

64th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

A serious approach to history: *Non-Fiction Diary* by South Korea's Jung Yoon-suk

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This is the second of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 6-16, 2014. Part 1 was posted February 20.

Thirty-three-year-old South Korean filmmaker Jung Yoon-suk takes a refreshingly serious approach to history in his new documentary *Non-Fiction Diary*, which won the NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) prize at the 64th Berlinale.

In notes for his film, Jung Yoon-suk (born in Seoul) makes clear that an understanding of the past is necessary to influence the present. He writes: “The past is not just the past. It comes back again and again, it affects our time. If the present cannot be changed then the future threatens to be the same as the past.” The filmmaker gave an interview to the WSW (see below).

Jung's *Non-Fiction Diary* sets out to examine the momentous social and political changes that beset South Korea in the 1990s, following the downfall of the military junta in 1988 and the opening up of the country to the global free market under the administration of Kim Young-sam (1993-1998). In Jung's own words, he sought in his film to “uncover the contradictions of capitalism.”

The film begins with the arrest of a gang of youth, known as the Jijon Clan (“Supreme Gangsters”), in September 1994. The Jijon Clan were a group of young men from a poor rural part of South Korea responsible for the kidnapping, torture and brutal murder of five victims they had identified as their enemies. The proclaimed aim of the clan was to “kill the rich.” The media asserted the episode was the first serial murder case involving young men in South Korean history. Branded by the media and political establishment as the “devil's offspring,” five of the group were sentenced to death and executed just over a year later.

The death sentence was undersigned by President Kim, who declared that the executions of the young men was a necessary act of “social purification.” Jung makes clear, of course, that he has no sympathy for the vicious activities of the group, but seeks to locate their crimes in a broader social and political context.

In his director's notes, he writes: “The crimes carried out by

this group ... are considered Korea's first case of serial murder targeting growing social inequality. This tragic event shows us the effects and contradictions of capitalism accompanying South Korea's successful attempt at economic prosperity. The politically motivated acts by the hierarchically structured Jijon Clan count among the darkest chapters of the country's rapid economic growth.”

One month after the arrest of the Jijon Clan, the Seongsu Bridge in Seoul collapsed, claiming 32 lives. Investigations into the disaster revealed that routine inspections of the bridge, completed in 1979, had been halted due to budget cuts.

Eight months later, also in Seoul, the five-storey Sampoong department store collapsed, killing a total of 502 and injuring nearly a thousand, in one of the deadliest building collapses in history. Official inquiries disclosed that the department store had been constructed with a substandard mix of cement and seawater, and that the addition of another storey, added at a later time, had further weakened the structure.

The human link between these various events is the senior policeman responsible for the arrest of the Jijon Clan. The same official, Chief Superintendent Go Byung-chun, was a witness to the Sampoong department store disaster. He describes the scenes of devastation at the site of the collapsed building as a war zone, as carnage he will never forget. Go then expresses his bewilderment that the Jijon Clan members responsible for five deaths paid for their crimes with their lives, while a mere handful of those responsible for the department store tragedy even received minor jail sentences.

One of the most powerful scenes in *Non-Fiction Diary* features documentary footage of relatives of the victims of the department store collapse rummaging in the rubble, trying to recover the remains of their loved ones from the giant rubbish heap. After the authorities conducted a search for survivors the rubble from the department store was transported to a landfill, although a number of families had not received the bodies of their relatives. We witness some families carrying out their own search for the bones and remains of their relatives.

Jung was able to interview key figures involved in these events, including leading policemen, prison wardens and

politicians, to provide a penetrating, rounded portrait of a profoundly conservative political elite that responds with draconian and brutal repression whenever the slightest threat emerges to its privileged status. His interviewees were evidently relieved to be able to express themselves freely about subjects and a period that has been barely addressed in the public discourse.

A prominent human rights lawyer interviewed in *Non-Fiction Diary* notes that in addition to massive economic and political tensions, South Korean society at that time was also afflicted by an ideological crisis. Neo-liberal economic values and the worship of money were being propagated by the ruling elite and the media, under conditions where the broad masses of the population lacked any effective representation.

A conversation with Jung Yoon-suk

In an interview with the WWS, filmmaker Jung Yoon-suk made clear that he saw parallels between the period of capitalist expansion and crisis in the mid-1990s and the situation in South Korea today, five years after the crash of 2008.

He explained: “The period in the mid-1990s was a very important time in Korean social and political life. After the fall of the military dictatorship in 1988, Korea underwent a period of very rapid neo-liberal economic development. In many ways it paralleled the development of Thatcherism in Britain and Reaganism in America.

“In a short period of time there was a rapid increase in social inequality. A few people were getting rich, but many were left behind. There was an outbreak of strikes. The country had opened up economically, but at the same time the ruling elite remained very conservative. Then in 1997 the country went through a severe crisis following its failure to pay back debts owed to the IMF.

“The events dealt with in the film are drawn from this period. In 1994, the serial killings of the gang took place and the Seongsu bridge fell into at the river. 1995 saw the collapse of the Sampoong department store. There is a connection between these events. And, as I say in the notes to the film, the social problems recognized by the Jijon Clan are still in effect today.”

I asked about the significance for his film of the police detective who originally tracked down the gang.

Jung Yoon-suk: “Originally I planned to make more of an artistic type of film. It was when I met the police chief that I changed my concept and made a documentary. The police chief is a key figure. Not only did he hunt down the gang, he was also present at the collapse of the Sampoong Department Store. It is he who draws a parallel between the two events, saying that the gang members suffered the death penalty, but all those responsible for the department store collapse got off lightly.

“His experience with the Jijon gang also forced him to rethink his opinion about the death penalty. Prior to the execution of the Jijon Clan, Go Byung-chun was a firm advocate. Following the light sentence for the head of the department store, he says he is of two minds about the death penalty, since there is one law for the poor and another for the rich.

“Another significant factor dealt with in the film was the amnesty granted in 1997 to the two South Korean military dictators who engineered the military coup in 1979 that overthrew the existing government. Both men had been sentenced to long prison sentences for their numerous crimes against the people, but were then released with Kim Young-sam’s approval in order to placate the military.”

I asked Jung about a comment made in his film to the effect that the South Korean elite always needs an enemy to be able to justify its authoritarianism.

“It’s true. In 1994 they had an easy target—the Jijon Clan. These young men could be presented as demons, thereby justifying massive state repression. But if it is not criminals, then the South Korean elite will always find another enemy. When all else fails, then it is the North Koreans. Capitalist society in Korea is closely bound up with nationalism. You cannot criticise or oppose one without the other.”

I also spoke to the director about the significance of American policy in the region and the dangers involved in US President Barack Obama’s “pivot to Asia.”

“I completely agree. The Americans are trying to implicate Korea and use the country as a military base against China. I dealt with some of these issues in a previous film [*Jam Docu Gangjung*, 2011], which deals with the popular hostility to the construction of a naval base at Gangjeong village.”

Finally, Jung Yoon-suk expressed his pleasure at being able to give an interview to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

To be continued



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