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The Barbarian Within: Images of Joseonjok in *the Yellow Sea*

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Abstract:

This paper will explore the portrayals of ethnically Korean Chinese, Joseonjok, in the film, The Yellow Sea (2010). Although they are often viewed simply as “Chinese who speak Korean,” the reality of Joseonjok’s relationship to South Korea is far more complicated. By analyzing popular Korean media portrayals, it becomes apparent that Joseonjok are often framed within a discourse of “problematization”: in The Yellow Sea (2010), they appear as barbaric criminals and illegal immigrants. This problematization discourse reinforces Joseonjok’s exclusion from Korea’s multicultural policies that are meant to foster more ethnic diversity within the historically homogeneous nation. Unlike non-Korean ethnic minority groups, the Joseonjok’s ethnic and lingual proximity has also impelled Koreans to subject them to processes of Othering through problematization. However, even as Joseonjok are not counted within this multicultural discourse, the relationship between Koreans and Joseonjok in the film still reflects the same paternal attitudes of cultural superiority that dictate the policies governing other migrant groups. While the portrayals of Otherness through which they are seen relate to their exclusion from the multicultural discourse, The Yellow Sea (2010) ultimately presents the Joseonjok male protagonist’s characterization in a sympathetic light. This sympathetic portrayal fits into a hierarchy of social and economic power that is at once a commentary on Korean society and a reinforcement of Korean supremacy.

Keywords: Joseonjok, Hwanghae, multiculturalism, citizenship, ethnicity, Korean film

1. Introduction

From May 2013 to May 2014, the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) ran a sub-program on the comedy show *Gag Concert* called “Hwanghae,” whose characters parodied a film of the same title (*The Yellow Sea* in English). Released in 2010 to moderate commercial success, the film had portrayed a Korean-Chinese protagonist coming to Korea on a mission to kill. The film’s depiction of Joseonjok characters (ethnically Korean Chinese) was deplored by some as being controversial, but when it was subsequently parodied on national TV, shown to much larger viewership, the public outcry that ensued became palpable. The producers argued that the show was intended as satire; in addition, they stated that the show was meant to warn viewers against “voice phishing,” and were not meant to portray Joseonjok in a negative light. Despite criticism, the show continued to run for a whole year before it closed, perhaps presenting counterevidence that the controversy was not taken as too serious. Yet, take out Joseonjok and plug in any other ethnic minority group in Korea – such as immigrant workers or marriage immigrants, the two groups that are often the focus of recent multiculturalism discourse (*damunhwa*), it is difficult to imagine the show would have lasted without serious protest.

Joseonjok, or ethnically Korean Chinese, are unlike other immigrants in that they do initially possess the language skills and familiarity with Korean customs, are much more attuned to adapt to Korean mainstream culture. Yet, because of this “asset,” they are often excluded from multicultural discourse, occupying a space that is neither wholly alien nor entirely familiar. The lack of criticism on their treatment in mainstream media is evidence that they are the unwitting victims of larger agenda that is multiculturalism.

This paper attempts to examine the film, *The Yellow Sea*, in the context of Korean multiculturalism discourse. In doing so, it will be pointed out that the Joseonjok are marginalized within the Korean multicultural discourse, which supposedly targets members of society who are considered marginalized. It will start the discussion by examining the current Korean multicultural discourse, focusing on the peripheral space Joseonjok occupy in it. Then, it will examine the film *The Yellow Sea* in more detail, focusing on the problematic images of Otherness represented in the film. Finally, it will attempt to situate such representation within the larger Korean society, examining how the exaggerated dog-eat-dog world presented by Joseonjok characters in the film present a sidelong criticism of Korean society, where globalization and capitalism have created new victims of the lowest rung of its own caste system.

2. Excluded from Inclusion: Joseonjok in the Korean Multicultural Discourse

In recent years, globalization has transformed many nations into multicultural societies, prompting them to re-evaluate their pre-conceived notions of nationhood under the free-flow of not only assembly-line-made products and natural resources but also human capital. Such exchange of human capital often takes place under disparate conditions: in most cases, the developed nations act as the receiver of human capital originating from the developing world. As Stuart Hall (2005) notes, Britain, faced with a symptomatic post-war shortage of labor, transported Caribbean migrants looking for better economic opportunities as far back as in 1948 (p.218). In addition, the United States's demand for cheap, unskilled manual laborers has been what Massey, Durand, Malone (2002) describe as the main cause for Mexican immigrants who cross the border, often in spite of life-threatening challenges, to take advantage of the wages of a developed nation (16-23).

In more recent years, such movement of human capital is by no means limited to in a strictly traditional sense. Due the past few decades of rapid economic development, Korea also experienced a demand for immigrants from economically less developed countries in Asia, who consequently enter the country in pursuit of a "Korean Dream." One significant demographic of immigrants from other countries consists of "marriage immigrants," (and to a lesser degree, Central Asia) who married Korean men usually of lower economic status within Korean society. Another demographic is that of "migrant workers" seeking better wages than at home (*iju nodongja*). Grace Chung and Joan Yoo (2013) explains that marriage migrants filled the void left by Korean women who had moved from rural villages to large cities, and that migrant workers began to take bottom level jobs (colloquially referred to as 3-D jobs, standing for Dirty, Dangerous, Difficult) that the advancing Korean workforce no longer occupied (p.241).

Such influx of foreign individuals presented new challenges for Korea. Andrew Eungi Kim (2010) points out that in recent years, alarmed by low fertility rates and a rapidly aging population, Korea had to re-configure its nationalistic beliefs and revise its ethnocentric policies as part of a new set of globalizing strategies that will help replenish the population and the workforce (p.115). This "re-configuration" is arguably at the heart of the multicultural discourse, the urgency to resolve the contradiction between globalization and the belief in the meritocracy of essential Korean blood (*hanminjok*, "one pure blood").

Caught in the middle of this contradiction, or, perhaps excluded from any of such multicultural discourses, are the ethnically Korean Chinese, or *Joseonjok*. While ethnically Korean, their lower economic status and social markers often restrict their access to Korean society the same way it would marriage migrants or migrant workers. Yet, their ethnic Korean status excludes them from becoming the main recipient of policies geared toward the acceptance of multiculturalism. While Korea has made efforts towards embracing all ethnicities, the two aforementioned groups (with an explicit emphasis on marriage migrants and their mixed-race offspring, who will likely remain in Korea permanently and become members of the next generation) receive the largest share of attention. Yet it is without a doubt that media portrayals of Joseonjok as the "perpetual outsider" contradict Korea's stated desire of becoming a multicultural society, and ironically reflect the exclusionary nature of Korean multiculturalism.

Despite their ethnically Korean Chinese are actually the single largest group within Korea's "multicultural" society. According to Eun-Kyung Yang (2010), they represent more than 40% of foreign nationals in Korea (p.197). In April of 2012, *Chosun Ilbo* (2014) stated that 587,732 foreigners are in Korea on work visas, of which 289,981 are Korean Chinese. ("70,000 Korean Chinese"). Joon K. Kim (2011) states that in 2009, roughly 26% of all female marriage migrants—a group that has been targeted by multicultural policies—were ethnic Korean-Chinese (p.1595-1596). As Yang points out, Joseonjok are often excluded or underrepresented in Korean mainstream media (p.197). Instead of portraying them in roles that are central to the multicultural discourse – as in the case of marriage migrants or migrant workers – their legal exclusion from Overseas Korean status privileges has stereotyped them into negative representations such as illegal immigrants or criminals.

In 1998 the Act on Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans (hereafter referred to as the Overseas Korean Act, or OKA) granted what the authors Park Jung-Sun and Paul Y. Chang (2005) describe as "quasi-citizen" rights to overseas Koreans whose ancestors left the Korean peninsula after the formation of the Republic of Korea in 1948 (p.4). By asserting this post-1948 criterion, the law effectively excluded Korean Russians and Korean Chinese, Joseonjok, who are often of lesser economic status. On the contrary, the groups who were granted such quasi-citizen rights include Korean Americans and pro-South Korean Japanese. Scholars have noted that being from highly developed nations, these ethnic Koreans are viewed as more valuable economic contributors to the Korean economy (Yang 208; Park and Chang, p. 4).

As of 2012, Joseonjok were now granted F-4 status if they meet certain economically exclusionary criteria based on social class and education level (Yoo, 2013). However, prior to this constitutional amendment, Joseonjok could only apply for H-2 visas, a special category of "working visa" issued for and created specifically for Korean Chinese and Korean Russians. Hyun-mi Kim (qtd. Yang 2010) notes the number of H-2 visas issued is directly dependent upon Korea's current demand for labor. While the exclusion of Joseonjok from the OKA helps Korea's ability to control the flow of foreign labor into the country, it also prohibits economically disadvantaged overseas Koreans from ascending economically in Korean society, and limits their work opportunities largely to menial jobs. Compounding the matter, control of Joseonjok through legal status exclusion is also perpetuated by negative media portrayals.

Sookyung Kim (2012) states that Korean media discourse objectifies migrants in ways that benefit the host nation, breaking down the media representations of migrants into two categories, namely, "those who can and those who cannot be trusted to contribute to national interests" (p.668). In what follows, this paper will examine how the representation of Joseonjok in the film *The Yellow Sea* (2011) aligns with the latter of these two categories, and how this discourse corresponds with the OKA's exclusionary conditions.

3. Joseonjok in the Yellow Sea

Although Joseonjok are occasionally portrayed in film, one that features Joseonjok individual as its central protagonist is rare. The protagonist of *The Yellow Sea* is a Joseonjok taxi driver named Gu-nam; his wife has gone to Korea to help support their daughter while he stays in the Yanbian Autonomous Korean Prefecture (called , the region of China that is highly populated by Joseonjok. Gu-nam makes an appearance for the first time gambling in a smoke-filled room crowded with roundtables of other men playing cards. Gu-nam's life is portrayed as not only solitary and bleak, but in extreme financial distress; he is physically harassed by debt collectors but hears nothing from his wife in Korea. From the very beginning, the suffocating economic atmosphere established explicitly, seemingly establishing the Joseonjok's motive for entering Korea.



Figure 1: Gu-nam as gambler in Yeonbyeon

Thus, in *The Yellow Sea* (2011), the process of problematizing begins even before the protagonist enters Korea: not only is it problematic, but it is also destructive for the individual, as well. Yang (2013) describes that the Korean media presents Joseonjok's migration to South Korea as having destructive effects on the family unit, as well as to the traditions and culture of the area where they reside. The director's cut of *The Yellow Sea* in fact begins by displaying a map of Yeonbyeon and its neighboring nations, alongside statistics that initiates this discourse of problematization (see fig 2).



Figure 2: Map of Yeonbyeon at the start of *The Yellow Sea* director's cut

Yet, Yang states that this area, which now belongs to China, is a part of Korea's historical geographical makeup, and is thus a kind of symbolic link to Korea's pre-modern ethnic identity (Yang, p.231). Thus, it is something that has been "lost," and thus signals something valuable, but at the same time definitely residing outside of Korea's current realm – which signals that it is something to be shunned. Within media portrayals, this geo-historical association has carried over to characterizations of Joseonjok as being unrefined or stuck in the past. It is also notable Yeonbyeon is portrayed through darkly shaded portraits of urban decay (see fig. 3). Park and Chang (2005) state that occupancy of this territory—which has been the subject of debate in recent discussions between China and Korea—is conversely, what Joseonjok believe empowers them with a politically relevant collective identity, separate from the occupants of the Korean peninsula (p.19-21).



Figure 3: Urban decay and the promise of a better future

Media portrayals of Joseonjok males in Korea are predominantly of illegal immigrants and economically deprived criminals (Yang, p.194). Within this discourse is the problematization of the Joseonjok husband as, like Gu-nam, a lackadaisical gambler who spends the hard earned money his wife earns in Korea and sends back to him as remittance. Yang also explains the “Korean Dreamer” discourse, in which Joseonjok give up an agricultural lifestyle—and with the lure of make-money-quick-schemes—come to Korea, ultimately falling victim to the decadence of Korean society (p.219-223). Gu-nam also comes to Korea with the promise of a large sum of money paid for committing a murder and advances the plot of the film through illegal activity in Korea, supporting Korean media discourse’s problematization of Joseonjok through negative representation.

A solution to Gu-nam’s three-fold problem—gambling debt, providing for family, separation from wife—is proposed by the seemingly barbaric Myeon-ga, a Joseonjok crime leader and hired killer. Myeon-ga orders Gu-nam to carry out a contracted murder of Korean professor and retired Olympic athlete named Seung-hyun Kim who also earns a steady side-income through the ownership of love motels and thinly-veiled brothels.

Until the end of the film, Gu-nam remains ignorant as to why he must carry out the murder, while the audience suspects ulterior motives long before he finds out. As it is slowly and convolutedly revealed, Gu-nam’s target is in fact the object of jealousy spite for two other Korean men, Tae-won and Jeon-hwan, who form cross-intersecting relationships of adultery. However, as Gu-nam spies for an opportunity to kill, he is intercepted by another group of Joseonjok assassins, who succeed in killing Seung-hyun before he does. Confused but determined to bring back evidence of the kill, Gu-nam enters the murder scene and becomes the suspect of the police. Hereafter, Gu-nam is chased by the police as well as the two groups of men who desperately need to cover up the murder by eliminating Gu-nam.

4. Images of Otherness

As soon as Gu-nam arrives in Korea, he is recognized as an outsider. The broker who gives Gu-nam the address of his murder target offers him a piece of advice, saying, “I’m not sure what you came to do, but when you go out, wear a hat. You look too obvious,” meaning that Gu-nam looks too awkward in appearance to mix with Koreans. Appearance is an important cue. Within media discourse, Joseonjok identity is formed by the image against which Koreans view themselves. This is contrasted with the discourse of inclusion directed at other minorities in Korea, who are perceived to be “inherently different” – meaning that they, due to their skin color or lack of Korean skill, are doubtlessly un-Korean; ironically, in the absence of such “visible” markers, the ethnic Koreans’ Koreanness adds an inverse discrimination.

This idea of externally based identity formation is what Stuart Hall (1991) describes as, “the self as it is inscribed in the gaze of the Other,” or a sort of deconstruction of self (p.48). In another film featuring Joseonjok assassins, *New World* (2013) by director Hoon-jung Park, physical from their Korean counterparts as they arrive through Incheon Port. Such characterization aligns with the Korean Dreamer discourse as well, as their anticipation of societal decadence is expressed with awe-struck facial expressions made as soon as they step into Korean soil (see fig. 4).



Figure 4: First appearance of Joseonjok killers in *New World*

In other words, they are caricatures of the way the Korean media perceives them and the portrayal is so overstated that their first appearance on camera almost functions as the film's comic relief: "Don't stand out so much. Do you have any idea how fast Koreans can tell you apart?" says one character, but the joke is that in their self-consciousness they are making the distinction even more obvious. This "constitutive otherness" is also perpetuated through images of barbarism and violence. One obvious point is Myeon-ga's hyper-masculinized violence. Even in their illegal, violent activities, a contrast is made between Joseonjok and Koreans: Myeon-ga is shown beating men to death with a large horse bone. Myeon-ga is always portrayed with a throng of barbaric entourage, whereas the Korean gangster, Tae-won, is ultra-modern in appearance in tailored suits.

This scene is what has been transported to larger TV-viewing audiences through the Korean comedy show, *Gag Concert*, as mentioned in the introduction. Each week an actor appears on stage in a segment aptly titled, "Yellow Sea," lampooning Myeon-ga—bone in hand, wearing a fur coat similar to Myeon-ga in the film. Like Myeon-ga the character in the sketch is the leader of a crime organization; however, his business is conducting fraudulent phone calls to extort money from unknowing costumers, a diluted version of Myeon-ga sans violence. In other words, it is made into a subject to be poked fun at. Likewise, the seemingly low-wit supporting characters of *Gag Concert* eats various sizes and shapes of seaweed in many, often ridiculous ways, parodying Gu-nam's first scene of consumption.

Such images of unnecessarily primitive consumption are important elements in solidifying otherness. Joseonjok characters are often portrayed in a primitive light regarding consumption, either through the kind of food or the manner of consuming them (through hand, for survival). Exploring the meaning of food and acts of consumption in film, Eleanor Ty (1996) states that for ethnic minorities who are displaced from their traditional cultures into more modernized societies, food and the ability to obtain it are connected to survival and struggle. Furthermore, she states that communal dining is linked to ethnic identity and tradition (p.62). Viewed through this lens, the scene where Myeon-ga and his associates feast from a large pot of boiled meat must be interpreted by the audience as an act of consumption linked the preservation and survival of an explicitly uncivilized ethnic identity (fig. 5). The size of bones and their way of voracious consumption using bare hands further suggest primitivism.



Figure 5: Myeon-ga and associates consume meat

A parallel can be also drawn in *New World*, as the dichotomy between Joseonjok and Korean society is distinctly illustrated through a similar act of unrefined consumption. Three remaining Joseonjok contracted killers (one has died in a shootout) are shown outside of a large Buddhist temple where the funeral of a criminal leader is taking place. They are not pictured paying respects to the deceased but speechlessly eating at a fold-out table, from large bowls or indecipherable food, in a similarly barbaric manner to that portrayed in *The Yellow Sea* (fig. 6). The gluttonous nature of consumption, and the heedlessness of customs, portrayed in *Gag Concert*, *The Yellow Sea*, and *New World*, functions in the discourse of Joseonjok as an image of a parallel Korean ethnicity stuck in the past, not-yet-modernized, and more occupied with basic means of survival than their modernized counterparts. By portraying Joseonjok within these sorts of primitive or backwards images—much like the Orient and the Occident in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)—Korea seems to derive its "strength and identity by setting itself off against ... [a] surrogate and even underground self" (p.3). Because of their Korean ethnicity, Koreans must view Joseonjok as a part of their conception of the self; however, as seen in these barbaric media portrayals, Koreans arguably have compartmentalized Joseonjok identity according to their elements of Otherness, thus strengthening a perception of superiority.



Figure 6: Images of consumption in *The Yellow Sea* (top), *Gag Concert* (middle), and *New World* (bottom)

While most portrayals of Joseonjok present food consumption rooted in a primordial drive for survival, there is however, one scene in *The Yellow Sea* where Gu-nam is shown eating for enjoyment. The aforementioned “Korean Dream” discourse functions within this scene as a criticism of the events brought upon Gu-nam by his literal appetite. While he is waiting for Seung-hyun, his murder target, to appear, Gu-nam becomes hungry, and using the puny allowance given to him by Myeon-ga, he gobbles up instant noodles at a convenience store. As he glances sideways, Gu-nam sees another man eating a hot dog. In the next scene, the camera cuts to Gu-nam walking out of the convenience store eating the same kind of hot dog. In this simple act of momentary indulgence, Gu-nam fails to see Seung-hyun enter the building. The scene suggests the only kind of consumption allowed for the “other” Joseonjok is that required for survival. Further, interpreted from the Korean Dream discourse, the scene functions to firmly locate Gu-nam within a problematization discourse wherein the Joseonjok illegal immigrant is availed the conveniences of modern-day Korea by way of a large payment for his labor—in murder. However, while the payment for his labor gives him access to the conveniences of a society more developed than his own, his impulse to indulge in that access ultimately hinders his ability to complete the task which brought him to Korea in the first place.

Such negative portrayals are problematic; they have been pointed out again and again by Korean Chinese, who also enjoy Korean TV dramas and films. In a recent documentary film about the relationship between South Korea and Joseonjok entitled *Hanminjok and Joseonjok* (2014) by director Hwa-seong Jeon, one Joseonjok interviewee, when asked about the barbaric portrayals of Joseonjok as criminals and gangsters replied:

I think the criminal groups similar to those portrayed in the film could actually exist in Yeonbyeon. So I wouldn't be able to say that there's no factuality behind those portrayals. But now because they have been magnified so extremely, I want to say it doesn't have a good influence on us. And the first time that I saw the *GagConcert* sketch, to be frank, I didn't laugh at all. Honestly, it seems like it only brings out a critical perspective of us. So some of my friends watched the show without really thinking and laughed, but I didn't. (Jeon, 2014)

The interview puts into words the concern that such media portrayals could actually influence public perception; or rather, the very fact that a lack of consciousness validates such caricaturizing. While the show on responses from the authorities seem to take it lightheartedly, attributing it to well-intentioned jest despite the drive on multiculturalism discourse.

5. Commentary on Korean Society

The desires of the Joseonjok in the film are subject to representation by dominant society, essentially the Other as the self's shadow (Said, 1978, p. 3; Spivak, 1988, p. 68). Conversely, then, the film also provides commentary on Korean society, which gives reason to such portrayal of Joseonjok. So far, this paper has examined the problematic nature of the representation of Joseonjok as Other. Although it is Joseonjok men who are mainly portrayed as perpetual outsiders or ruthless criminals, it must be pointed out Korean nationals in the film are also characterized within an equally negative or pessimistic frame. The contrast is used in the film not only to highlight the climate of Korean society which gives rise to Joseonjok criminals, but also casts a critical gaze at the paternalistic attitude Koreans harbor towards the Others of society.

Each of the Korean societal insiders who advance the film's complicated series of events possesses a ubiquitous sense of moral depravity. Three of the main male characters form cross-intersecting relationships of adultery with the same two women, ultimately leading them to self-destructive acts of murder and revenge. In order for Tae-won and Jeon-hwan to dominate their adulterous affairs without legal consequence, they directly and indirectly partake in importing Joseonjok migrant workers to kill the same man, Seung-hyun; whose wife is Jeon-hwan's lover, and with whom it is implied that Tae-won's lover is sexual involved. If the violence of Joseonjok is depicted in the film as primitive, instinctive, and animalistic, it is contrasted with the more cerebral kind of crime of Korean nationals, that of abetting a crime.

Here, a kind of hierarchy of crime is already established, aligning with the hierarchy of social and economic status. For Korean men like Tae-won, the bus company president, and Jeon-hwan, the Korean banker, it is a simple matter of bringing in Joseonjok migrant workers to do their dirty work. In other words, the Korean characters are exercising their relative socioeconomic status to “outsource” the murders, creating victims from lesser status. In some sense, it can be even said that the criminal role forcefully assigned to the Joseonjok characters in this film is somewhat vindicated by the film's portrayal of them as having no choice in the act of killing, especially in comparison to the frivolity of the Korean characters' motivations to kill. The dichotomy between wealth and poverty, the haves (Koreans) and have-nots (Joseonjok) are explicitly depicted.

The fact that the Joseonjok in the film have only one reason to commit the acts of violence is important here. Unlike the Korean criminals, who are driven by various motivations, such as jealousy, revenge and fear of discovery (and downfall of reputation), the Joseonjok's motivation is pure and simple – that of financial reasons. This simplistic motivation illustrates the urgency and inevitability of their situation. Furthermore, as Chang-woo Lee (2011) states, Gu-nam, and other Joseonjok migrant workers enter into Korea and subsequently become trapped in a cycle of debt repayment to brokers. This is an exchange system whose rules are dictated by those who initiate exchange: Korean restaurant owners, Korean factory owners, and other members of the dominant society (p. 326-327). The seeming pettiness of such exchange (for example, it is mentioned in the beginning that Gu-nam's debt owed for his wife's visa is only sixty dollars) further emphasizes the desperate nature of Gu-nam's situation.

Thus, as the film seems to suggest, Joseonjok on the surface are criminals and illegal immigrants, but in reality they are simply trapped in a hierarchy of power and immorality. At the bottom rung of this hierarchy is Gu-nam who is motivated by a desire to find his wife and escape debt to support his family, all of which is only possible through illegal activity in Korea. In the middle of the relationship is Myeon-ga, who, as the mere middleman of the exchange between Gu-nam and the Korean banker, in comparison lacks the same morally or immorally directed motivations. His overall portrayal as barbaric and generally lacking in humanity also positions him

outside of moral concerns, simply facilitating the exchange between the moral bottom and immoral top. At the top of the hierarchy are government officials, housewives, restaurant owners, and other Korean characters who initiate or play a part in the initiation of the exchange of money for Joseonjok migrant workers. These socially superior Korean characters are portrayed as both the most powerful and the most immoral.

In this way, *The Yellow Sea* seems to be proposing that although Joseonjok may engage in Korea, their motivations are not immoral, but forced by circumstances. This is evidenced in the variety of hardships facing Gu-nam as he arrives in Korea, where he is duped to hand over money to brokers because of his illegal status. This is an important moment, because it illustrates the potential immoral “gains” Koreans can have by keeping the marginalized position of Joseonjok. In other words, at least in this film, Koreans have acted in official capacity to marginalize the status of Joseonjok, and are partly responsible for the demand of their illegal activity in Korean society.

Seen this way, the film faithfully depicts the Joseonjok’s precarious status as the Other caught in the middle. Unlike other racial minorities in Korea, who are more directly tied to the future of Korea – as in the children of mixed race families, for example – Joseonjok have yet to present their advantages in extending a policy of inclusion. Although it is a bit of stretch, keeping their “other” status is, for now, more useful, such as those fitted for the dreaded jobs in Korean society. In *Yellow Sea*, in one scene, the Korean restaurant owner who employed Gu-nam’s wife tells him, “Stay out of other people’s affairs. When Joseonjok get in trouble, they are deported. Make your money and leave.” Essentially, he is telling Gu-nam that Koreans may be immoral, but he is in no position to interfere; confirming that Koreans view Joseonjok’s position in Korean society as temporary workers barred from mainstream interaction.

This is partly owing to the fact that the policy of inclusion cannot be but tinged with a paternalistic, condescending motivation: it is ultimately the benevolence shown by the privileged to the underprivileged. As such, while the multiculturalism discourse is directed at inclusion, it serves to consolidate the hierarchy of position. In a telling scene, Gu-nam is discovered by Seung-hyun, the murder target, as he spies the building in which Seung-hyun lives. Mistaking Gu-nam as simply taking shelter in his building, yet correctly identifying him as Joseonjok, Seung-hyun says, “Are you Joseonjok? Yes you are. Don’t come in here because it’s cold.” Then, as Gu-nam is about to go away, Seung-hyun turns him around and hands him some money. As Gu-nam hesitates, Seung-hyun exhorts him to take the money, telling him to “get some rest in a sauna around the corner.” (fig. 7) The criminalizing yet sympathetic attitude towards Joseonjok culminates in this scene, and it is based on an unmistakable perception of economic superiority.



Figure 7: Seung-hyun offers Gu-nam money

Through privileged social and legal status, the Korean characters have the power to partake in activities that allow them to fulfill their desires, directly or indirectly. In this way, *The Yellow Sea* suggests that immoral desire within Korean society is predominantly empowered by legal status of the economically privileged. Thus, without this power of legal status to represent themselves within society, Joseonjok are, while economically constitutive of a class, unable to form a collective class consciousness, and thus, also fail to possess objects of unified desire. This lack of unity within the community of Joseonjok migrant workers in Korean society is apparent a scene where Gu-nam is forced to kill other Joseonjok men, in this dog-eat-dog world, not because of an innate desire, but in self-defense.

The Korean men, Tae-Won, the banker Jeon-Hwan, and Seung-Hyun signify the corruption and moral depravity of globalizing Korea based on their superior status as the ones with economic power. The former two do not complete their act of murder on their own, but import Joseonjok workers, much like Koreans import immigrants to perform menial duties. Furthermore, while all three men hold highly respected, “insider” positions in Korean society. The ending, where all characters are met with violent deaths, is the verdict of their immorality. Gu-nam dies halfway, implying his in-between status and implying his redemption in that he dies outside of Korean territory.

Perhaps the commentary on Korean society is indirectly depicted through the final scene, where dying Gu-nam reminisces about his wife’s departing for Korea. In a nostalgic, sepia-tinged sequence, Gu-nam’s wife waves to him as she supposedly sets off to Korea, almost a foreboding of un-corrupted, idealistic return. Although her reappearance at the end may seem to represent a sort of romantic purity, it also initiates a discourse of what Kim Kyung Hyun (2004) describes as the longing for an escape; or the belief that beauty can only be recovered from outside of the ugliness of modernized Seoul (p. 25). This romantic homecoming connects back to the previously mentioned media discourse of the Yeonbyeon area functioning as an ethnic community of Korea’s pre-modernity. The area’s occupants become the eternal protectors of traditions lost in Korea’s rapid development into a capitalist nation state. However, rather than creating a pre-modern utopian vision, the logical end to this discourse is that Joseonjok, unable to keep pace with Korea’s

advancements—are merely tools to arrive at the larger realization of Korean superiority (Kim K. H., 2004, p. 231).

6. Conclusion

Under the particularities of the current Korean multicultural discourse, *The Yellow Sea* at first glance seems to stay within the framework of regarding Joseonjok as illegal actors in the country. However, while Joseonjok's activity may be illegal in the country, their characterization is sympathetic; while societal decadence has corrupted the Korean nationals in the film, Gu-nam remains on the fringes. Thus, the audience comes to view Gu-nam's comparatively impoverished conditions as a signifier of his relative moral purity. Furthermore, the direct knowledge of nearly all of Gu-nam's monetary interactions creates an intimacy between him and the viewer absent in their relation to the Korean characters. Yet, of course, these portrayals of the morally pure societal outsider seem to reinforce arguments of Korean superiority. Much like the migrants in Korea's "multicultural society," immigrants are simply viewed in terms of how they can benefit national interest. For both migrant workers as well as the hired killers in *The Yellow Sea*, it means taking the jobs that Koreans do not want to do themselves. The undertone of paternalism which seems to drive Korean multicultural educational policies -- focusing more on assimilation than genuine cultural expression -- are also implicit in the film's sympathetic portrayals of Joseonjok. As Joon K. Kim (2011) states Korean educational policy portrays the new migrant class as "backward, primitive and inferior" through the lens of Otherness in order to elicit sympathy (p. 1600). Instead of viewing Gu-nam as a societal equal, the Korean characters are shown in acts of charity: watching as he consumes the food they bought for him, giving him money to "wash up," and providing unsolicited advice about how he can correct or hide his backwardness.

The new trend in portrayal of Joseonjok as "backwards," is by magnifying aspects of barbarism and violence. While the portrayal of Joseonjok in *The Yellow Sea* may be unnecessarily violent, it can be read in the larger context of the film's commentary on Korean societal decadence and subjugation of the disempowered. Within this frame, the degree of which violence associated with Joseonjok is exaggerated in the film is merely a reflection of the severity of criticism it directs towards Korean society. In other words, the film seems to state that immorality which arises from Korean societal decadence has, in many ways, created this barbaric "Other": both a reflection of and a partially constitutive self. While this kind of critical analysis seems to clarify that *The Yellow Sea* is in fact a condemnation of Korean supremacy, it may also work to reinforce attitudes of superiority and desensitize the public to negative portrayals of Joseonjok. If mainstream society continues to view the media's problematization of Joseonjok through an uncritical lens, then there is a dangerous possibility that these portrayals become the norm of which Joseonjok's status in Korea becomes cemented.

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