

MODERNITY OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT AND POLITICS OF THE SUBLIME: READING SIN SANGOK'S FILM *SANGNOKSU*

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Released in 1961, Sin Sangok's film *Sangnoksŭ* (Evergreen tree) is an important example of an artistic work that was both directly and indirectly employed as an instrument of the rural modernization policies and the underlying ideological objectives of the Pak Chŏnghŭi regime. The film reveals the subtle and complex interrelationship between the (popular) art and politics of the 1960s. As the negotiation between authority and consensus characterizes the direction of the modernization of Korean society during the 1960s, this article argues that *Sangnoksŭ* served as the emotional medium that bridged the gap. In addition, it also illuminates how the film as a form of popular art is associated with the construction of *mentalité* toward Korea's modernization. This article seeks to identify implicit aesthetic principles to discuss the political signification of the film in Korean society during the 1960s and its function as an allegory to provide logical appeals and emotional assurance.

Key Words: modernization, sublime, enlightenment, allegory of development

1. *SANGNOKSU* AS AN ALLEGORY OF DEVELOPMENT

Sangnoksŭ (Evergreen tree) is a 1961 film by Sin Sangok that is based on Sim Hun's 1935 novel of the same title. In addition to pursuing a career in film production in the Japanese colonial era, Sim Hun wrote several seminal works of realism and peasant literature such as *Yŏngwŏn ūi miso* (Smile of permanency) (1933), *Chingnyŏsŏng* (Vega star) (1934), and *Sangnoksŭ* (Evergreen tree) (1935) through which a nationalist and resistant consciousness was invoked. *Sangnoksŭ*, a full-length novel, garnered the first prize in the literary contest commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of the *Tonga ilbo*. This novel depicting the story of sacrifice in pursuit of the eradication of illiteracy and the enlightenment of rural communities has been hailed as a representative example

of colonial era peasant literature wherein a confluence of popular and enlightenment elements is evident. In the novel, Pak Tonghyök and Ch'ae Yöngsin circumvent their love for each other while dedicating themselves to the sole cause of enlightening the rural population, but ultimately, the female protagonist, Ch'ae Yöngsin, succumbs to ill health and dies, leaving the male protagonist, Pak Tonghyök, to continue on with their work even after her death. In Sin Sangok's film version of the same title, this main narrative is retold unchanged.¹ In this sense, the film can be seen as a type of literary film which constitutes a faithful screen adaptation of the original novel. Furthermore, the film *Sangnoksusu* made its mark as a commercial success, achieving such feats as drawing an audience of 170,000 people at its initial release at the Myöngbo Theater in Seoul.²

The notable nature of the film, however, does not simply lie in its level of quality or in its success in terms of the scale of its audiences. Rather, what is being paid attention to here is how the film's narrative of sacrificial devotion to the enlightenment and development of rural areas converges with the 1960s dominant ideology of modernization to form the film's political implications. The modernization discourse of the early 1960s often perceived rural areas as being both the root source and a reflective mirror of underdevelopment and poverty.³ Likewise, this film reflects the psychological terrain of a Korean society that was desperately yearning for an escape from underdevelopment.

These very elements eventually formed the inherent basis for the use of the film as a propaganda tool for government policies under the Pak Chönghüi (Park Chung-hee) regime.⁴ Having come to power through the May 16 Coup of 1961, Pak Chönghüi implemented a development drive designed to bring about modernization as his basic policy line. This drive was rooted in the absorption of the dominant desire to eliminate poverty and overcome backwardness into the

¹ At the time the film was released, it was considered "to be a faithful digest of the original novel on which it was based." "*Simbun üi isang chal käryö*" [Sim Hun saliently depicts his ideals in *Sangnoksusu*], *Tonga ilbo*, September 25, 1961, 4.

² "*Sangnoksusu 16 nyön man e tasi yöngwahwa*" [*Sangnoksusu* made into a film after sixteen years], *Kyönghyang sinmun*, November 5, 1977, 6.

³ Yi Sangnok, "Kyöngje cheil chuü üi sahoejök kusöng kwa saengsanjök chuch'e mandülgi" (Configuring social construction and 'productive subjects' in economy-oriented structures), *Yöksa munje yön'gu* 25 (2011): 138–139.

⁴ Theodore Hughes maintains that the biopolitics of developmentalism relied on a visual order in the Korean literature and films produced during the Cold War era. The narrative of development found in *Sangnoksusu* was also relevant to the biopolitics of the developmentalism of the Pak Regime during the 1960s. See Chapter 4, "Development as Devolution" in Theodore Hughes, *Literature and Film in Cold War South Korea* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

logic behind his system of rule. Along with anti-communism, the modernization drive emerged as one of the important pillars that supported the Pak Chŏnghŭi regime in the 1960s. Sin Sangok's film, *Sangnoksu*, which told of the sacrifices of young people who devoted their lives to eliminating poverty and backwardness in rural areas, constituted a subtle point of convergence with the modernization policies of the Pak Chŏnghŭi regime.

In fact, Pak Chŏnghŭi, after having watched the film, ordered the film to be mass printed in 16 mm format and circulated widely in rural parts of the country. Thus, the film *Sangnoksu* was utilized as a propaganda tool for rural enlightenment to embody Pak's modernization policy towards the rural areas, signifying the direct and indirect use of art as a political medium and the collusion between popular art and politics.

Sin Sangok's overall career as a film producer in the 1960s was closely intertwined with the Pak regime. Having produced numerous works in an array of genres that included literary, history, melodrama, war, and comedy films, Sin Sangok was a leading box office director at the forefront of the Korean film industry during the 1950s and 1960s—a period known as the golden era of Korean cinema. Through the release of many sensational films such as *Romansŭ ppappa* (Romantic papa, 1960), *Sŏng Ch'unhyang* (1961), *Sarangbang sonnim kwa ōmōni* (The houseguest and my mother, 1961), *Sangnoksu*, *Romance Gray* (1963), *Pŏng'ori samnyong* (Deaf Samnyong, 1964), and *Ppalgan mahura* (Red scarf, 1964), Sin managed to stake out his position as a leading director within the Korean film industry during the 1960s.

His production company entitled Shin-Film (Sin-Film), which he established in 1961, grew to dominate the Korean film industry. It is a well-known fact that Pak Chŏnghŭi and Kim Chongp'il (Kim Jong-pil) provided direct and indirect support and sponsorship that helped to foster Shin-Film's rapid growth, providing fuel for claims that Sin Sangok and Shin-Film were the biggest beneficiaries of the military regime's cinema policy.⁵ In this regard, *Sangnoksu* has been labeled as an obvious example of collaboration between the film director and the government regime. Specifically, Sin continuously engaged in ideological cooperation with the Pak Chŏnghŭi regime as evidenced by the release of follow-up films to *Sangnoksu* such as *Ssal* (Rice, 1963), which told a story that justified the May 16 Coup and the inevitability of Pak's developmental policy.

Nevertheless, the cooperation between Sin Sangok and Pak Chŏnghŭi that continued throughout the 1960s does not sufficiently explain the film's political and ideological impact on the Korean public at that time. Also, the fact that

⁵ Cho Chunhyŏng, *Yŏnghwa cheguk Sin-film* (Cinema, empire, and Shin-film) (Han'guk yŏngsang charyowŏn, 2009), 21.

Sangnoksŭ was used as a political propaganda tool to promote the modernization of rural areas does not completely explain the political implications embedded in *Sangnoksŭ* in the 1960s.⁶ These facts constitute nothing more than the external factors in understanding this film's reception and popularity. It is important to understand that the propaganda aspect of the film did not simply work as a means of top-down control but that the film's narrative functioned to arouse sentiments that resonated among the general populace and wielded a widespread cognitive and emotionally persuasive power.⁷

The circumstances around the production of *Sangnoksŭ* demonstrate that, either directly or not and consciously or not, the film played a crucial role of bridging the gap between authority and the populace to determine the direction of the modernization of Korean society. In this respect, Sin's film, *Sangnoksŭ*, is symptomatic of a complex relationship that existed between popular art and government censorship, as *Sangnoksŭ* served as an allegory for national destiny and development in Korean society during the 1960s.

Then, what was the foundation that made all of this possible? In other words, where does the aesthetic logic that made possible the strengthening of the cognitive and emotionally persuasive power of *Sangnoksŭ* as an allegory for national development and the spread of its political implications and significance lie? This study argues that this aesthetic source stemmed from the sublime. Kant argued that it is through the logic of the sublime that the subject becomes aware of its power as a rational being capable of elevating itself beyond its natural and phenomenal existence amid its 'physical' powerlessness. At this moment, what

⁶ Sin Sangok later released *Ssal* (Rice, 1963), a propaganda film that explicitly portrayed the Third Republic and the image of soldiers as leaders, and sought to justify rural modernization and development by recasting Sin Yŏnggyun and Ch'oe Ŭnhŭi as protagonists. However, the film, which was more explicit in terms of its political objective, was far less successful than *Sangnoksŭ* both in terms of its political impact and social effects. Please refer to the following works for more on *Ssal*. Chu Ch'anggyu, "T'alsingmin kukka ũi chendŏ (tasi) mandŭlgi: Sin Sangok ũi *Ssal* ũl chungsim ũro" (The post-colonial state's rebuilding of gender: Focusing on Sin Sangok's film, *Rice*), *Yŏnghwa yŏn'gu* 15 (2000): 175–223; Kim Sŏna, "Kŭndae ũi sigan, kukka ũi sigan: 1960 nyŏndae Han'guk yŏnghwa, chendŏ, kŭrigo kukka kwŏllyŏk tamnon" (Modern time, time of nation: Korean film, gender and discourse on authority in the 1960s), in *Han'guk yŏnghwa wa kŭndaesŏng* (Korean film and modernity), eds. Chu Yusin, et al. (Seoul: Sodo, 2001), 63–68.

⁷ This is reaffirmed by Sin Sangok's own account: "This film had serious social effects, so much so that it served as a significant stimulus for the Saemaŭl (New Village) Movement that emerged later on. Quite a few people have said that they got involved in the rural movement because of the indelible impression that the film left on them, and a number of female rural movement leaders died in the course of over-exerting themselves as part of their pledge to live like the female protagonist." Sin Sangok, *Nan yŏnghwa yŏtta* (I was cinema) (Seoul: Random House Korea, 2007), 78.

functions as the center of gravity of our existence in our ordinary lives suddenly becomes perceived as trivial and unimportant. What occurs in this logic of the sublime is the dominance of the superego. In the sublime, the superego forces the subject to act contrarily to its well-being, to renounce its interests, needs, pleasures, and everything else that binds it to the 'sensible world.'⁸ The logic of sacrifice depicted in the film *Sangnoksu*, in which the subjects give up their own happiness to enlighten the rural population, is a popular aesthetic version of this logic of the sublime. Based on an analysis of *Sangnoksu* as an allegory for modernization in an underdeveloped nation, this study intends to find the roots of the aesthetic dynamics of the sublime underlying the film and to reveal the political implications of these aesthetic dynamics in the sublime logic that prevailed in Korean society during the 1960s.

2. REDISCOVERY OF POVERTY AND THE TEARS OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

The film starts with a scene in which Ch'ae Yöngsin arrives in a rural area to conduct a rural revitalization campaign. Despite the misgivings and ignorance of the local farmers, she settles in Ch'öngsökkol and devotes herself to the enlightenment movement by establishing a school and teaching children and women. Meanwhile, Pak Tonghyök, who initially inspired Ch'ae Yöngsin's passion for such activities, drops out of school and returns to his hometown Han'gok-ri, devoting himself to the youth movement. The two characters see each other from time to time to encourage each other's passion for the movement and develop their relationship from being comrades to being lovers. This film not only describes the couple's passion and self-sacrifice, but also the camaraderie between the two. After an ardent battle to expose a plot hatched by a pro-Japanese landlord to destroy the youth organization, Pak Tonghyök is unjustly accused and arrested by the police. After visiting Tonghyök in prison, Ch'ae Yöngsin falls ill from overwork while building a new school that would enable her to take in more students. Eventually Yöngsin dies on her sickbed after calling for her lover Tonghyök. Having arrived too late to see his beloved one last time, Tonghyök vows to complete his lover's mission as he follows her funeral procession. Set against a backdrop of the desolate landscape of rural areas populated by impoverished farmers and their families, the film draws its audience's attention to Ch'ae Yöngsin's difficulties, her self-sacrificial devotion, and her parting from her lover and subsequent death as the consequences of this devotion.

⁸ For more on this understanding of 'sublime,' see Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 149–160.

The film *Sangnoksŭ*, therefore, effectively embodies the core plot of the novel while faithfully reproducing the ideals of enlightenment ideology as well as the story of romance between a young man and woman. This film adaptation resulted in social effects not unlike those caused by the original novel. However, it would be an oversimplification to assign the cause of such an impact to the fact that the film faithfully reproduced the core message and morals of enlightened nationalism inherent in the novel.⁹ Rather, the immense impact of the film was made possible by the emergence of a new context formed in a historical setting that was totally different from the time of the release of the original novel. Despite the fact that the film *Sangnoksŭ* is a reworking of the novel in cinematic form, as it is situated in different circumstances, the film asserts a different and independent signifier that goes beyond the level of a simple adaptation of the original novel. In other words, situated in the 1960s, the film was endowed with a new context and meaning different from the original novel.

The most significant impact of this film's story on the Korean psyche emanated from the formation of an effective point of convergence with the collective social psychology of the populace living at that time. Underlying this convergence point was the overall atmosphere within Korean society, in which a consensus on the need for the urgent task known as 'rural modernization' had begun to grow from the late 1950s onwards.¹⁰ It was this atmosphere that provided the psychological grounds that allowed Pak Chŏnghŭi's modernization drive to gain popular support at the time. In other words, the Pak regime's (rural) modernization project was readily implemented via the successful integration of the discourse on (rural) modernization which had become more widespread and more persuasive in the wake of the April 19 Uprising and the increasing popular support for rural modernization.¹¹ The reasons why this film portraying the story of a couple dedicated to rural enlightenment during the Japanese colonial period acquired its contemporary significance in the 1960s, can be seen as having derived from these circumstances.

For a film depicting a story set in the Japanese colonial era to have had the kind of impact it had on a 1960s audience, the power of the sensory immediacy of

⁹ The film reviews in newspapers at the time are typical of this assessment: "The pure passion of the young people who in their eagerness devoted themselves to the soil with pickaxes and chalk, instead of graduation caps and notebooks is tear-inducing." "Simhun ŭi isang chal kŭryŏ," *ibid.*

¹⁰ Chŏng Hongsoŭp, "1960-nyŏndae nongch'on kŭndaebwa tamnon kwa nongch'on/tosi sosŏl" (Discourse on rural modernization and rural/urban novels of the 1960s), *Minjok munbaksŭ yŏn'gu* 40 (2009): 135–136.

¹¹ Hwang Pyŏngju, "1960 nyŏndae Pak Chŏnghŭi ch'eje ŭi 't'alhujin kŭndaewha' tamnon" (Discourse on 'post-colonialism' during the 1960s), *Han'guk minjok undongsa yŏn'gu* 56 (2008): 239–280.

cinema must have played a significant role.¹² However, even more important was its underlying psychological mechanism through which a more profound impact was created. In this regard, one of the important points of the film *Sangnoksu* that affected the audience was the urgency of its explicit message of liberation from ignorance and poverty, as well as of ‘future’ and ‘hope.’ This urgency in the film is expressed in the scene in which the female protagonist Ch’ae Yöngsin painfully writes the words ‘future’ and ‘hope’ on the chalkboard for the benefit of the students and the villagers although she is barely able to hold herself up due to her illness. Although it is true that the urgency of the message in the film is inherent in the character’s tear-inducing self-sacrifice, what made it seem even more urgent was the current ‘common sense’ that the contemporary audience shared in their desire to escape poverty. Furthermore, what is at work during this process of embedding the urgency of the messages emphasized in the film in the consciousness of the audience is the repetition compulsion towards the categorical imperative of Korean society’s escape from poverty via modernization which was to be achieved at any cost. The film *Sangnoksu* effectively supports this compulsion through a kind of ideological variation. As such, we see that in the film, the national consciousness supporting the enlightenment ideology at the heart of the novel plays a secondary role. Instead, we realize that the emphasis has subtly been moved toward the ideological direction of liberation from poverty and ignorance. This is also clearly evidenced by the film’s scaling back of elements of conflict and resistance toward Japanese colonial rule as mere narrative background and its relative emphasis on passion for rural enlightenment and the sublimity of devotion.

Considering the above, it can be said that the film *Sangnoksu* in some respects expressed the Pak regime’s discourse on modernization through its cinematic language even before such discourse became dominant within Korean society. Why was this the case? Pak Chönghŭi gave a speech that steered the direction of the national consciousness from the anti-imperial struggle following the March 1st Movement to ‘the struggle against poverty’ and then to ‘modernization of the nation’ aimed at freeing the people from underdevelopment.¹³ Taking this into account, it is not difficult to conclude that the shift in narrative focus found in the film *Sangnoksu* shared a significant homology with Pak Chönghŭi’s logic. In addition, the subordination of national consciousness as well as the shift in focus tie in closely with the melodramatic narrative conventions of this film. As in the

¹² The mechanism of cinematic effect will be delved into at greater length further on in this study.

¹³ Pak Chönghŭi, “Che 45 hoe samil chöl kyöngch’uksa” (Celebratory speech marking the 45th anniversary of the March 1st Movement), *Speeches by President Pak Chönghŭi*, Vol. 2, Office of Presidential Secretary, February, 1973, 56.

fiction, the film depicts the protagonists' bitter trials and hardships as a result of the suppression of the colonial government. However, in the film, these nationalistic implications are subordinate to the melodramatic narrative strategy that emphasizes the deliverance of the rural populace from poverty and ignorance as well as the moral loftiness of self-sacrifice. As such, the nationalistic context of Tonghyök and Yöngsin's hardships (the suppression of imperial Japan) was transferred as a post-historic melodramatic obstacle accepted by audiences at the time as the bitter trials and difficulties that impeded sublime moral attainment.

In Sim Hun's novel *Sangnoksu* released in the 1930s, the self-consciousness of enlightenment and modernization was expressed through an intellectual sense of duty. However, in the course of the production and reception of the film version, this theme was expanded and replicated on the level of popular consciousness. This was due to the fact that film, unlike the novel, is a popular art form that involves the notion of spectatorship. And through this spectatorship as a medium, the collective consent and empathy of the populace toward the modernization of Korean society that prevailed in the early 1960s were projected into the film. Director Sin Sangok recreated the voluntary hardships and enlightenment consciousness of colonial era intellectuals through the portrayal of the two protagonists from the viewpoint of the 1960s and showed it to contemporary Korean audiences in the form of cinematic imagery. The audiences identified themselves with Ch'ae Yöngsin and Pak Tonghyök, who sacrificed their own safety and happiness to liberate the rural populace from ignorance and poverty, and internalized the belief that the modernization of Korean society was the means to overcome backwardness as if it arose from their own desires. As such, the spectacle of backward rural areas during the Japanese colonial period as depicted by the director passed through the prism of the contemporary consciousness of the 1960s and was made to naturally overlap with the contemporary scenery of Korean society. During this process, the barren, denuded rural landscape depicted in the film was decontextualized from its time setting and was transcoded into the landscape of the backwardness of Korean society of the 1960s. In this regard, the following newspaper article's remarks on the film *Sangnoksu's* treatment of the landscape are suggestive of something entirely different from what the article originally intended.

(The film) shows on the cinemascope screen the plight of the rural population and its provincialism at their most pathetic levels. However, there is insufficient explanation of the historical circumstances and causes of the desperate reality depicted in the film. ¹⁴

¹⁴ “*Simhun üi isang chal küryö*,” *ibid.*

This comment implies that while it described the portrayal of a barren rural landscape, the film omitted an explanation of its historical context. However, the lack of explanation of the barren rural landscape rather worked as the decisive element to create the unique effect of this film, drawing the spectators into the contemporaneity of the situation in the 1960s. The barren landscape of rural areas depicted in the film *Sangnoksŭ* functioned as a medium for the ‘rediscovery of poverty’ at the level of collective consciousness, while reverberating in the perception and awareness of the spectators. As a result, poverty in rural areas underwent a process of naturalization thanks to the power of the cinematic image, which was able to successfully overcome the twenty-six-year gap between the respective settings of the novel and the film. As such, the spectators perceived the barren landscape in the film as being the contemporary landscape of Korea in the 1960s.

Sin Sangok’s film *Sangnoksŭ* also suggests the presence of consensus among intellectuals and the general populace regarding the urgent need for ‘(rural) modernization.’ The consensus and empathy can be said to have affected the film’s meaning making process. Furthermore, the film rediscovers poverty in a manner that helps to disperse this consensus and empathy on a wider scale. If Sin Sangok’s films are the “product of a cultural action to portray the rapidly shifting emotional spectrum of the public in a meaningful manner,” and if the public correctly judged that “Sin Sangok himself was symptomatic of the Korean society of the 1950s and 1960s,”¹⁵ then the film *Sangnoksŭ* itself should be placed at the center of the discussion. The film *Sangnoksŭ* should be re-interpreted as a symptom of Korean society in the 1960s reflecting the psychological landscape of Korean society standing at the crossroads of ‘national modernization.’

The above point is further highlighted by the director’s memoirs.

I’m a ‘single-minded man’(?) who always thinks only of ‘movies’, but have always felt that ‘film directors in developing countries do have the duty to contribute thirty percent of their efforts to reflecting reality’. I firmly believe so even now. Film is not simply for fun. Imperative truths such as struggling against all odds, justice, the sow-as-you-reap effect, working beyond the mere fun aspect of the film, should remain alive. Young people nowadays will laugh at such words, yet this is what I believe in.

What came out of such a belief with nothing else in mind was the film, *Sangnoksŭ*. (.....) It was copied in 16 mm format for nationwide distribution to be enjoyed by a lot of people. Although they were not

¹⁵ Kim Soyŏng, “Chŏnt’ongsŏng kwa modŏnit’i ūi yuhok: Sin Sangok ūi chakp’um segye” (Tradition and the lure of modernity: Sin Sangok’s oeuvre), *Sinema, tekŭno munhwa ūi purŭn kekot* [Cinema, the flower of technological culture] (Seoul: Yŏrhwadang, 1996), 134–135.

paying spectators, this film may be one of the most popular films with the largest audiences of all time. I heard that President Pak shed tears when he saw the film and that Kim Chŏngil recommended that the film be used for educational purposes for the ruling elite of the communist party. I feel extremely proud of the fact that the two rival leaders of the north and south both felt empathy for the film. I believe this is an example demonstrating the power of cinema.¹⁶

The director's firm belief that directors in developing countries have the duty to pursue the improvement of social realities through cinema inevitably influenced the reinterpretation and re-contextualization of the narrative of the novel *Sangnoksŭ* describing the sublimity of self-sacrifice and devotion to the liberation of the rural populace from ignorance and poverty. However, even more salient in the director's memoirs is that the film was actually politically used by both North and South Korean leaders who were said to be 'tearful' and impressed by its message transcending mutual animosity and ideological conflict.¹⁷ The film brought about the spectators' rediscovery of poverty and the internalization and proliferation of the noble cause of the abolition of poverty. Such practical effects of the film conform to those sought at the level of authority. Thus the film mediated consent from the bottom and domination from the top in regard to rural/national modernization.

What is interesting is that the film was able to move the leaders of both the North and the South. The two leaders of the opposing regimes probably shared the need for the spirit of self-sacrifice that traded an individual's happiness and well-being for a national cause. At this point, the political implication of this film takes on a (pseudo) universality that helps to overcome the obstacle of the ideological divide between the left and the right. Without such universality, the two antagonistic leaders sharing 'one mind' would never have been possible.

¹⁶ Sin Sangok, *Nan yŏngbwa yŏtta* (I was cinema) (Seoul: Random House Korea, 2007), 77–78.

¹⁷ In the case of South Korea, Sin Sangok's own testimony was published in almost all of the gossip columns in a large number of newspapers: "Someone told me that President Park was tearful after having seen the film version of *Sangnoksŭ*." ("Nongch'on ŭi choŭn il ŭn allira" (Good works in rural areas to be widely advertised)," *Kyŏnghyang sinmun*, January 19, 1962. 1); "President Pak appeared to be highly impressed by the film, *Sangnoksŭ*, based on Sim Hun's novel of the same title, depicting young intellectuals dedicating their lives to the betterment of rural areas." ("Sangnoksŭ e kamdonghan Pak ŭijang" (President Pak impressed with *Sangnoksŭ*), *Tonga ilbo*, January 19, 1962. 1). North Korea was not very different in terms of the manner in which it accepted this film. Kim Chŏngil encouraged using this film to educate the members of the Workers' Party, thus implying that the contents of this film, which included the sublime self-sacrifice of individuals for the group value called 'development,' also had an influence on the North Korean public at the time.

This study argues that what explains such pseudo-universality is the working of the aesthetics of the sublime. The aesthetics of the sublime can overcome any ideological dispute and work as a foundation that supports the emotional engine of social modernization (whether it be capitalistic or socialistic modernization). Moreover, the aesthetics of the sublime is narrated through the conventions of popular melodrama in which personal and political themes are closely combined.¹⁸ This study intends to reveal the aesthetic mechanism of the sublime at work in the film *Sangnoksu*, the combination of the aesthetic mechanism of the sublime and melodramatic narrative conventions, and their political implications in Korean society during the 1960s. However, in order to articulate this point, it is necessary to take a slight detour.

3. MATERNAL SUBLIME AND ITS RUPTURE

Sin Sangok's film *Sangnoksu* follows the story found in Sim Hun's novel *Sangnoksu*. However, the film does not limit itself to a mere cinematic 'summarization' or repetition of the novel. Most of all, Sin Sangok was a director who exhibited a clear interest and passion for the creation of stylish scenes and *mise-en-scène* that transcended the existing rugged characteristics of Korean cinema, a feat that was achieved through the introduction and experimentation with new forms of cinematography.¹⁹ Sin's obsession with *mise-en-scène* results in an incommensurable difference from the original narrative of the novel. This difference also appears in the narrative structure as well. The most noticeable juncture at which the cinematic narrative diverges from that of the novel occurs in the film's ending.²⁰ Then where does the difference in the two endings lie?

A significant portion of Sim Hun's novel is dedicated to the wanderings of Pak Tonghyök after the death of Ch'ae Yöngsin amid circumstances meant to reflect his despair and disillusionment as well as his determination to embark on a new

¹⁸ According to Steven Chung, *Sangnoksu* is a "melodrama of development" in which the *v narod* narrative and the tragic love plot are closely intertwined. He explains that the melodramatic features of the film are integral to its mass cultural effect, that is, the potential of the film narrative to make an emotional impression and to work politically. Steven Chung, *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sangok and Postwar Cinema*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 129–145.

¹⁹ For more on the 'desire for scene making' that permeates Sin Sangok's films, please refer to Pak Yuhüi, "Spektök'ül kwa tokchae: Sin Sangok yönghwaron" (Spectacle and dictatorship: Shin Sangok's film theory). *Yöngbwa yön'gu* 49 (2011): 103–113.

²⁰ The reason why this ending is important is that the ending in a narrative is the point at which ideological forces that are formed in a unique ideological setting come into place. See Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 154.

start to his activities in his village. However, the film *Sangnoksu* does not show the bewilderment of Pak Tonghyök after the loss of his lover nor his sudden determination for a new start in Han'gok-ri. Instead, the film ends with Pak Tonghyök (played by Sin Yönggyun) ringing the school bell while mourning the death of Ch'ae Yöngsin (played by Ch'oi Ünhi). The school children rush over while a voice-over version of *Aehyangga* (Song of the love of one's hometown) plays in the background. If the novel's ending reaffirms the male oriented enlightenment movement represented by the elite figure of Pak Tonghyök,²¹ the film's ending attempts to minimize or reduce the conscious and unconscious suggestions of the male-elite-centered structure. The elite male subject (Pak Tonghyök) appears to be marginalized when a new beginning is initiated by the moment commemorating Ch'ae Yöngsin's self-sacrifice. The last scene of the film showing Ch'ae Yöngsin's smiling face superimposed over evergreen trees rising high into the blue sky is a symbolic shot illustrating this point (Figure 1).



Figure 1

In the fiction, Ch'ae Yöngsin disappears from the narrative without being properly mourned. However, her counterpart in the film achieves the status of a goddess when she looks down from the sky. The embedded image symbolizes the sublime maternity of Ch'ae Yöngsin who benevolently watches over her children and promises to protect them even after her death. The repetitive placement of Ch'ae Yöngsin and the children in the same frame also accentuates the image of sublime maternity throughout the entire film.²² Furthermore, such an

²¹ Yi Hyeryöng, "Sinmun bunarodü sosöl—litörösi üi wigye chilsö wa kü up'yosang" (Newspaper, *v narod*, novels: categories and symbols of literacy), *Han'guk kündae munbak yön'gu* 15 (2007): 185–191.

²² Shots containing both Ch'ae Yöngsin and the children in the film tend to underline the maternal image of the female protagonist.

interpretation is further supported by the fact that the actress Ch'oe Ŭnhŭi often projected the image of an ideal mother possessing the virtues of self-sacrifice and intelligence at that time.²³ The image of sublime maternity in the film *Sangnoksu* is fused with the image of a transcendental superego obtained only through death and thus creates greater resonance compared to images of maternity found in other films.²⁴

Riding on the power of this image of the maternal sublime, the film's ending places Ch'ae Yŏngsin's legacy at its center and creates an elegy of maternal self-sacrifice. Unlike the novel that begins with a gathering of students who have just returned from a student enlightenment campaign, it is significant that the film opens with Ch'ae Yŏngsin entering Chŏngsŏkkol to dedicate herself to the rural enlightenment movement. The first part of the novel (the scene in which the students first meet) is reprised in a flashback by Ch'ae Yŏngsin as she begins her activities at Chŏngsŏkkol. In other words, the beginning and ending of this film are all centered on Ch'ae Yŏngsin. Although she is spiritually impressed and encouraged by Pak Tonghyŏk and her activities at Chŏngsŏkkol are regularly interspersed with Pak Tonghyŏk's activities at Hangok-ri, she constitutes the principal subject in the cinematic *diegesis*. This is reaffirmed by the asymmetrical treatment of the camera angle that shows each protagonist from a different cinematic perspective. While Ch'ae Yŏngsin is mainly portrayed in low angle shots, Pak Tonghyŏk is exempted from such angles apart from at the beginning of the film in which he makes a public speech. In other words, the central position of Ch'ae Yŏngsin as a sublime subject in the film is also made prominent through the use of a camera angle that differs from that used for shots of Pak Tonghyŏk.

In this respect, the film *Sangnoksu* differentiates itself from the widespread notion that identifies state power with male authority. Generally, femininity is portrayed as inherently subordinate to the collective masculinity that represents the people particularly in the process of the formation of the nation state and modernization.²⁵ However, it is at this point that the film *Sangnoksu* in effect calls this view into question. While it is self-evidently true that femininity was subordinated to male authority, the logic behind this film shows that Sin's artistic representation does not simply replicate such a position. For sure, the image of

²³ For representations of motherhood by Ch'oe Ŭnhŭi, see Pak Yuhŭi, "Yonghwa paewu Ch'oe Ŭnhŭi rŭl t'onghae pon mosŏng p'yosang kwa pundan ch'eje" (Motherhood representation and divided system as observed through actress Ch'oe Ŭnhŭi), *Han'guk kŏgyesul yŏn'gu* 33 (2011): 129–164.

²⁴ It is in this regard that the representation of motherhood in *Sangnoksu* differs from that found in other films.

²⁵ Kim Sŏna, *ibid.*, 65–66.

the modern female subject played by Ch'ae Yöngsin tends to follow the same gendered logic of male-centered enlightenment, and yet, it is her maternal image and method of self-sacrifice that fulfill the aesthetics of the sublime and strengthen the emotional identification with the task of development. This is the same place from which the emotional reverberation of the film justifying and creating identification with the categorical imperative for enlightenment and development emanates.

The significance of Ch'ae Yöngsin as the subject of the sublime in the narrative of development in the film is unquestionably affirmed in the last sequence. After his lover's funeral, Pak Tonghyök stands by the school bell and is reminded of something she said to him when she was still alive: "I will ring the school bell every morning and evening. The sound of the bell will certainly shake the villagers from their dark memories and deep slumber and keep ringing until it reaches the farthest place." This emotional testimony is heard as a voice-over sounded over the montage of Pak ringing the school bell and the children running towards the school. This sequence establishes Ch'ae Yöngsin as representing the film's center of signification and identification accomplished through the use of Ch'ae Yöngsin's voice-over that plays a vital role in the process of creating this center. The hearing of her voice while she is not present on screen serves to reinforce the message of liberation from ignorance and the unenlightened state ("dark memories and deep slumber"), which resonates throughout the entire film. Furthermore, the artificial reverberations of this voice-over suggest that it is the voice of the audience lying deep in their minds that is being heard and facilitates the effect of identification for the audience.²⁶ In this regard, the voice-over in this film is construed as an acoustic interpretation of the logic of the sublime. The use of sound, in this case Ch'ae Yöngsin's voice-over, to awaken the inner slumber of the audience who hear her words as if they emanated from themselves, is reminiscent of Kant's suggestion that the sublime awakens the inner moral law.

However, the signification of the film is not that straightforward. The film contains a scene which both works toward such an ending and at the same time shows subtle 'stains' and 'cracks' along the way. Such ruptures reveal the ideological ambiguity of the film if only for a moment.

²⁶ Although not identical, it is similar to the technical effect created by 'the voice of the ego' (*son-je*). For 'the voice of the ego,' refer to Michel Sion, *Yöngghwa üi moksori* (La voix au cinéma), trans. Pak Sönju (Seoul: Tongmunsön, 2005), 77–78.

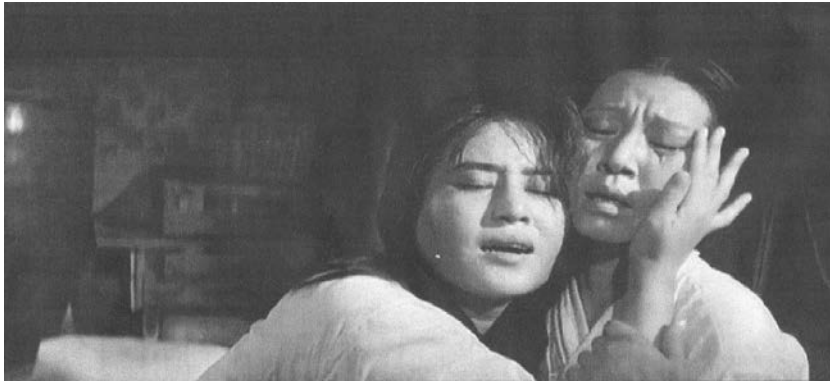


Figure 2

As seen in Figure 2, this is the scene where, faced with her own imminent death, Ch'ae Yöngsin hallucinates while in the throes of longing for Pak Tonghyök. She mistakes a lady taking care of her for Tonghyök and presses her own face to her cheek while calling out his name, "Tonghyök." She collapses while repeating, "I love you, I love you..." before she finally succumbs to death. This scene of tragic despair and emotional upheaval is characterized by melodramatic excess. Here, her expression of a strange *jouissance* reenacting an erotic moment with her lover is symptomatic of excess. Furthermore, the sense of despair and release of tragic emotions are also symptoms of excess. This is the moment when attachment and remorse over her desire that was restrained and sacrificed for the great cause finally rupture the wall of repression and come to the surface. In turn, devotion to the enlightenment movement becomes relativized. Borrowing from psychoanalytical language, it is a moment when the guarantee of the Other as a reward for self-suppressed desire is rendered powerless. This is symbolized by her pathetic longing for her long-gone lover and the language of desire in the repetition of "I love you," overwhelming the children's singing of *Aehyangga* (a soundtrack meant to remind the audience of a sense of morality and responsibility) heard in the background.

The ideological crack that momentarily surfaces in this scene is quickly glossed over by the following scene. In the last scene of the film mentioned above, the sudden ideological ambiguity that surfaced in the previous scene is covered up. Furthermore, the last words by Ch'ae Yöngsin's supporter Wönjae (played by Sin Söngil) ("Our teacher told us, before she passed away, not to be sad but to fight until the end") have a comparable effect. What effect then does this symptomatic scene have in the film? Does it serve as evidence of contradictory and "over-

determined meanings”²⁷ often found in Sin Sangok’s films therefore revealing the contradictions and cracks in the ideology of self-sacrifice carried out in the name of a national cause? Or does it rather serve as an opportunity to strengthen the ideological cogency of the film?

4. MODERNITY OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT AND THE SUBLIME

It was mentioned earlier that the central aesthetics of the film *Sangnoksŭ* can be addressed as the sublime. In the Kantian notion, the sublime is defined as the power that arises from within that makes it possible for us to regard our deep concerns (wealth, health, life, etc.) as trivial matters.²⁸ The basic structure of *Sangnoksŭ* exactly follows such a concept of the sublime in that the two protagonists are able to trivialize personal values such as love and happiness in the name of ideology and morality represented as the “rural enlightenment.” During the course, they experience a spiritual uplift as a consequence. As Kant suggested, the sublime is closely related to the issue of (self) sacrifice.²⁹ According to the logic of the sublime, the greater the sacrifice the greater the value of the cause requiring such a sacrifice. The emotional intensity of self-sacrifice in *Sangnoksŭ* is much stronger than in Sin Sangok’s other films such as *Sarangbang sonnim kwa ōmoni* (The houseguest and my mother), *I saengmyong tabadorok* (Until the end of my life) which also portray women’s self-sacrifice. This is because the self-sacrifice in *Sangnoksŭ* requires Ch’ae Yōngsin to relinquish not only her feminine desire or happiness (as is the case in the two films mentioned above) but also her life.

In this context, the real effect of the ideological ambiguity found in the film *Sangnoksŭ* becomes evident. While the female protagonist’s regret and remorse over her unrequited love suddenly explode through melodramatic excess, her tragic death functions as an essential means to enhance the greatness of the cause of ‘rural enlightenment’ or ‘modernization of the nation’—the greater the anguish and tragedy of her self-sacrifice the greater the value of the cause. The maternal sublime in the film *Sangnoksŭ* is completed at the point where the self-sacrifice for the greater cause of deliverance from poverty and ignorance encounters the image of the self-sacrifice of maternity. From this point, the cracks, which may appear to disturb the smooth conclusion of the film, provide the opportunity to emotionally justify the demand for self-sacrifice and the

²⁷ Kim Soyōng, *ibid.*, 134.

²⁸ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement [Kritik der Urteilskraft]*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 111.

²⁹ For example in this phrase, “(in the sublime) Imagination gains an extension and a might greater than that which it sacrifices,” in Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, 120.

devotion required by the rural/national modernization drive under the logic of the sublime. Consequently, the scene of the rupture paradoxically solidifies the effect of the ending through a signification process which intercepts a smooth ideological conclusion and creates the condition for intensifying the level of sublime emotion.

More profoundly, the image of Ch'ae Yöngsin, who put aside her own personal well-being and happiness in the name of moral duty and was not afraid of difficulties and hardships, is built up gradually in the mind of the audience. The earlier hardships and difficulties, and self-sacrifice made by Ch'ae Yöngsin are enhanced by the awareness of the audience along with the tragic sentiment of this scene. Thus this film had the realistic impact on the spectators of restructuring the value of national reconstruction/modernization as an absolute imperative by reminding them of the reality they faced. The film treats Ch'ae Yöngsin's death differently from the novel by pointing to the direct cause of Ch'ae Yöngsin's death. In the film, she falls down during her work that she pursued even in her critical condition. The novel, on the other hand, describes how Ch'ae Yöngsin moves to Japan to study and recuperates but eventually dies of illness after returning home. This means that the film departs from the novel by intentionally inserting scenes to invite sublime emotion.

Then, how did the aesthetic of the sublime in the film *Sangnoksü* come into contact with the Pak Chönghüi regime's discourse of modernization? It is important to consider that the modernization discourse promoted by the Pak Chönghüi regime was inherently linked to a sort of idealism that placed emphasis on spiritual reform. It is widely accepted that the roots of Pak's implementation of modernization lie in such movements as 'spiritual revolution' and 'spiritual reformation,' as "strategies aimed at undermining material inferiority with spiritual superiority."³⁰ These strategies naturally merged with the logic of the sublime, as the subject's consciousness of unlimited capability is awakened by the self-awareness of one's incompetence and sense of inferiority. Here, what transforms incompetence into 'unlimited capability' is the key to the logic of the sublime.³¹ The fact that the spiritual blueprint referred to as a spiritual revolution and reformation was accompanied by an insistence on devotion and self-sacrifice on the part of the people and the leader for the great cause of the 'elimination of backwardness and national reconstruction' provides sufficient grounds for its

³⁰ Hwang Pyöngju, *ibid.*, 266. For more on the spiritism found in Pak Chönghüi regime's discourse on modernization, please refer to the same book, 265–271.

³¹ "The Subject's very incapacity betrays the consciousness of an unlimited faculty of the same Subject, and that the mind can only form an aesthetic estimate of the latter faculty by means of that incapacity," in Immanuel Kant, *ibid.*, 108.

interpretation as a political-economic codification under the logic of the sublime. The aesthetics of the sublime achieved through the self-sacrifice and devotion to moral duty and the resulting spiritual fulfillment and sense of emotional integrity found in the film *Sangnoksŭ* can be seen as having a shared context with the Pak regime's spiritual blueprint.³² Such an aesthetic basis grounding the film's collusion with the Pak Chŏnghŭi regime's logic of modernization, in which the film at a later point was used as a textbook example for promulgating the 'Saemaŭl Movement,' can be traced back to this juncture.

Kant's comparison of the sublime to the accumulation of capital in the aspect of "gaining an extension and a might greater than that which it sacrifices"³³ becomes more significant than ever. From the perspective of this article, the sublime is an aesthetic expression of the logic of modernization in an underdeveloped nation. The idealism of the sublime transforms and justifies self-sacrifice as an irrefutable moral and ethical duty in the name of economic development and modernization amid backward material conditions. In this sense, it can be considered a part of the emotional logic of modernization that effectively created the voluntary consent and participation of the public. The portrayal of the barrenness of the rural landscape in the film leads to the rethinking of poverty and material deficiency, and locating the means for their obliteration in a spiritual revolution and dismantling of ignorance. The logic of self-sacrifice extolled in pursuit of such spiritual reform faithfully follows the process of the sublime under the wings of which the film *Sangnoksŭ* articulates the ideological implications of the Pak Chŏnghŭi regime's logic of modernization.

Sin Sangok's *Sangnoksŭ* is a film that illustrates the relationship between public art and politics. Essential to this inner working of the film was the aesthetic logic of the sublime and its power of emotional persuasion over the general public. The aesthetics of the sublime found in this film that idealized self-sacrifice for a great cause was combined with melodramatic conventions to maximize the explosion of emotions resulting in intensifying the film's appeal for the public. Here, it is important to note that the strong appeal of this film precisely reflected the desire of the public at the time to fundamentally eradicate poverty and underdeveloped living conditions. Given the fact that it cunningly linked the desire of the public with the political logic of a ruling system that implemented forceful top-down modernization, this film illustrates how the political function

³² The situation was not much different in North Korea in the 1960s. The fundamental emotional structure of *Sangnoksŭ* comes from absolute self-sacrifice in the name of a great cause. That is the realistic and aesthetic grounds for the universality of the emotional structure of *Sangnoksŭ* despite differences in the ideological positions of two mutually hostile nations.

³³ Karatani Gojin, *Transkuritik* [Transcritic], trans. Song T'aeuk (Seoul: Han'gilsa, 2005), 362–367.

of Sin Sangok's film *Sangnoksu* reconciles with the history of Korean modernization during the 1960s.

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