

San Francisco International Film Festival 2007

Part 3: Smiling through the pain

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This is the third of a series of articles on the 2007 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 26-May 10.

Culminating a period of intense power struggles in the Korean ruling elite, as well as years of domestic repression, on October 26, 1979, Park Chung-hee, president of South Korea since 1961—who had established himself as virtual dictator—was assassinated by the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Kim Jae-kyu. Over the next several months Gen. Chun Doo-hwan and his cohorts staged “a rolling coup,” which was met by increasingly volatile protests, especially from students.

Following Chun’s declaration of martial law on May 17, 1980, troops attacked students in Gwangju, a city in southern South Korea, when the latter resisted their university’s closure. Over the next several days, the student protesters were joined by citizens of the city and surrounding areas, including many workers, among them textile workers and miners.

The brutal actions of the repressive forces only escalated. One participant described it: “A cluster of troops attacked each student individually. They would crack his head, stomp his back, and kick him in the face. When the soldiers were done, he looked like a pile of clothes in meat sauce” (Lee Jae-eui, *Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age*).

By May 21, Gwangju was in a state of open revolt, with some 300,000 people having joined the movement. Arms depots and police stations were looted and their weapons seized. A militia, known as the Citizens Army, repulsed the army, killing several soldiers. A rival administration arose to maintain order and conduct negotiations with the government. It lasted six days.

On May 27, army units, including Special Forces, were unleashed on the population in an orgy of violence. No one knows to this day how many died during the events in Gwangju, perhaps as many as 2,000.

The actions were carried out with the full knowledge and support of the Carter administration in the US. In 1996, Tim Shorrock of the *Journal of Commerce* obtained documents under the Freedom of Information Act that implicated Washington. His account makes fascinating reading [The US Role in Korea in 1979 and 1980—<http://www.kimsoft.com/korea/kwangju3.htm>].

Summarizing his findings, Shorrock explained that “Senior officials in the Carter administration...approved Mr. Chun’s plans to use military units against the huge student demonstrations that rocked Korean cities in the spring of 1980.” The documents reveal leading members of the Carter government, including Zbigniew Brzezinski, panic-stricken about the possibility of “another Iran,” a nation in which another vital ally, the Shah, had recently been deposed.

Two of the key participants in approving the actions were Warren Christopher, later Bill Clinton’s secretary of state and a great pontificator on “human rights,” and Richard C. Holbrooke, the same administration’s chief negotiator on Bosnia, seven times nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Shorrock’s documents furthermore disclosed that US officials knew of

contingency plans to use “Black Beret” Special Forces, known for their brutality, against the civilian population. In the midst of the uprising, after the homicidal violence of the military had already been demonstrated, the Carter administration approved further use of force “to retake the city” and discussed plans for “direct US military intervention if the situation got out of hand.”

The Gwangju massacre still weighs heavily on many minds in South Korea.

It continues to preoccupy certain artists and filmmakers. In 2004, the WSWs covered an exhibition in New York City by artist Hong Sung Dam that in part treated the events. Lee Chang-dong’s film *Peppermint Candy* (2000) recounts the life and death of a secret policeman turned businessman who, as a frightened youth, participates in the massacre as a member of the armed forces.

In Im Sang-soo’s new film, *The Old Garden*, Hyun-woo leaves prison after nearly 17 years for his part as a leftist militant in the events in 1980. Before he departs, a prison official tells him, “The world’s a better place. You had some part in it. Have a great life.” Hyun-woo first stays with his family, but he’s suffering from “insomnia, claustrophobia and anti-social” tendencies. His mother is now a realtor in a wealthy part of Seoul. He feels out of place, and his family seems uncomfortable in his presence.

Hyun-woo meets up with a group of his ex-comrades. One tells him bluntly, “We’ve all become asswipes.” Some are disillusioned and cynical, others lead trivial lives.

(In a conversation in San Francisco, Im made the point that the “current regime is made up of the activists in 1980.” The current president, Roh Moo-hyun, was a lawyer for student dissidents following the 1980 events. Filmmaker Lee Chang-dong served as culture minister in 2003-2004.)

Hyun-woo goes in search of traces of the woman, Yoon-hee, who harbored him in the countryside after the Gwangju events. Much of the film is taken up with recounting the more or less idyllic time they spent together—months? a year?—before he returned to the city, where he was arrested, beaten with sticks and eventually tortured and held in solitary confinement.

Yoon-hee, a teacher and a painter, dies of cancer while Hyun-woo is in prison. He never sees her again. Even her letters to him are returned undelivered.

Im Sang-soo directs the film with empathy for his characters. He clearly empathizes more with Yoon-hee and her art than he does with Hyun-woo, or at least Hyun-woo’s political associates. In one scene, only their mouths, repeating slogans or empty phrases, are filmed. (Presumably they are Maoists or supporters of the North Korean Stalinists.)

Yoon-hee wants Hyun-woo to stay with her in her little isolated house and not return to the city, where he’s likely to be caught. Hyun-woo feels guilty for deserting his comrades, and he can’t forget what the military did. “I’ll never forgive those bastards.” We see scenes of the carnage in Gwangju. Eventually he says, “I think it’s time to leave,” and she replies, “What about me? Let’s go deep into the mountains.” After he gets on a

bus, she mutters, “So long, idiot.... I put you up, feed you...why would you leave?”

It’s not clear whether she opposes his activism, or simply thinks that he is sacrificing himself unnecessarily and pointlessly.

In any event, *The Old Garden* leaves enough space around the problem so that the spectator can make his or her own judgments. Nonetheless, one suspects that not all the unresolved issues in the film were left so as the result of a conscious decision by the filmmaker. Varying and perhaps contradictory impulses are at work.

Im’s film is deliberately theatrical and “artificial,” in fact, something of a melodrama, complete with fake snow. In our conversation, the director professed himself to be an adherent of Hollywood-style storytelling. (“Ironically, yes, I love Hollywood. I use their method of storytelling. I am not an *Asian* filmmaker, I am a *global* filmmaker!”) No long takes, unmoving camera or non-professional acting for him. His lighting alone is intended to lift the events out of the realm of the everyday. He makes no bones about his emotionalism.

It’s refreshing to encounter such theatricality and artifice. However, the conflicting moods and tones of the film, which shift from underground torture chambers to serene mountain retreats, are not fully explained by Im’s artistic predisposition. There are intertwined aesthetic and political questions.

The Old Garden takes up very dramatic and complex events, treating truly life-and-death matters. Im obviously feels deeply about these matters; he has now devoted two films to the period 1979-1980. In *The President’s Last Bang* (a scabrous and purposely tasteless work, done with a good deal of venom, which treated Park’s assassination) and the most recent film, Im sets to work with a variety of artistic tools: a more-or-less realistic narrative approach, irony, melodrama, Hollywood romance, black humor. In regard to the latter, however, one feels that the laughter is a very pained laughter. As it should be.

The South Korean people have suffered for decades under various authoritarian regimes, firmly backed by Washington. Every act of villainy was justified in the name of “national security” and the struggle against “communism.” Moreover, the population made vast and heartbreaking sacrifices in the name of economic development. And all of this, it turns out, principally enriched a selfish and repressive elite that now presides over a highly polarized and explosive society.

Im brings some entirely legitimate vitriol to his films, which manifests itself as an especially biting humor, without though, one feels, having worked through all the problems. So the result is something quite startling, but not entirely coherent or satisfying. He’s laughing, and there are farcical elements to the carrying on of the South Korean elite...but it’s not, in the end, so terribly funny for him or us...it’s rather painful.

And added to those conflicting sentiments are difficult ideological problems. As he made clear in our interview, Im has no love for the student radicals of the time (or the present)...

“Certain political radicals don’t like my film [*The President’s Last Bang*]. They said I should have depicted Park more negatively. In my view, some of these radicals have the same mentality, an undemocratic, authoritarian mentality.”

...and this no doubt colors his approach to the material. One has every right to be highly critical of such elements. A great deal depends, however, on the nature of one’s criticism. Satirizing sloganeering and empty rhetoric and pinpointing the undemocratic and cultish methods of various Stalinist and Maoist organizations are all to the good.

Or is Im tempted at least by the notion that the entire project of fighting for a better world is rather futile, and one should retreat into the mountains and drink, paint and make love? It’s not clear to me; perhaps it’s not entirely clear to him. He is outraged and frustrated by the South Korean situation. One can only hope he will clarify this for himself. He’s a lively and interesting filmmaker. “My approach, I hope, is unique,” he says.

Im Sang-soo remains cheerful, even when speaking about rather grim matters. We asked him about the personal significance of the historical episode.

“The events of 1979-1980 are important for me. I was in high school. The teachers were very sad when Park was assassinated. They cried.

“My father was an anti-Park journalist who lost his job because of his opposition. My family was not unhappy he was gone. I had to hide my feelings. People were really sad.

“Too many people accept orders without question. It’s very hierarchical in Korea. High-ranking officials are fascistic.”

The President’s Last Bang apparently created a sensation:

“The film, about the assassination of President Park Chung-hee in October 1979, caused something of a scandal in South Korea. His daughter, Park Geun-hye, will be a candidate in the next presidential election, in December 2007. She feels attacked by my film. Her brother sued the film. The court demanded I cut documentary footage used at the beginning, because she’s in the footage. The case is still going on. They said the film might spoil people’s reputations.”

Im seemed pleased by the thought.

“When *President* was released, I was on television for 10 straight days. There were attacks from the ultra-right. I was accused of ‘betraying’ the country and falsifying history.

“I wanted to say to the Korean people: 25 years later, this is what you are. People in South Korea don’t want to face reality. The mentality is what’s shown in the film. There is not a democratic mentality.”

He spoke of the Gwangju events:

“In May 1980, at the time of the Gwangju massacre, I was preparing for a big exam for university. My older brother was a university student. The normal everyday life of the students in May 1980, I knew very well. There was a generally rebellious mood.

“South Korean television, the media, did not cover the massacre. No one confirmed the rumors that were going around. The alternative press knew about it. They gathered at my house and talked about Gwangju. The following year, when I was a first-year student, I saw videos.

“The characters are based on real people.

“We had 18 years of Park. His death was sudden, shocking. There was an immense political vacuum in South Korea. People wanted democracy. General Chun [Doo-hwan] used the vacuum, he intentionally carried out a massacre to consolidate his power. After that, everything was icy, no one moved.

“The massacre was backed by the US government, the Carter administration. People knew what the American role was in the events.”

As for the future: “It’s getting hard to make films in South Korea. I have a hard time getting financing.” Then he smiled.



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