ON THE TRAIL OF THE MANCHURIAN WESTERN

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ABSTRACT

In recent years South Korean mainstream cinema has seemed to show a softening of mood towards the Korea of the colonial era. A variety of commercial films have portrayed a sepia-toned world of Koreans in snappy suits, broad-brimmed hats and slinky dresses managing to outwit the clumsy efforts of the Japanese to dominate their lives. Director Kim Ji-woon’s film The Good, the Bad and the Weird (2008) shares some of the mood of colonial nostalgia and joins that lighter-hearted approach to the Korean past with the conventions of the action film. An all-Korean production, set in the wild west of Manchuria sometime during the colonial era, it is a clever mix of genres. Beyond that, however, The Good, the Bad and the Weird provides pointers back down the genealogical trail to earlier Korean/Manchurian westerns. A number of films made during the Park Chung-hee years were set in or near Manchuria of the colonial and wartime period. Made by skilled directors such as Im Kwon-taek and Lee Man-hee, they provided a sense of adventure and escape from the claustrophobic political and cultural atmosphere of those years, while associating the action film with serious questions of national and personal identity not always associated with genre entertainment.

1 PROLOGUE

‘Manchuria offered the Japanese opportunities akin to what Americans had found in the great expanses West of the Mississippi.’


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1 I wish to acknowledge the great help and advice concerning illustrations that I have received from Rosanna Morris.
‘... all of Manchuria is a very unsettled place. I can’t help feeling that it’s tremendously dangerous’ // ‘That’s because a lot of different people are converging there.’

Dialogue in Natsumei Sōseki’s The Gate (1910).

‘The visual motif of The Good, the Bad and the Weird is the image of men racing through the vast plains; we don’t know why but they’re racing relentlessly.’


You run off into the future, and look at the past—do you run into the past and see the future? Running off into the future is not identical to running into the past; running into the future is running into the past.

Yi Sang, ‘Reflections on Lines 5’ (1931).²

2 INTRODUCTION

In August 2008 the Korean Film Archive (KOFA) presented an unusual retrospective of Korean genre films. Publicity material (Figure 1) urged people to buy their tickets and ‘Head for the continent’ through this special exhibition of Manchurian westerns (KOFA 2008). The fourteen films ranged from the debut film of Im Kwon-t’aek, Farewell Tumen River (Tumankanga chal ittgôra) of 1962, to the 1971 Break the Chain (Soesasûrûl kkûnhôra), one of the last films of Lee Man-hee (Yi Man-hûi). The latter was one of the most significant directors of the 1960s and 1970s. While his films have yet to gain recognition outside the country, they are much appreciated by knowledgeable cinephiles and students within it. The former, Im Kwon-t’aek, is the best-known survivor of the film industry from the leaner, poorer, more censored days