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Brian M. Yecies
University of Wollongong, byecies@uow.edu.au

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Planet Hallyuwood's Political Vulnerabilities: Censuring the Expression of Satire in *The President's Last Bang* (2005)

Brian Yecies[†]

South Korea's cinema has recently enjoyed a Golden Age that has opened up new spaces for creative and cultural expression in Korea and probably in the larger Asia-Pacific region. Domestic market share of local films, lucrative pre-sales, a robust screen quota and fresh genre-bending narratives and styles have attracted admiration in Korea and abroad. However, since its peak of success in late 2005 and early 2006, extreme competition between domestic films, piracy and illegal downloading, halving of the screen quota and the erosion of ancillary markets have impacted on the industry's ability to sustain vitality and profitability. Among the challenges facing the next decade of growth in the Asia-Pacific is 'censorship', which was supposed to have been eliminated in Korea in 1996 by a change in government policy. A case study of Im Sang-soo's The President's Last Bang (2005) illustrates how a representative 386 Generation filmmaker has encountered and resisted startling attempts to suppress freedom of expression. A theoretical framework for exposing and opposing intimidation in defamation and censorship struggles is applied to this case, and the methods used by each side to attain their goals are analyzed. It is hoped this analysis will stimulate a deeper understanding of how Korea's nascent national cinema engages with sensitive social issues as part of its transformation from a national to a supranational cinema, or what we might call 'Planet Hallyuwood' – the fusing of Hallyu (Korean Wave) and Hollywood.

[†] Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies, University of Wollongong, Australia. Phone: +61 2 4221 4076. Fax: +61 2 4221 5341. Email: byecies@uow.edu.au

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Challenges for the Korean Cinema[1]

Censorship across parts of the Asia-Pacific region is impacting significantly on creativity and the freedom of expression, primarily due to the close scrutiny of scripts and the cutting of final prints by government officials and by restrictive rating systems. In South Korea (hereafter Korea) by law censorship is non-existent, however, different ways of curtailing and criticizing freedom of expression have arisen in place of official government regulation. This article analyzes a new mode of 'censureship' dynamics, that is, the expression of disapproval, criticism and blame for contributing something provocative to Korea's contemporary entertainment cinema. A case study of director/writer Im Sang-soo's 2005 so-called historical-fictitious film *The President's Last Bang* is used to illustrate the methods that representative filmmakers have used to overcome the oppression of creative and cultural expression, which is one of the complexities shaping the cinematic component of *Hallyu* or 'Korean wave' of popular culture spreading throughout East Asia and beyond. A theoretical framework for overcoming censorship struggles (Jansen and Martin 2003; Gray and Martin 2006) is applied to the strong expression of disapproval surrounding *The President's Last Bang*, and the methods used by each of the players in this case and how they obtained their goals are analyzed on the basis of published accounts. Despite all its glory, the Korean Cinema has experienced a dark side that continues to brew in the post-2006 downturn. The startling legal reprimanding of *The President's Last Bang* points to one of the significant burdens confronting not only the Korean cinema but also cinemas across the Asia-Pacific as they transform and look for new collaborations between diverse cultures and

[1] An earlier and shorter version of this article was presented at the 5th Korean Studies Association of Australasia (KSAA) Biennial Conference held at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia, 12–13 July 2007. The author thanks colleagues and friends Brian Martin, Kim Hyae-joon, Mark Russell and Ae-Gyung Shim as well as the anonymous referees for their helpful comments. A Korea Foundation Advanced Research Grant enabled valuable industry and archive research to be conducted for this study.

regulatory environments.[2] Not only is it likely that this article could open up a large can of worms, but also it is hoped it might stimulate discussion about Korean filmmakers in the post-Golden Age testing uncharted waters in their search for the next decade of growth.

The history of national cinemas in the Asia-Pacific region is plagued with gaping holes, and Korea's cinematic history is not without exception. Recent studies and edited collections such as Lee and Choe (1998), Lee (2000), James and Kim (2002), Kim (2002), Min, Joo and Kwak (2003), Kim (2004), McHugh and Abelmann (2005), Shin and Stringer (2005), Yi (2005), Yecies (2005), Jin (2006), Kim and An (2006), Yecies (2007) and Gateward (2007) provide new understandings of the little-known history of one of the hottest pan-Asian cinemas: the so-called New Korean Cinema. What binds these groundbreaking studies together is their contribution to the larger synthesis of what we might call 'Planet Hallyuwood' – the fusing of *Hallyu* and Hollywood.[3] The Korean cinema has become a 'full service cinema', which embraces 'a full range of modes of production and consumption' (Berry 2002: 1). Apart from its lion's share of the domestic exhibition market and fresh genre experimentation and narrative styles, the global recognition of the

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[2] Co-production treaties serve as one of the key means of engaging with other countries and facilitating transnational cultural flows. As of September 2008, New Zealand had co-production agreements with Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Italy, Singapore, Germany, Ireland, Spain and Korea. Australia has co-production arrangements with Britain, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Singapore and China, as well as memorandums of understanding with France and New Zealand (with negotiations underway with South Africa). Korea has co-production treaties with France in addition to New Zealand, but co-productions need not go through treaties to apply for government and semi-government (Korean Film Council, KOFIC) support programs and investment funds. In China, treaty negotiations are underway with France, which if successful will enable French filmmakers to gain never-before-seen access to the Chinese market. Upon completion, this will be China's fourth international co-production treaty along with Canada, Italy and Australia.

[3] Since early 2000, *Hallyu* – an intensive and extensive wave of popular culture – has been thrilling non-Korean fans and critics alike in Japan, China and Southeast Asia, as well as parts of the Middle East, Europe, and North and Latin America.

Korean cinema has focused on excellence in proactive film policy. Combined, these variables have helped filmmakers to breathe a universality into their narratives and characters while maintaining a distinct Korean sentiment. New spaces for freedom of expression have undoubtedly helped filmmakers achieve this aim. Yet, many important studies overlook the long-term impact censorship has had on the shaping of these spaces, let alone the creative hurdles filmmakers continue to face.

Censorship Struggles in the 1990s

Government and industry regulations as well as self-censorship efforts and the personal views of censorship and ratings board members make 'freedom of expression' a slippery and complex term. In addition, economics and conventional business models in the pursuit of profits also shape the formation of content – particularly by those who control the investments behind content production. Essentially, freedom of expression exists in shades and nuances defined by changing social norms, ideals, attitudes and beliefs, and differing – often competing – cultural perspectives around the world. Simply put, it is the autonomy to convey ideas and opinions no matter which medium is used, often resulting in the questioning of dominant ideologies and power structures. Throughout history, those who have challenged preconceived understandings of controversial topics such as obscenity (pornography), profanity, religion, violence and expressed critical views of governments and authority figures often have been fined, jailed, persecuted (banned from making films) or even killed for upsetting these arbitrarily established views. In film industries where heavy government interference exists, freedom of expression primarily has been limited by the censoring of scripts and final prints – particularly in regards to representing nudity, to glorifying violence and to critiquing the government and/or society (in which case would make the government look bad). In the case of Korea, recent censorship cases have been used as a tool to challenge regulatory conventions as well as to generate exploitative attention by particular filmmakers.

Within the recent historical context of censorship in Korea, the year 1996 is a watershed year, a year when the Constitutional Court ruled (on 4 October 1996) that pre-censorship regulations enacted by the Performance Ethics Board (a.k.a. the Korean Performing Arts Promotion

Committee, KPAPC) under the Film Promotion Law were unconstitutional. The Performance Ethics Board's so-called 'deliberation' system, which had exercised a heavy hand over storytelling since 1984 (under Motion Picture Law revisions), no longer had any power to restrict freedom of expression. In its place, the government initiated a rating system that provided a greater range of classification possibilities. Suddenly, the low-hanging ceiling that had been restricting creativity exploded, providing the impetus for both arthouse and commercial filmmakers to turn enthusiastically toward fresh ideas. It is precisely this moment that most scholars attribute to the fundamental beginnings of the Korean cinema's latest Golden Age.[4] Within a relatively short period of time, a brood of talented filmmakers and writers began drawing local, regional and international attention to a host of new cinematic possibilities, which prior to 1996 under the Motion Picture Law had been stifled.[5]

Since 1996, in spite of the nullification of so-called censorship laws, a residual form of censorship has continued under the rubric of the ratings classification system. In 1998, both Jang Sun-woo's *Bad Movie* and Im Sang-soo's *Girls' Night Out* were self-censored (re-edited) under compulsion by threat by the Performance Ethics Board. Then in 1999,

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[4] The Korean cinema's earliest 'Golden Age' dates back to the mid-to-late 1920s when a 'boom' in silent filmmaking occurred during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945). A second Golden Age appears to have occurred during the 1960s when an abundance of tear-jerking melodrama genre films was produced to meet government-urged industry quotas. Producers who successfully met these quotas received lucrative licenses from the government to import select Hollywood films. Its most recent Golden Age can be said to have begun in 1996 with the lifting of government regulations and a subsequent explosion of creativity.

[5] Prior to 1996, the Motion Picture Law, which took effect in 1962 under the Park Chung-hee dictatorship, required all filmmakers to obtain script (pre-production) approval from the Ministry of Public Information (hereafter MPI) and to give the government the right to the 'final cut' on completed films. All filmmakers also had to register with the government, and every film, whether domestic or foreign, required government permission to leave or enter the country. Park's regime as well the military governments that came after ultimately used the Motion Picture Law, that is, outright censorship, to nurture films that proselytized anti-communist ideology. Ironically, erotic 'hostess' genre films became popular (and widely tolerated by the government) while narratives that criticized the government's anti-communist ideology (and the government) were forbidden.

the film *Yellow Hair* received a three-month rating suspension – the first of its kind after the Media Ratings Board was established and the rating system was implemented (in mid 1999) – for containing a *ménage à trios* scene. During the 'rating-pending' period, that is, after the Media Ratings Board refused to rate the film – effectively making a domestic release impossible – the film's producer was forced to delete controversial scenes and then re-apply for a new rating, which became 18 plus. In the following year, the Media Ratings Board refused twice to rate a different film called *Yellow Flower*, which portrayed explicit, strange sex acts (in the tradition of Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) and Murakami's *Tokyo Decadence* (1992)). The film's producer Gwak Young-soo from Indiestory took the case to the Seoul Administrative Court and then the Korean Constitutional Court, which eventually found the Media Ratings Board guilty of violating freedom of expression. Whether circuitously or not, the aforementioned filmmakers bravely began laying stepping-stones for the greater freedom of expression.[6]

The next film to be rejected outright by the Media Ratings Board was Jang Sun-woo's *Lies* (2000), which is Korea's third film ever to be invited to compete in the Venice International Film Festival. This case stands apart from the pack because it is one of the first instances in which a filmmaker strategically set out to challenge directly the Board's authority and to maximize media attention for the film and its controversialism. Given that Jang Jeong-il's banned novel *Tell Me a Lie* involved the sexual escapades between a high school student and a 38-year old artist – sending writer Jang Jeong-il to jail – director Jang cleverly used the filmed version to cause a sensation. Only days before Venice, the Media Ratings Board refused to rate *Lies*, thus making it impossible for it to be distributed in Korea. Around the same time, the Association of Citizens Against Media Encouraging Obscenity and Violence lashed out against Jang Sun-woo and his producer Shin Chul. Finally, after multiple and lengthy suspensions by the Media Ratings Board, the filmmakers conceded to the hiding of private parts, but refused to change key elements in the script. A few other films such as *Too Young To Die* (2002), portraying a seventy-something year old

[6] Thanks in part to the efforts of these particular filmmakers, internationally-acclaimed films such as Ang Lee's *Lust and Caution* (2007), which contains explicit sexual-acrobatic lovemaking scenes, could be exhibited (and sold) in Korea without being cut.

couple having sex, have experienced similar censorship challenges and has also benefited from an ensuing media campaign.[7] The timing of *Lies* and *Too Young To Die* represents a type of advanced maturity in artistic freedom of expression.

The aforementioned cases, along with a batch of foreign films such as *Shortbus* (2006), *Battle In Heaven* (2005), *Kill Bill Vol. 1* (2003), *Wayward Cloud* (2005), *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), *Happy Together* (1997) and *Tokyo Decadence* (1992) have aroused deep questions about film censorship in Korea and its relationship to the portrayal of 'obscene' and violent content in public as well as the status of films receiving 'limited screening' or delayed ratings.[8] Combined, their experiences before the Media Ratings Board have generated a particular kind of energy aimed at changing the disapproving attitudes and perceptions of this particular aspect of freedom of expression.[9] Yet, unlike in the above cases, few other filmmakers and producers in the Korean Cinema's post-1996 era have had to fight so hard against litigation directed at the political gagging of a story as Im Sang-soo.

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[7] According to Darcy Paquet (2002), the first known occurrence of a film attracting a restricted rating is the nearly five-hour North Korean television documentary called *Animal Copulation* (1987), which portrays animal sex organs.

[8] *Battle in Heaven* (imported by World Cinema) is an interesting and particularly important case because it is one of the films that successfully used the Korean court system to get the vague standards behind the 'limited screening' rating from the Media Ratings Board deemed as unconstitutional. Before the appeal to the Seoul Administration Court and then the Constitutional Court, the film, which contained exposed private parts, was restricted to being shown at limited cinemas, and nearly all advertisement and DVD releases were banned. However, a lack of appropriate screening venues to service films with this type of rating effectively resulted in the prohibition of said films, thus making Ratings Board decisions of this type unconstitutional in the Court's view.

[9] Changes made to a number of domestic and foreign film posters such as *Bad Guy* (2001), *The Game of Their Lives* (2002), *3-Iron* (2004), *The Grudge* (2004), *Everybody Has Secrets* (2004), *Lady Chatterley* (2006), *Share Living and Joy* (2007), *Never Forever* (2007) and *The Cut* (2007) – that is the toning down of their sexually provocative/suggestive images and words (including in some cases representations of North Korea and horrific ghosts) – have also contributed to the larger but under-discussed debate about censorship.

Censorship Tactics

Apart from studies on wars, military operations and business dealings, rarely does one encounter analyses of tactics and backfire strategies used by members of national film industries to achieve a set of goals. Valuable studies on film censorship such as Butters (2007), Robb (2004), Lewis (2000), Petrie (1997), Couvares (1996), Jacobs (1991) Robertson (1989), Gardner (1987) and Randall (1970) abound. However, there is a dearth of attention given to the specific methods that filmmakers use for exposing and opposing intimidation in defamation and censorship struggles across World cinemas. The Korean cinema provides a fertile source of such cases because of its long history of massive censorship, which needs sustained discussion elsewhere.

The President's Last Bang (2005) is the main focus in the remainder of this study because from the start the script promised to become one of Korea's most controversial commercial entertainment feature films. Posters for the English-language market appear below in Figure 1. First, there is the subject matter that broached the topic of Park Chung-hee's death in a critical yet black-comic way. Second, is the provocative reputation surrounding Im and his methods for getting the film made in the first instance. Third, are the reputations surrounding producers Shim Jae-myung (who is politically savvy in her own right) and Shin Chul and executive producer Lee Eun who between them developed trailblazing reputations for producing wild and successful films such as Kim Jee-woon's *The Quiet Family* (1998), Jang Sun-woo's *Lies* (2000), Kim Ki-duk's *The Isle* (2000), Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* (2000) and Kwak Jae-yong's *My Sassy Girl* (2001). The synergy running through Im's project was built upon the energies of these three variables as well as the talents of his production crew.

Figure 1: Film posters courtesy of MK Pictures and Kino Video

Whereas the English subtitles on the 2005 censored DVD version of *The President's Last Bang* say that it is based on a true story, Im is quoted as saying that the story is his personal, truthful account of the events of one night (Bertolin 2005). Those who have met or interviewed Im soon gather that his understanding of this night in question was derived from his own memories and thorough research of the period.[10] Yet, if one digs deep, documents regarding the incident abound. For instance, a minute-by-minute overview of the assassination appears in English in the *Korea Annual, 1980*, which is published by Hapdong News Agency, one of Korea's longest-standing and largest independent commercial news companies. This fascinating journal issue presents a five-page discussion of the assassination as the number one highlight of 1979, and a seventeen-page, mind-altering investigative report, including the indictment against Kim Jae-gyu (KCIA Agency Chief), the assassin of President Park who apparently was acting under the illusion of obtaining political power, and the court-martial verdict against all nine men involved. Minute details in the report, such as

[10] The author thanks Im Sang-soo for sharing his personal thoughts and insights during conversations held at Pusan International Film Festival #10 in October 2005 and during the Chungmuro International Film Festival in September 2008.

descriptions of gloomy facial expressions, aspersions cast at the President's staff and verbatim quotes such as "I will finish him off tonight"; "Your Excellency, do you think you can make good politics by working with this worm-like guy?"; the President's chief bodyguard (Cha Ji-chol) is a "headache'' and "When you hear gun shots in the room (the restaurant), you eliminate the President's bodyguards. Are you ready?" partly made it Im's script in waiting.

Figure 2: At about 6 minutes into the film, a doctor (played by Im Sang-soo) advises KCIA Director Kim (played by Baek Yoon-sik) to improve his health by resigning from Park Chung-hee's brutal regime. KCIA Agent Colonel Min (played by Kim Eung-soo) is pictured screen-right holding a two-way radio. Permission to use all still images from the film is granted by MK Pictures and SBS TV Australia.

As a 386 Generation filmmaker – that is, someone who was in their thirties during the 1990s (born in the 1960s) and enrolled in university in the 1980s – Im has participated in the global promotion of the Korean cinema by telling provocative stories that transcend national and cultural borders. Being part of this generation is significant to this overall picture because it is Im's age group that formed the head, legs and voice of the pro-democracy movement to end Korea's military dictatorship. Filmmakers under this label trained at international and domestic film schools and have drawn upon their first-hand experience of witnessing and living-through one of Korea's most radical periods, which includes the Kwang-ju massacre, student demonstrations, other intensive protests organized before world media at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the end of the military regime and the subsequent victorious

rise of democracy.[11] In the 1980s Im was a Sociology major at Yonsei University, which was a center for the student movement at that time. Hence, he has experienced and lived through social, political and cultural burdens and learned how to combat censorship after 1996, in an era when few could imagine that restrictions of freedom of expression still existed. One could say that Im's generation has provided the backbone for the Korean cinema's rise to local, regional and international fame – all while making films before and after censorship was found to be unconstitutional. Each filmmaker in their own way has reflected on Korea's modern history – a history about surviving prolonged dictatorship, rapid industrialization and economic crisis. Although Korean filmmakers have practised their trade under these challenging constraints for nearly half a century, it has been the 386 Generation filmmakers who have come of age by experiencing first-hand the lifting of rigorous state censorship in the mid-1990s.

The President's Last Bang imagines what authoritarian President Park Chung-hee's last night on earth (26 October 1979) was like before the director of Korea's Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) assassinated him at close range with a West German-made 32 caliber gun. At the same time, the narrative encompasses more than a single night in Park's life. The film surreptitiously portrays the 18-year gamut of his dictatorship by implication, depicting the one night when the assassination took place as a template for understanding *and* critiquing this man who was and still is revered by his country. Scenes in which his political opponents were imprisoned and tortured, and socialists or liberalists were unjustly accused of being North Korean spies serve as acute reminders of what occurred during Park's reign. By the same token, we see Park's sexual inclinations and indulgences, which are exemplified by the portrayal of women in the scene from Figure 3. We are also exposed to unwavering views of Park's coercive ideals and policies as a means to facilitate patriotism (seen in Figure 4, his pro-Japanese disposition (he was an officer in the Japanese army during the Japanese colonial period), and finally his fascist ideology regarding

[11] Im's filmography, which confronts contemporary issues of sexuality, infidelity, youth street life and political history includes *Girls' Night Out* (1998), *Tears* (2000), *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (2003) and *The Old Garden* (2006).His portfolio demonstrates that he has always been interested in probing deeply into the thorny issues of Korea's transformative past. Investigating Korea's breaking family system and looking at the 1980 Kwang-ju Massacre from a distance have been part of his *Modus operandi*.

atomic armament and Korea's overall relationship with the US government. Perhaps for those who hold only high, endearing views of Park and his Presidency, these strong views are somewhat painful to bear, thus making Im's film one of the first to broach this 'taboo' subject.

Figure 3: Topless girls swimming in President Park Chung-hee's pool on the day of his assassination. This scene proceeds the black screen time where the documentary footage was deleted from the film's 2005 version. Permission by MK Pictures and SBS TV Australia.

Figure 4: KCIA Chief Agent Ju (played by Han Seok-kyu) appearing in the doorway of the KCIA's torture chambers while democracy advocates are being brutalized and humiliated. Permission by MK Pictures and SBS TV Australia.

Fluid cinematography brings the audience on an intense journey as KCIA Chief Kim decides that 'tonight is the night' to kill the president – in the name of 'democracy'. We follow KCIA Chief Agent Ju and KCIA Agent Colonel Min as they collude to kill the President at a private dinner banquet. A fierce, bloody gun battle ensues between President Park's bodyguards and KCIA agents after KCIA Director Kim

shoots the President, splattering his blood at the banquet dinner table. The positioning of the characters in Figures 5 and 6 below represents the intensity of the event. The result is chaos among Park's military ranks as they jockey for position and attempt to maintain civil order. The film offers a fleeting but intriguing and undoubtedly satirical perspective of Park Chung-hee, who remains nameless throughout the film or is simply referred to as the highly respectable one (*gakha*).

Figure 5: KCIA Director Kim shooting the President's Chief Bodyguard Cha (for the second time) after the initial shooting of he and President Park. Permission by MK Pictures and SBS TV Australia.

Figure 6: In a final fit of madness, KCIA Director Kim gathers the guts to shoot the President at close range. Permission by MK Pictures and SBS TV Australia.

On 31 January 2005, only three days before the film's scheduled public release in Korea, the Seoul Central Court mandated that parts of the film be cut. This move was prompted by litigation filed by the son of the late President Park, Park Ji-man, who was using this official channel

as a mode of attack. He sought to get the film banned. Im was familiar with censorship in Korea because in 1998 his *Girls' Night Out* film was re-edited under duress in order to conform to suggestions made by the Performance Ethics Board. Yet, nothing could have prepared him for the blame and harsh criticism that was directed at *The President's Last Bang.* The Korean daily newspaper *Donga-A Ilbo* reported that Park Ji-man argued the opening and closing credits' inclusion of stills and footage of actual protest marches and of his father's funeral ceremony blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction (Cho 2005). For the beginning scene, Im used archival footage of outraged Korean students and citizens in Pusan and Masan holding violent demonstrations in 1979 against President Park's regime, demanding democratization. These pro-democracy protests in which military tanks overpowered the crowds were staged about two weeks before Park's death. Archival footage at the end shows some of the same people who had protested against the dictatorship shedding tears in the streets in the center of Seoul during the grand funeral for President Park. Regardless of age and sex, people mourned bitterly in this footage. These two radically different views reflect on Park's existence in dynamic ways, offering holistic insights into the story and the film. Simply put, the film was feared as a disturbance to the privacy of the Park family. Park's legal threats aimed explicitly at suppressing the film and discrediting its contents, while implicitly attempting to damage and devalue Im's reputation, as if Im were committing some type of crime against the nation.

After all, President Park is considered by many to be the father of Korea and the one responsible for industrializing Korea and bringing it out of poverty. Under his regime, conglomerates such as Samsung, Hyundai and LG grew beyond imagination, becoming among some the world leaders in their fields. With Park's support, small newspapers have become media conglomerates. An upper-middle class was born under his regime as well. With this in mind, the people behind these companies and organizations are the same people who essentially run Korea today. Hence, it is understandable that these people are against seeing a film dealing with the darker side of Park and his assassination. This is precisely why the film's subject matter ranks as highly taboo. This is also why Korea's largest distributor, CJ Entertainment – a sister company of Samsung – eventually refused to distribute Im's film, withdrawing its investment at the last minute. For Im, after so many years since Park's death, it is difficult to find a rational linkage between

the decisions made by CJ and the thinking behind the others who attacked the film and the thinking of the people in the historical footage.

According to Jansen and Martin (2004) and Gray and Martin (2006), in defamation and censorship struggles there are several methods and counter-methods employed by attackers and opponents respectively. Five commonly-recurring methods used to block outrage against oppression, that is, to prevent backfire against censorship are: 1) to cover-up the events; 2) to devalue the target; 3) to reinterpret the story and/or facts; 4) to appear to be seeking justice through official channels and procedures; and 5) to intimidate. Conversely, then, for opponents, exacerbating outrage against oppression and increasing backfire, that is, decreasing the efforts of the attacker include: 1) to promote exposure to and publicity of the event/case; 2) to legitimize the status or stature of the attacked; 3) to offer a different interpretation to the story and/or facts; 4) to utilize unofficial channels to expose the injustice of the attack; and 5) to simply stand up against the coercion. Backfire, as the term suggests, happens when a censorship case and its subsequent publicity and/or exposure unexpectedly increases awareness of the event and public support for the attacked as opposed to blocking the event from public view (Jansen and Martin 2003).

Park Ji-man's legal action attempted to use the law to simultaneously gag *The President's Last Bang* and to discredit its potentially defaming and libellous script, that is, to direct blame against the film for showing contempt against the Park family. Although the Court believed the film to be a fictional spoof that audiences would interpret as a story based on false events, Park Ji-man was successful, at least initially, in getting the film censored. As a result of the Court's decision, Im and producer MK Pictures were left with two options: 1) to please the court and cut scenes from the film, or 2) to ignore the court order and pay $30,000 USD in fines for each time the pre-censored version of the film was commercially screened in cinemas or on TV, which potentially could lead to the prevention of all future public screenings of the film in Korea. The filmmaker acquiesced to the first option and deleted scenes with documentary footage. However, he launched a counter anti-censorship promotional strategy, which is discussed below.

Draconian and politically-motivated disapproval of the film surfaced in an era of supposedly newfound freedom of expression. On the one hand, Im Sang-soo's deconstruction of President Park's mythical aura was perceived as being too audacious and downright dishonoring

given the high profile that Park's daughter Park Geun-hye occupied as chairwoman of the centre-right opposition party in Korea at the time. Yet, on the other hand, controversy was fuelled by what was snipped from the film; Im was ordered to delete nearly four minutes of documentary footage because of Park Ji-man's litigation. Hence, the film's narrative created hullabaloo on all sides of the picture. The English title did use a risqué double-entendre use of 'bang' to mean sexual intercourse and opening scenes of bikini-clad women exposing their supple breasts did set a perverse scene for the President's domicile. And, call girls lined up (with their mothers) to give President Park – in the words of one of the characters – 'what he wanted' and 'what made him happy'. Moreover, the film's excessive portrayal of guns, violence, vulgar language and the gory splattering of the President's blood was used to depict a dirty old man who had students, democracy leaders and other alleged communist sympathizers humiliated and brutalized in the KCIA torture chambers (as represented above in Figure 4). There is no mistake that the film ventured in provocative and uncharted 'taboo' waters – with Im's full knowledge of what he was doing. However, a maturing democracy in a developed country that has eliminated censorship is supposed to nurture such ventures, or at least one might think a society of this statute would have the confidence, endurance and reflexive skills to face critical albeit painful views of its recent history.

Upon hearing news of the Court's decision, members of the Korean Motion Picture Association (KMPA) and Director's CUT (a young directors group) exposed what happened. They expressed outrage at multiple press conferences that they organized on behalf of Im and the film industry, and published articles on Pressian.com, a political news website based in Seoul. The Court's decision was interpreted as nothing more than a brutal suppression of freedom of expression (Kim 2005). From the view of the filmmakers, this type of draconian reaction was a setback for creativity and a limitation on the democratic expression of opinions and ideas. After 1996 film censorship had been considered as a thing of Korea's past semi-democratic and authoritarian governments. Despite being hacked, Im's visually stunning film was invited as an official selection to the Cannes, New York, Toronto and Telluride film festivals. Im resisted Park's legal intimidation by using his Q & A sessions, media interviews and general social interactions with non-Koreans to protest against the censorship of his film. He also received support from festival authorities for his film, and used these situations strategically and opportunistically to expand his protest campaign. A

crucial technique was keeping black screen time in the film where the deleted scenes initially would have appeared. This alone served as a vivid reminder of what was going on and a signifier of the censorship. In itself the black screen time and what it represents speaks louder than any documentary footage could have, promoting the film and its self-styled taboo script in unimaginable ways. The backlash was intensified in print and by word-of-mouth across the globe by reporters, critics, academics, industry people and cinephiles who homed in on the international declaration of protest symbolized by the black screen time. News stories, interviews and reviews divulged details about the censorship case, fuelling Im Sang-soo's reputation as some kind of cine-agent provocateur, and furthering Im's recognition beyond that of a low-budget filmmaker who makes films about sexy women and frustrated youth. He is one of the New Korean Cinema's maverick filmmakers. In this sense maybe the film's censorship backfired because Im's methods were more effective than the Court's.

At first glance, the use of black screen time with explanatory subtitles, as well as Im's protest before international audiences, made the censorship, that is, the suppression of his politically-charged film, backfire. Yet, viewed from another angle, while Im's international reputation has grown with the creation and release of *The President's Last Bang*, which is a good thing, the censorship did not really backfire – at least in terms of the film's popularity. The film failed to make it into the top ten grossing domestic Korean films in 2005.[12] Its national audience reached a little over one million (1,083,962), which may seem large for domestic films in some countries such as Australia and Taiwan that face ongoing difficulties competing with Hollywood films – or even a less popular Korean film overshadowed by one of the top five grossing Korean blockbusters in a recent year. In other words, *The President's Last Bang* was far from the commercial behemoths of the *cheonman younghwa* or 10-million audience picture in the same era as *The Host* (2006) and *King and the Clown* (2005*)* as well as *Taegukgi* (2004) and *Silmido* (2003). At an estimated budget of $4.5 million USD, it was never meant to be a blockbuster. Nevertheless, it was meant to reach

[12] In 2005, according to *Korean Cinema 2005*, the top five domestic films based on admissions in Seoul were: *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, *MARATHON*, *Marrying The Mafia*, *Sympathy For Lady Vengeance*, and *Another Public Enemy* (a.k.a. Public Enemy 2). In particular, the mainstream films *MARATHON* and *Another Public Enemy* competed heavily with *The President's Last Bang* because both films had been released in the week before it and both had gained wide appeal.

people, but given its promotion and advertising budget, it fell short of its target.

Without question, *The President's Last Bang* attracted a smaller audience during the Lunar New Year holiday season than expected (in Korea and overseas), though the sensation surrounding its court order and its dark portrayal of Park Chung-hee made it relatively infamous at home. Low box office takings specifically resulted from it screening on a small number of screens in cinemas with a small number of seats – mostly thanks to CJ's abrupt withdrawal as the film's distributor. The film was released on about 190 screens with 31,000 seats, that is, half as many screens as the top five domestic films released in the same year. In other words, the film's per-screen average was not very good. By comparison, *Another Public Enemy* opened on 370 screens (with 85,000 seats) and *MARATHON* on roughly 300 screens (with 66,000 seats). Moreover, the film failed to attract large numbers of Twenty-somethings and Thirty-somethings, Korea's biggest cinemagoing target audience. People in this age bracket simply had no desire to see the film. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they could not identify with the story nor understand why President Park was assassinated to begin with.

After the ruling, the film's producers, MK Pictures, immediately appealed against the Court's decision. In August 2006 they were successful in overturning the censorship decision. The deleted documentary footage was restored, but MK Pictures was forced to pay Park Ji-man about $106,000 USD for slandering his father's character (Paquet 2006). Although harm to the film had already been done, Im and MK Pictures continued to stand up for their right to make a film that expressed different opinions and ideas. They stood for the principle behind freedom of expression. In any case, the punitive damage was hardly comparable to the hurdle producers had to overcome in January 2005 when their co-distributor, CJ Entertainment – one of the largest vertically-integrated investors and controllers of domestic and international film distribution in Korea – withdrew its distribution commitments through its distribution channel CGV and venture capital amounting to about 20 per cent of the film's total budget. Ramifications surrounding the film and its court case evidently spooked CJ Entertainment, thus resulting in the company's apparent failure to resist the intimidation – even though Im was willing to stand up against the suppression of freedom of speech. This was a mighty blow for the attacked and a huge coup for the attacker because collective resistance, which is usually more effective than an individual's efforts, was deterred.

Once more, Kino Video/Kino International based in New York, the company that holds the North American distribution rights to the film, has yet to release or see the need to carry the restored version of the film. Apparently something was lost in translation when the previous damaged (cut) version of the film was presented to audiences in North America. Video sales and theatrical releases failed to live up to expectations, and Kino has yet to make a return on its investment in the film. So in this sense, perhaps the censorship case didn't backfire. Finally, in mid-2008 the film was restored to its original version and re-released. It will be interesting to see how well the film sells.

It may be that not everyone – especially right wing individuals who still worship Park – realizes that this is an intensely personal film for Im, who makes it clear in interviews that he had no intention to blame Park in the film. Rather, Im is one of the first 386 Generation filmmakers to invite audiences to stand back and to reexamine overt mythological views about Park – the man and not the precious myth. The film tests how much the public has overcome these accustomed views and whether or not Koreans have overcome their mourning for Park. Nearly thirty years later, in the mid-to-late 2000s, the fascism of Park and his entourage is meant to appear ridiculous as the protective layers of reverence are peeled away. The images in Figures 7, 8 and 9 below portray this degree of absurdity rather well. Another (David Lynch-type) scene that comes to mind is when President's Chief Bodyguard Cha (while hiding in the President's bathroom) desperately attempts to re-attach a finger to his hand after KCIA Director Kim shoots it off. Given the discussion presented here, I believe that it is precisely this exposing the rawness that is why Koreans felt so uncomfortable with this film. Scores of nameless right wing supporters who still worship Park were enraged while surprisingly so many others on the left who disdain Park remained silent – perhaps not really knowing how to react to or to comment on the film's critical perspective. Only about 2% of the population wholly embraced this bold film by paying to see it at a public cinema.

Figure 7: President's Chief Bodyguard Cha (pictured in the background in his underpants speaking to President Park on the phone) and the President's Chief Secretary Yang (in the foreground picking his nose) getting ready for President Park's last dinner. Permission by MK Pictures and SBS TV Australia.

Figure 8: KCIA Director Kim in the bathroom after excusing himself from the dinner table. Permission by MK Pictures and SBS TV Australia.

Figure 9: Top administrators and military officials in President Park's government saluting his lifeless body near the end of the film. Note the placement of a military cap on the President's private parts. Permission by MK Pictures and SBS TV Australia.

Tactic	**Attackers (Park Ji-man/Seoul Court)**	**Opponents (Im Sang-soo, MK Pictures and film critics)**
Cover-up/exposure	Blocked the film's exhibition by suing for defamation and libel. Attempted to cover-up the case and maintain distance between his politician sister and the case.	Publicized information concerning the case in local newspapers and through interviews with international film trade journalists. Internationalized the struggle by exposing case details at the Cannes Film Festival, where *The President's Last Bang* was screened. Used black screen time in the film and explanations in subtitles as a vivid signifier for the censored material.
Devaluing vs. validating the target	Focused on libellous nature of Im's version of story. Devalued Im and film content by suggesting the film was highly fictitious.	Re-valued/reaffirmed narrative content by indicating the film was based on thorough research. Film critics refer to Im as a high-quality, artistic and provocative filmmaker.
Interpretations	Claimed that documentary footage of funeral and protest marches blurred the boundary between fact and fiction.	Focused on how freedom of speech was being suppressed after film censorship was thought to have been abolished.
Use of channels	Used Courts to lodge defamation suit and to apply pressure on CJ Entertainment – the film's financial backer and distributor.	Used Courts to lodge appeal.

Intimidation/resistance	Park brings Im and the film to court.	Im and the producers (as well as exhibitors and film festivals) resist by screening the film – albeit on a less than satisfactory number of screens.

Korean Cinema Struggles

Although the intimidation did not work against Im per se, the bulldozing litigation directly impacted on the film's local and international distribution, thus effectively hindering the film's global popularity and overall profitability. The point here is not to overstate the film's lack of success because according to statistics available on the Korean Film Council's web site (www.kofic.or.kr), to date *The President's Last Bang* is one of Im's most successful films by admissions with 338,025 in Seoul and 1,083,962 nationally. By comparison, nationally *The Old Garden* sold about 300,000 tickets and *The Good Lawyer's Wife* sold 1,750,000, while in Seoul only *Tears* sold nearly 25,000 and *Girls' Night Out* reached 290,502 admissions. Nevertheless, there is no easy way to tell how much more successful the film might have been if the legal attack had never occurred. There may have been other things going on that can help explain or at least contribute to the film's (poor) reception by audiences at home and abroad. Without further questioning the film's success or lack thereof, readers can decide for themselves if backfire actually occurred and/or imagine how things might have been different. Hopefully, this article will invite readers to take a closer look at the case and to re-scrutinize its significance in larger discussions about the oppression of freedom of expression.

There are many hurdles the film industry has to overcome in order to continue achieving domestic and international accolades. Challenges facing Korea's film industry, such as a different mode of censorship struggles raise difficult questions that must be answered before another decade of growth can be achieved. This time and these issues are pivotal, because they will dictate the future direction of the whole of the Korean film industry. Will the film industry continue to become more like Hollywood with its long-term and glorious history, or will the Korean cinema fade into the ranks of other popular national cinemas, joining the likes of Japan (1960s), Hong Kong (1970s) and

China (1980s)? I don't profess to have all the answers, however, it is clear that filmmakers, activists, policy-makers and scholars are attempting to gain a better understanding about this era as part of a larger continuum of problems worth solving together. This is the kind of fighting spirit that has contributed to the backbone of the New Korean Cinema.

All censorship is political, and all lines drawn by censorship regulators are moral lines drawn in the sand. That is, they are arbitrary and based on attitudes and values of a particular social, political and cultural milieu that change with time. Im is an agent of change as in the case of those of his peers who have also challenged the Ratings Board and the ratings system, surviving the intense censureship (blame and disapproval), controversy, lawsuits, verbal attacks and threats surrounding their films. As the author of the screenplay, and as in the case of so many highly regarded films in the contemporary Korean cinema released during its latest rise, Im vehemently stands by the way he brought the research material to life. The five films that Im has directed to date are 'local' in that they are linked to Korea's modern social history. Nevertheless, his films like so many others belonging to his 386 Generation peers, such as Lee Chang-dong, Park Chan-wook, Kim Jee-woon, Hong Sang-soo and Kim Ki-duk, to name a few, have been regarded well outside of Korea, especially in France.[13] In fact, one of the hallmarks of the Golden Age that has just passed is the critique of the human condition and the exploration of psychological circumstances in Korean stories, which carry a universal appeal. Undoubtedly, Im makes films that he personally finds interesting, and *The President's Last Bang* shows producers and audiences all over the world that he is a director who is able to make big-budget films in addition to low-budget films about women, for which Im feels he is known. In similar ways to his contemporaries, Im has begun concentrating on international projects and has no immediate plan to return to Korea to make films. In this regard, he is someone who has escaped from Korea, deciding to remain in exile.

As this article has attempted to show, a residual form of oppression exists in Korea, and it has undoubtedly detracted some of the limelight surrounding Korea's domestic and export screen production industries. All of the challenges mentioned above are significant for

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[13] At the time of writing, Im was in Paris, preparing for his next project tentatively titled *A Good Woman in Paris* – a Korea-France co-production.

different reasons. Yet, censureship as in the case of censorship is important for larger social, cultural and political reasons because it is seen as one of the most significant hurdles for other film industries around the world to overcome – particularly as international co-productions and collaborations take center stage and analogue industries jockey for position in new digital realms. At the time of writing, countries such as Australia, France, Korea and the US (and possibly India and Britain) are attempting to forge new co-production opportunities through formal treaty agreements with China – where existing censorship regulations deeply impact on the likelihood of domestic films (including co-productions) being made and foreign films being rated (under the single rating system) and shown at cinemas. Thinking about censorship in this global sense in which different cultures are converging is an exciting, but delicate matter, one in which it is hoped that we will continue to maintain an open dialogue. The dialogue has already begun in Korea where in late 2008 the Constitutional Court has decided that the limited screening rating for films with 'objectionable' content is now unconstitutional. Audiences can decide for themselves if they wish to see a film with such content, providing there is ample advanced warning about obscenity and violence. Perhaps by opening up this can of worms other non-Hollywood film industries can learn something from the Korean case; reflecting on one's own society in a critical and satirical way may be somewhat painful, but it is part of a larger process of cultural maturity and understanding.

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