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Korean films flog Japanese occupation

BY GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN on JULY 24, 2016 in ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES, KOREAS

South Korean film-goers, who usually love syrupy romances, are being drawn to war-time stories focusing on freedom-fighters battling a cruel and oppressive Japan in the 16th century or women enslaved and brutalized during the occupation from 1910-1945. These colonial films are proving big hits. Maybe, Korean directors and producers have decided that the time for sweet songs and darling-and-honey narratives is over

Often, it is said life imitates cinema, but the truth can be the other way round as well. The recent spate of anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea expressed through films merely indicates that a wound inflicted long ago still festers.



A still from Choi Dong-hoon's *Assassination*

But let us take a look at life before we begin our journey into the screening rooms. The Japanese Embassy in Seoul looks virtually like a fortress, with high impregnable walls which are clearly meant to protect those inside from those outside.

Inside the embassy, Japanese diplomats might not think about the atrocities their country is said to have committed in Korea before and during World War II. But once they step out of it, the diplomats cannot escape being reminded of those "dark days."

For, right across the embassy building is the bronze statue of a sweet looking girl who is said to be one of those hundreds of "comfort women" enslaved and brutalized during the Japanese occupation of Korea and China.



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As the bronze girl sits there in silent accusation, anti-Japan protestors tend to her in rain and in shine. On occasions, they could let their patience wear them down. Last year, one of them threw a stone at the Japanese ambassador. The nationalists are still unforgiving about the sexual slavery seen during the occupation years from 1910 till Japan's defeat in 1945.

In tune with this mood — which just does not get any better despite Tokyo's profuse apologies — one of the biggest movies in South Korea that rocked the cash-counters was a swashbuckling tale of freedom-fighters battling a cruel and oppressive Japan.

Choi Dong-hoon's *Assassination* traces the story of three underground sharpshooters led by Ahn Ok-yun. Their mission is to kill a Japanese general and his Korean collaborator in the 1930s Seoul, taken over by the imperialist army. Melodramatic in a spaghetti Western style, the film jingled the South Korean box-office with \$85 million, making it one of the highest grossers of 2015.

It was only a few weeks ago that *Assassination* opened in Japan — unmistakably conveying that the country was willing to let go of the past.

Another big earner was the historical epic called *The Admiral: Roaring Currents* — a splendorous recreation of Yi Sun-sin's famous victory over the fleet of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1597. The movie raked in \$117 million, and opened in Japan in 2015.

At Cannes this May, we saw *The Handmaiden* by South Korea's Park Chan-wook. A lesbian thriller, one could not but miss the underlying Japan-South Korea hatred in the plot. Which talks about a Korean woman's efforts to swindle a Japanese heiress.

Observers feel that South Korea is giving vent to its suppressed anger over Japanese invasions of the Korean peninsula during the 16th century followed by the actual occupation from 1910 to 1945.



A still from Cho Jung-rae's *Spirits' Homecoming*

Terrible memories of that era could not have been presented more graphically than in one of the most talked about films this year. Cho Jung-rae's *Spirits' Homecoming* happened after crowd funding, and is a devastating tale of a real "comfort woman", forced to slog it out in Japanese wartime brothels. Despite its small budget, the movie, which opened on March 1, fetched \$23 million for its producers. The right-wing Japanese news magazine, *Sapio*, hardly known for its impartiality, called it "the worst anti-Japanese film in Korean history."

The phenomenal popular support for Cho's creation — which took him 13 years of trying to get his work out of the drawing board — was seen as a protest against the recent "comfort woman" agreement between Tokyo and Seoul. There was a huge public outcry in South Korea damming the pact.



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A still from Kim Jee-woon's *The Age of Shadows*

Come September, we would see another anti-Japanese work, *The Age of Shadows*, helmed by Kim Jee-woon (who also made the interesting *I Saw the Devil*). The first ever Korean language movie to be made by Warner Brothers, *The Age of Shadows* is set in the 1920s and, like *Assassination*, centers on an armed plot against the Japanese.

Some of the films are the last word in sadism. Take *The Admiral* — where Japanese characters, played by Korean actors, are mean and villainous. One of them sends a boat filled with the severed heads of Korean prisoners to his enemy's camp, and says: "If they are worthy opponents, then why not?"

In *Assassination*, we watch a Japanese lieutenant execute a young Korean girl with unbelievable casualty. Her crime. She bumped into him on the street!

The present attraction for colonial Korean cinema is just about a few years old. Choi told *The Hollywood Reporter* earlier this year that he had overcome a box-office "jinx" on movies about Japan's occupation of Korea, stating, "Koreans are not comfortable with this era."

There are two clear reasons for this. Koreans love syrupy romances, much like Indians – who would give up anything in the world to see their hero and heroine live happily ever after. Again, Koreans thirst for happy endings. War-time stories are far removed from such darling-and-honey narratives.

But one supposes that the task of cinema is also to take the monster head on — and not just to be singing sweet songs to soothe searing souls. Perhaps, Korean directors and producers have decided that the time for such lullaby is over. Or, almost.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and Seoul Times.

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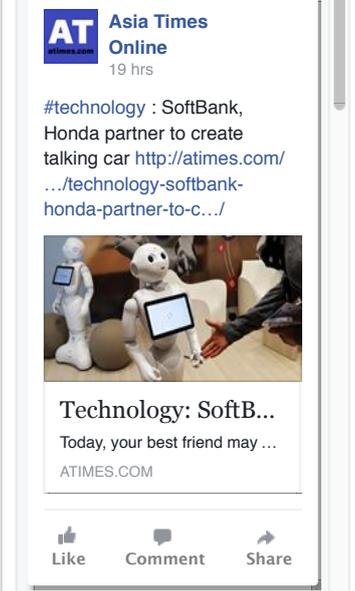
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Young Koreans trying to look badass in perfectly clean & neat 30's garb is strangely amusing.

Alex Wijaya · an hour ago
can't blame the koreans, the japanese haven't been sincere in their apology

Bobserver · 2 hours ago
There is probably a big market for these movies where Korean TV series have already taken off, namely China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas Chinese communities in Europe and the USA.

sufi · 4 hours ago
korean should stop crying and show some gratitude to the japanese who laid solid foundation , during the occupation , for korea's economic miracle.....korea were not treated as a colony rather it was treated like a japanese province.....ungrateful rascals.

mijkai → sufi · 41 minutes ago
Agree, sufi. Whatever else happened, there would be no chaebol without the keiretsu model.

Sgs → sufi · 2 hours ago
Hehe. Not a fan of facts? The Japanese were brutal occupiers.

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