

*The Fatal Encounter* certainly has heroes and villains in the tradition of mainstream popular films in Hollywood and, increasingly, Korea. There is no question that the film sides with Chǒngjo, that he is the hero and that those who oppose him are villains, especially Queen Dowager Chǒngsun. She is shown relaxing in a luxurious hot bath, seemingly unconcerned about the waste of clean water even in

<sup>20</sup> William Shaw, *Legal Norms in a Confucian State* (Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Center for Korean Studies, 1981), 63.

<sup>21</sup> Kim Chi-mi, *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>22</sup> Ch'oe Min-sŏng, "Chǒngjo sŭt'ori ŭi k'aerikt'ŏ yŏn'gu" [A character analysis of the stories related to Chǒngjo], *Han'guk ŏnŏ munhwa* 55 (2014): 260, 266, 271.

the midst of a drought. In contrast, the “good” Lady Hyegyŏng pointedly refuses to join her in the bath, citing the ongoing drought and subtly reproving the queen for her indulgence. There is even a bit of anachronistic playfulness with weaponry. Ku Sŏn-bok, representing the bad guys, mocks the use of guns in warfare, extolling the virtues of the bow, while Hong Kuk-yŏng, in the film Chŏngjo’s closest ally among the government officials, commands a military unit organized around guns. Ku and Hong engage in a duel of words over the usefulness of guns in front of the king. Since Hong is the “good” character, we in the audience are meant to recognize his (and perhaps Chŏngjo’s) wisdom in recognizing the value of guns, since we “know” that guns are the superior weapons. Kap-su, the orphan assassin who turns against his masters and defends the king, is portrayed as deliberately losing the game of rock-paper-scissors that he and Ŭl-su are forced to play to decide which of them will be castrated and sent to infiltrate the palace. As the elder brother in the fictive kinship he and Ŭl-su have built, Kap-su literally sacrifices his manhood to protect his younger brother. This sacrifice of the elder for the younger is a common trope of nobility in Korean films. (Indeed, the monstrously successful blockbuster *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* (2004, dir. Kang Je-gyu) takes this trope as the basis of its plot, with the elder brother taking on ever more dangerous military assignments in the belief that his bravery and success will cause the army to discharge his younger brother from service and send him home safely.)

However, the film is not overly simplistic or one-dimensional in its portrayal of the “hero” and “villain” characters; there are some wrinkles. Though Hong Kuk-yŏng is Chŏngjo’s unfailing friend in the film, hints are dropped as to his eventual fate, death in exile ordered by the king. The queen dowager, the chief “villain,” correctly warns Chŏngjo of the danger of Hong’s rapid rise to power, while Kap-su obliquely suggests the king take a concubine in order to produce an heir, the very crime for which Hong will eventually be sent into exile. As for Kap-su, the same man that nobly sacrificed himself to protect his fictive younger brother murders his adopted father to protect the king from the assassins, a morally-reprehensible act both at the time of the film’s setting and in Korea today. “Bad” general Ku Sŏn-bok is persuaded to return to the king’s good graces, and in the climactic battle during which Hong’s military unit must protect the king, the rain renders their guns useless, just as Ku warned during the duel of words. Chŏngjo himself uses a bow, and to great effect, rather than a gun. Lady Hyegyŏng, to take another example, attempts to protect her son by using a young child as an agent of murder. She tasks ten-year-old palace maid-in-training Pok-ping (Yoo Eun-mi) with poisoning the queen dowager’s food. Pok-ping breaks under the mental stress of the task and confides in Wŏl-hye, who is the queen dowager’s agent.

Wöl-hye eventually betrays the conspiracy in part to save Pok-ping's life, but not before she viciously denounces Lady Hyegyŏng for the immorality of using a helpless child as a pawn in her deadly game with the queen dowager. Nor is Chŏngjo himself a paragon of virtue. At the end of the film, Chŏngjo demands that the queen dowager not reveal the details of the assassination attempt; if she does, he coldly promises to execute not only her but her entire family, not a simplistically "heroic" act. Ch'oe Min-sŏng takes *The Fatal Encounter* to task for showing Chŏngjo in a "halo," in contrast to *Everlasting Empire*, which shows both his virtuous qualities and the underhanded tactics he used to maintain his rule.<sup>23</sup> But this is a surface reading of the film. A more nuanced reading of *The Fatal Encounter* reveals more ambiguity than is immediately apparent, particularly in the dénouement.

The film ends on a note of surprising ambiguity for a big-budget blockbuster. Chŏngjo personally leads a detachment of soldiers to the orphan assassin training ground. Surrounded by soldiers rescuing the children, Chŏngjo confronts the leader of the camp, Kwang-baek (Cho Jae-hyun). He draws his sword, but Kwang-baek is unfazed. Rather than resist, he simply states, "What a crock. You kill me, and that changes the world?" Chŏngjo replies with a killing blow, but Kwang-baek's question hangs in the air despite the immediate cut to the king on a white steed, the sun behind him, almost a parody of the heroic figure of film legend. Ch'oe Min-sŏng argues that the final scene, which has Hyun Bin reciting the twenty-third chapter of the *Doctrine of the Mean*, together with the white horse and the camerawork emphasizing his heroism, ends the film triumphantly.<sup>24</sup> At the end of the recitation, Chŏngjo assures us that the world will change, but is that really what we have seen so far? As Kim Chi-mi points out, Kwang-baek may be dead, but Chŏngjo's palace is still full of enemies.<sup>25</sup> The Queen Dowager's plot may have been defeated, but she remains in place. Indeed, despite Chŏngjo's threat, she does not really suffer any damage from the plot; it is only the non-aristocratic, poor, and powerless—Kap-su the eunuch, Ŭl-su the orphan assassin, and the faceless rank-and-file soldiers and assassins who died in the attempt—who really suffer. Chŏngjo has won a battle, but it is only the first of many he would fight throughout his twenty-five-year reign. If the ending of the film lacks the moral ambiguity of *The Godfather*, neither is it the unqualified triumph of the pseudo-historical *Braveheart*, which ends with the Scots winning "freedom," the evil king dead, and the hero's son set to take the evil king's throne, a truly mythical ending that bears not even a thematic resemblance to actual Scottish history.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 268, 274.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>25</sup> Kim Chi-mi, *ibid.*, 363.

*Braveheart* is a fine epic, commercially and critically successful, but it is not history.

*The Fatal Encounter* packs a visual and emotional punch that even the most skilled scholarly monograph could never hope to. It starkly portrays the rigid (and perhaps, to modern eyes, absurd) status hierarchy of eighteenth-century Korea. To wit, there is the absurdity of the king addressing the queen dowager as “Grandmother” when she is thirty-two years old, only seven years older than her “grandson” (and if anything looks even younger). The lower-class characters are pawns in the schemes of the upper-class, at least within the palace walls; the world beyond the walls scarcely appears, emphasizing the gulf between the officials and palace maids at court and the outside world. However, even the disempowered lower-class characters retain agency: Kap-su saves the king from his adopted brother; Pok-ping inadvertently betrays Lady Hyegyöng’s plot to the queen dowager; Wöl-hye informs Chǒngjo of the plot against him. Wöl-hye also serves as a symbol of lower-class resentment against the Chosŏn upper class. After revealing her involvement in the plot against Chǒngjo to Lady Hyegyöng, she denounces all sides of the upper class conflict for using “people like us” as tools. In the end she switches sides to support Chǒngjo, but only to save Pok-ping’s life. There is little indication she cares who is king; rather, she is focused on the relationships that matter in her life. Thus, eunuchs and servants, whom social historians lamented were for decades left out of history, have pivotal roles in the film, as they almost certainly did in actual events despite their absence in official histories.<sup>26</sup> In fact, all the characters are motivated by personal ambition and relationships rather than dedication to abstract anachronisms like the nation or class interest. Contrast this to *Hero* 英雄, a 2002 costume drama directed by acclaimed Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou. The climax of that film has its protagonist, Nameless, deciding not to assassinate the king of Qin after meeting with him and deciding that he is the only man capable of uniting China. It is an effective moment artistically but totally unhistorical. Not only was there no China at the time, but Nameless has absolutely nothing to gain from allowing the future First Emperor to live. That he willingly sacrifices his own life for an abstract “China” that he could only know about by seeing the future himself is an act so utterly anachronistic that it would be brilliantly subversive if the director had any notion of history.

*The Fatal Encounter* offers a historically-grounded interpretation of Chǒngjo. It portrays him as a reformer who was concerned for the plight of slaves and sons of concubines, though it is questionable whether he held that concern so early in his reign. It also takes a position on the execution of Prince Sado—though it does

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

not agree with this author's own view. It accepts the authenticity of the dubious "cabinet letter" (*kūmdǔngji sa* 金滕之詞), a letter allegedly written by King Yōngjo blaming the Intransigents for manipulating him into ordering his son's execution.<sup>27</sup> The *Veritable Records* have Chōngjo claiming to have received this letter on August 8, 1793, "found" nearly twenty years after Yōngjo's death at a time convenient for Chōngjo's purposes. Thus, the filmmakers portray Sado's death according to the traditional narrative as resulting from factionalism rather than the interpretation based largely on the historical Lady Hyegyōng's *Memoirs* (*Hanjungnok* 閑中錄) that Sado was mentally disturbed and so had to be eliminated to avoid impugning the morally-based legitimacy of the royal house. It takes a position in an active historical debate and presents that interpretation in the visual language of film. That its position disagrees with this writer's own position is hardly grounds to label the film "unhistorical." The film's portrayal of Chōngjo is largely positive but is not swamped by a nationalist narrative as is *Roaring Currents*' Yi Sun-sin. Chosŏn Korea is portrayed with little attempt to iron out its contradictory splendor and oppression. Chōngjo's Confucian concern with the downtrodden sits alongside Wōl-hye's withering indictment of the kingdom's class system, and the king's mercy for Kap-su when he ends the eunuch's torture and refuses to execute him is juxtaposed with the cruel beating administered to Kap-su by government officials. Chosŏn is neither jingoistically praised for its achievements nor universally condemned for its "premodern" or "feudal" backwardness leading to its fall in the face of a modernized Japan.

### 3. HISTORY AND DRAMA IN *ROARING CURRENTS*

The focus of this article is *The Fatal Encounter*, so it will not dwell for very long on *Roaring Currents*. Instead, it will build on the cogent analysis of Kim Kyu Hyun in "A Whirlpool of History" to illustrate how *Currents*, despite being a fine action film, does not meet Toplin's and Rosenstone's criteria for a historical film to anywhere near the extent that *The Fatal Encounter* does. Kim does not cite either scholar, but his analysis of *Roaring Currents* is informed by many of the same concerns. For example, he echoes their—and this author's—lamentation for historians' evaluation of historical films by toting up inaccuracies:

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<sup>27</sup> Ch'oe, *ibid.*, 273. *Kūmdǔng* is a reference to a secret letter written by the Duke of Zhou when King Wu was ill, asking the spirits to take his life instead, called *kūmdǔng* because he locked it in a cabinet. The story can be found in the "Metal-bound Coffers [Jinteng]" section of the "Zhou-shu" chapter of the *Book of Documents*.

[M]any academic historians, when evaluating cinema and TV, usually stop at pointing out gaps between the ‘facts’ and ‘fiction’, reducing the function of our position to that of a fact-checker. In truth, getting historical details ‘right’ is often unrelated to what historians consider ‘good’ or ‘persuasive’ interpretations. Historians, however, often let the questions of interpretations and perspectives slide at the expense of nitpicking the factual information closely related to their own personal expertise or interests.<sup>28</sup>

For Kim, like Rosenstone and Toplin, a historical film should be evaluated on whether it offers an interpretation of history and not on a strict accounting of whether it is totally factual, since any narrative film involves some amount of fictionalizing.

*Roaring Currents* is set during the Imjin War, a conflict between a Chosŏn-Ming alliance and Japan that was fought in two major stages (with a long peace in between) from 1592 to 1598. The plot concerns a 1597 naval battle that saw Chosŏn admiral Yi Sun-sin (1545–1598) inflict a crushing defeat on a Japanese fleet despite being vastly outnumbered, a victory that together with Yi’s other successes cemented his reputation as a great commander and savior of the Chosŏn state.

Kim has nothing but positive things to say about *Roaring Currents* as an entertaining blockbuster. On page 272 he calls it “a technically superior production” with battle scenes that are “intense...[and] by turns suspenseful and spectacular” and notes with approval that it is not “stodgy and lifeless” as were previous films about Yi Sun-sin. Thus, the film does not fail as history because it is esthetically lacking. Rather, Kim presents a number of reasons for its ahistoricity. While he does not clearly lay out exactly how much weight he gives to each factor, my reading of his analysis suggests three major problems, all of which can be connected to criticisms laid out by Rosenstone and Toplin.

The first concerns anachronism. Kim judges the film as not even having tried to escape a nationalist narrative that overwhelms every other aspect of the story and characters, thus rendering it useless as a historical work. He notes that it scrupulously avoids ambiguity in its presentation of Yi Sun-sin as a nationalistic hero, such that inconvenient details are “flattened under the relentless rolling-forward of the patriotic narrative.”<sup>29</sup> This stands in contrast to *The Fatal Encounter* as discussed earlier, which has Chŏngjo striking down an unarmed man and threatening to exterminate entire families, while a sympathetic lower-class

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<sup>28</sup> Kyu Hyun Kim, “A Whirlpool of History: Roaring Currents Between a Determined War Film and a Deifying Biopic,” *International Journal of Korean History* 19, no. 2 (2014): 273.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

character (Wŏl-hye) expresses contempt for all royals, including the king. Kim also criticizes the film's attempt to make Yi Sun-sin a kind of proto-democrat "via the ideas of Confucian (Mencian) populism,"<sup>30</sup> a blatant anachronism of the type that *The Fatal Encounter* successfully avoids. For Kim, the film fails to "transcend the pull of nationalist narratives and [give] voice to the 'grunts', civilians and ordinary people of Korea,"<sup>31</sup> By contrast, while *The Fatal Encounter* focuses on the upper class and royalty, the eunuchs Kap-su and Ŭl-su and the palace maid Wŏl-hye are key characters, and in the end it is not the high-status characters who pay with their lives but the eunuchs and the common soldiers who fight and die to protect a king who is interested in protecting himself, his throne, and perhaps his state, but not "the nation" or "the people" or other such modern notions.

The second problem concerns the film's offering of a historical interpretation. Though Kim does not explain his analysis in this way, he essentially takes the film to task historically for not offering any original interpretation. He describes it as "shrewdly 'conservative' in the sense that it hardly challenges the standard view of the particular historical context in which Admiral Yi was active, or of Admiral Yi himself as a historical character."<sup>32</sup> The nationalistic narrative presented in the film dates back at least to the Park Chung Hee era.<sup>33</sup> This is revealed in both the unrelentingly positive portrayal of Yi Sun-sin and in the "Japanese all being caricatures who function to be defeated by" him.<sup>34</sup> Once again, the criticism is not that having one-dimensional villains makes the film bad. Epic fantasy is full of shining heroes who defeat villains embodying evil without ambiguity or complexity. The *Star Wars* franchise starkly defines with the clear labels of the "light side" and "dark side" of the Force; its canonical films admit of no ambiguity in these categories. Ha Seung-woo in fact places *Roaring Currents* squarely in the same genre. For Ha, there is no point in documenting its distortions of history because it "is not historical documentation but a popular film comfortable with its hyperbolic use of the grandiose characteristics of the blockbuster"; it can be viewed as a heroic epic with a "classical hero narrative."<sup>35</sup> *The Fatal Encounter*, on the other hand, is not an epic but a historical film in part because it complicates these understandings, especially if the viewer is informed about the historical context surrounding the events: Chŏngjo "turns" Ku Sŏn-bok

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>35</sup> Ha Seung-woo, "The Return of Yi Sun-shin: Mediating the Present and the Past." *Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 236–237.



back to his side in the film yet executes him later in history; the king's close ally Hong Kuk-yŏng likewise ends up executed for treason; and Queen Dowager Chŏngsun oversees the accession of Chŏngjo's son to the throne. None of this makes *The Fatal Encounter* a superior film to *Roaring Currents*, except for the subjective preference for historical films over epics, but it does suggest that each is part of a different genre with different aims. *Roaring Currents* can be useful for examining the mythologizing of a historical figure into a nationalist icon, but it is much less useful than *The Fatal Encounter* when it comes to offering a genuine historical interpretation and communicating the feeling of certain aspects of life in Chosŏn Korea.

### **The Value of *The Fatal Encounter* as a Historical Film**

So, if *The Fatal Encounter* escapes a nationalist epic hero narrative to stand as a historical work, what does that mean for it? The film can serve as one tool for imparting an understanding of history even for general audiences, more so for those with other sources of historical knowledge of Chosŏn. *The Fatal Encounter* contains its share of distortion of the historical record, perhaps to a greater extent than other historical works. But as E. H. Carr has demonstrated, all works of history engage in some distortion, if only in the historical facts the historian chose to present in order to illustrate her interpretation of that record. If general audiences' only exposure to the history of Chosŏn were a viewing of *The Fatal Encounter*, they would hardly come away with a comprehensive knowledge of that history and would undoubtedly confuse much of the film's liberties with the historical record with accurate representations of it. But neither would reading a single history article, or even a single monograph, impart a comprehensive understanding. What *The Fatal Encounter* would provide is a plausible general narrative and understanding of class relationships among both a number of key actors in the Chosŏn political arena and, through the palace maid and eunuch characters, the historically oft-neglected non-elites of Chosŏn.

For those viewing the film with an existing knowledge of the period, *The Fatal Encounter* is even more richly rewarding and emotionally resonant. These viewers can feel the tragedy of Hong Kuk-yŏng's steadfast loyalty and lifelong friendship with the king up to the point of the film, since they know this is followed by Hong's death in exile as a result of accusations of treachery. They will recognize more than the casual viewer the hollowness of Chŏngjo's victory over the Queen Dowager, when in the end it is she and her family that ultimately triumph over the king's legacy after his death. They will also recognize Chŏngjo's "conversion" of Ku Sŏn-bok to be only temporary and a result of political calculations rather than

the magnetic charisma of Hyun Bin, since Ku was executed for treason nine years after the film's depiction of his rescuing Chŏngjo from this assassination plot. Even the best scholarly monographs cannot produce such reactions to history, especially in an age of near-constant video stimulation. Films reach a wider audience than any other presentation of history, so we ignore historical films, and those that merely purport to be historical, at our peril. If historians choose to recuse ourselves from conversations about historical film, we dismiss the primary medium by which the public learns most of its history and thereby abdicate our responsibility to inform them. We historians should pay heed to Kim Kyu Hyun's call to go beyond "pointing out gaps between the 'facts' and 'fiction'" in historical films and embrace their potential to enrich, inform, and educate about history.

For general audiences, some history is better than no history, and a successful historical film may even stimulate interest among them to seek out more information about the events portrayed, perhaps specifically to answer the question of "Just how historically accurate was this film?" The distortions of history demanded by the medium of film can serve as an excellent jumping off point for questioning and interrogating the distortions induced by narratives in all historical works and even nonfiction narratives in general. Like the historical novel, the museum excursion, the direct engagement with primary sources, and all the other tools in the historian's arsenal, historical films have a place in the teaching repertoire of our profession, for when it comes to bringing history to life in an immediate, powerful, and emotionally-resonant way, it is without peer.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This article has investigated *The Fatal Encounter* as a work of history. While the film does take significant liberties with history such that it does not rank with the very best examples of the genre such as *Glory*, it engages with historical sources and data, offers a narrative interpretation, and engages in what Rosenstone has termed "true invention," namely, the inclusion of details and events that, while not present in the historical record, help the viewer understand that record. Its Chŏngjo is a hero, but a multidimensional hero who is largely consistent with a plausible understanding of the character of the historical Chŏngjo as we now have it (keeping in mind that Chŏngjo probably purposefully attempted to shroud himself in mystery). The exercise of dramatic license is acceptable for a film of this type, the big-budget blockbuster. It moves events in time, collapses multiple characters into a single character in the name of narrative focus, sets up heroes and villains, and tells a complete story. Yet for the reasons outlined above, it

remains in the realm of history, unlike works of mythic “faction” like *Roaring Currents* or costume dramas like *Hero*. Therefore, *The Fatal Encounter* deserves to be called a historical film. It is good history within the confines of the cinematic form, having escaped the nationalist narratives constraining the entertaining but largely ahistorical *Roaring Currents*. As part of a larger effort towards understanding history, it grounds scholarly writings and artifacts in a moving, living, breathing atmosphere that conveys the time and place, and it presents the stories of non-elite characters that are often left out of the standard historical narratives to which most people are routinely exposed. Other historical works, in turn, inform the film for those who are familiar with them, causing the portrayed interactions between Chǒngjo, Chǒngsun, Ku Sǒn-bok, and Hong Kuk-yǒng, among others, to have additional emotional and historical resonance. In conjunction with other tools for teaching history, it can effectively convey to a wide audience a reasonably realistic snapshot of a notable event in Korean history.

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