



## Chapter Seven. Struggle for Self-Determination: Development, Dictatorship, and Democratisation in South Korea, 1960s–1980s

### Playbill

“The President’s Barber” (*Hyoja-dong ibalsa* [“The Barber of Hyoja district”]); Im Chan-sang, 2004

“Harmonium in My Memory” (*Nae maeum ui punggeum*, [“Harmonium in my heart”]); Yi Yeong-jae, 1999

“Once in a Summer” (*Geu hae yeoreum* [“Summer that year”]); Jo Geun-sik, 2006

“A Single Spark” (*Aeumdaun cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il* [“The Beautiful youth Jeon Tae-il”]); Bak Gwang-su, 1995

“The Drug King” (*Mayag-wang*); U Min-ho, 2018

“Memories of Murder” (*Sarin ui chu-eok*, “Remembrances of murder”); Bong Jun-ho, 2003

“Nameless Gangster” (*Beomjoewa ui jeonjaeng* [“War against crime”]); Yun Jong-bin, 2012

“Gangnam Blues” (*Gangnam 1970*); Yu Ha, 2014

“Silmido”; Gang U-seok, 2003

- “The President’s Last Bang” (*Geu ttae geu saramdeul* [“Those people at that time”]); Im Sang-su, 2005
- “The Man Standing Next” (*Namsan ui bujangdeul* [“Directors of Namsan Headquarters”]); U Min-ho, 2020
- “The Attorney” (*Byeonhoin*); Yang U-seok, 2013
- “A Petal” (*Kkonnip*); Jang Seon-u, 1996
- “May 18” (*Hwaryeohan hyuga* [“Fascinating vacations”]); Jang Seon-u, 2007
- “A Taxi Driver” (*Taeksi unjeonsa*); Jang Hun, 2017
- “Ordinary Person” (*Botong saram*); Kim Bong-han, 2017
- “1987: When the Day Comes” (*1987: geu nari omyeon*); Jang Jun-hwan, 2017

Twelve-year-old Nagan, the paralysed son of the title character in “The President’s Barber”, lies asleep while being diagnosed by a traditional healer, who tells the father, “Your son is endowed with a strange fate and name, which should have meant a life without suffering, but he has taken on the karma of a serpent across the river that became a dragon”. A cryptic message to the viewer as well as to the amusingly simple-minded barber, it furthers this remarkable film’s workings as a parable of the 1960s and 1970s, the years of rule under President Park Chung Hee: the serpent that crossed the river to become a dragon. For Nagan, whose name means “joyous peace”, had been born in April 1960 amid the student demonstrations that overthrew the reigning dictator, a democratic breakthrough that was cut short within a year by General Park Chung Hee’s military coup of May 1961. This put Park in power until his shocking assassination in October 1979, the aftermath of which prompts the resolution to “The President’s Barber” and caps its depiction throughout of the Park regime’s comprehensive hold on the country: a stifling of the South Korean people’s yearning for the freedom of self-determination and historical agency, as well as joyous peace.

Nagan’s distressing development into a young man thus parallels the nearly two-decade lifespan of the Park period, when South Korea underwent rapid economic growth out of poverty but failed to advance out of authoritarianism. Park’s military rule of the 1960s developed into his

“Yusin” constitutional dictatorship of the 1970s, followed by another military strongman’s rule in the 1980s. In these latter two decades, politics and its personality cults reached chilling levels of harshness, with expressions of opposition punished by terrible means. Resistance nevertheless persisted and finally achieved the breakthrough to electoral democracy and political liberalisation in 1987, thanks to massive public demonstrations. The cost was high, though, beginning with the violent suppression of student protests in the fall of 1979 that led to Park’s assassination in October that year, and reaching the peak of damage the following spring: The 1980 Gwangju Uprising, a not atypical student-led disturbance, turned into a shocking bloodbath when the army, under the direction of a new military junta, turned its guns and sticks on the citizenry of this southwestern city and region. Since then, this event has stood as a historical watershed that continues to guide South Korea’s ongoing reckoning with its painful past. In the more immediate term, the Gwangju Uprising of 1980 set the stage and tone for the intense buildup of mass defiance until it burst forth irrepressibly in 1987, the opening year of permanent democratisation.

As with a celebrated cinematic dramatisation of that year’s events, titled simply “1987” (see below), an unmistakably dominant motif in the films set in the roughly quarter-century period (1961–1987) of anti-communist, militarist authoritarianism is the centrality of the youth—children and young adults—as representations of the struggle for self-determination. Conversely, films that depict the brutality, indeed criminality, of the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s feature more the older generations as executors of the system, such as the confused government torturer in “The President’s Barber”, who gives Nagan a mild electrical shock that ends up paralysing the boy. Even when the main character, such as Nagan’s father the barber, is not a young person, the stakes and burdens of national history are often shown to fall squarely on those of the youth. They stand as the agents, symbols, vehicles, or objects of the quest for individual freedom, authentic carriers of the nation’s history and of its prospects for redirecting its fate. Due to several factors, particularly the age of most of the directors—members of the so-called x86 generation, born in the 1960s, who came of age and to the streets in the intense political struggle of the 1980s—such films have generally reflected the progressive historical understanding that prevailed at the turn of the twenty-first century. This view prioritises the resistance to dictatorship over the escape from poverty

in South Korea's meta-narrative of history. And here, as with Nagan, the youth drive the hopes of freedom from fate, with the long arc of the country's maturation signifying the pursuit of a more proper destiny.

### THE 1960s AND 1970s: YOUTH TRAGICALLY INTERRUPTED

There seems to have been a chronological symmetry to the dictatorship period's place in Korea's modern experience as a whole. Like the preceding 35-year period of Japanese rule, from 1910 to 1945, and the (as of now) succeeding 35 years of existence as a liberal democracy, the authoritarian era also endured for about 3.5 decades following the Korean War of 1950–1953. If, as in “The President's Barber”, we can imagine the formative period of South Korea's history as arising only after the Korean War, then the 1960s would represent the country's adolescence, when the younger generations would mould, and be moulded into, the shape of the country's early form. That entity would then have come of age starting in the 1970s by developing a self-awareness and sense of the historical stakes, particularly under the military dictatorship. Meanwhile, in the realms of popular culture and economic development, equally dramatic transformations also took place, especially from the vantage point of young people: a sense of potential self-fulfilment and self-determination at odds with the politics and social conventions that seemed to reinforce authority, hierarchy, and exploitation. This combination produced turbulence around the world, as shown in youth activism in response to global cultural developments, and in the deepening of the Cold War as manifested in the Vietnam War. The films examined in this section incorporate all of these elements in their portrayals of South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s.

We can begin with a film that is relatively tranquil in its setting and storyline, “Harmonium in My Memory” (*Nae maeum ui punggeum*, [“Harmonium in my heart”]; Yi Yeong-jae, 1999), based on a novelistic memoir. Set in the South Korean countryside in 1962, the first full year of the Park-led military *junta*'s rule following its coup in 1961, the remoteness of the backdrop allows for a focus on simple coming-of-age love stories that have a somewhat indirect connection to developments elsewhere in the country. The main characters are a 17-year-old girl in the village, Hong-yeon, and a 21-year-old student teacher from Seoul, Suha, who has arrived to start his career at the local primary school, which the girl still attends despite her advanced age. She quickly develops a crush on the young man, but he himself undergoes a maturation while falling for a

fellow teacher, Eun-hui, who is four years his senior. These three main characters offer a limited but subtle range of representations of the younger generations in South Korea at the time, transposed to a rural, “backward” setting that enhances the contrast between the past and present and hints at the stirrings of modernising changes affecting the country at large.

The political circumstances in Seoul and the cities of the time do make a presence, such as through the slogan of “Reconstruction” (*Jaegwon*) pushed by the junta that came to power in 1961, but these connections are not prominent. Rather, the sense of the times comes more from the authoritarian approach to things at the school, echoing the recent military takeover in the capital, and from the countering, softer impulses of the three main characters, especially Eun-hui. Her efforts to instil feelings of discovery, exploration, and joy among the students in their education invite collegial reproaches from older teachers who emphasise hierarchy and discipline. In the material realm as well, the transformations are shown as subtle and incremental but still significant in totality, with the remote countryside serving as a receptacle for modern ideas and items. And here, too, the school, as represented by the ubiquitous musical instrument in classrooms of that era, the harmonium, facilitates the harmonisation of modernity and tradition, growth and stability, young and old. The teachers thus act as transmitters of the new and future South Korea, bringing to the schoolchildren and the villagers modern medicine, vaccination, hygiene, and the technologies and tastes of the latest in popular culture, as well as of course schooling itself.

All of these components, including the cultural influence of American popular music, appear in more pronounced form in a film set at the end of the 1960s, “Once in a Summer” (*Geu hae yeoreum*, [“Summer that year”]; Jo Keun-sik, 2006). Although relatively under-viewed despite its star power, this masterfully crafted tear-jerker depicts the loss and sacrifice stemming directly from the painful trials of South Korea’s developmentalist past. But unlike “Harmonium in My Memory”, this film does not shy away from politics, even with the story anchored in melodrama and taking place substantially in a rural setting. And although limited in scope—as the title suggests, the main narrative comes from one year, 1969—“Once in a Summer” exudes an epic feel through its expansive treatment of that summer’s historical significance: the mass protests against Park Chung Hee’s attempt to revise the constitution in order to run for a third consecutive presidential term<sup>69</sup>; the swelling urban youth culture, and its contrast to the underdeveloped rural areas; the ferocious power of anti-communist

ideology, wielded by the state and dispersed throughout society, that informs both urban and rural lives; the domination, entitlement, and abusive hold of big business; and the inescapable American impact, as wielded through popular culture and technological prowess. In a scene of villagers gathering around the communal television set to watch the moon landing, one of them asks, “Is the moon now American land?”

The film begins in contemporary times (mid-2000s) with a frail version of the lead character, Seog-yeong, an ailing college professor in his early 60s, as he is visited by a former student working for a television programme that finds long-lost friends and lovers. Her request to the professor to name such a person in his past—as well as her awkward singing—unleashes a flood of memories. The ensuing flashback sequence to 1969 then shows university student Seog-yeong with little interest in a campus rally against Park, and it turns out he generally lacks interest in politics, youth culture, his future, or much of anything else, and for this he is shown being needled by friends and harangued by his father, a wealthy businessman. To escape all of this Seog-yeong joins a student “farm outing” (*nonghwal*) to a remote village to help the locals with their work and spread the accoutrements of modern life. There he falls in love with a village girl, Jeong-in, who has an uneasy, distinctive standing in her community. She is one of the few literate adults, for one, and therefore staffs the local library, but more importantly, in a setting in which one’s identity remains firmly tied to one’s family, she has none.

Jeong-in was orphaned when her parents, both leftist guerrillas or activists, were either killed or ended up in the North following the Korean War, but who in any case bestowed upon their left-behind daughter an ostracised status. Before that, however, her father had established the library with all good intent, so it appears somehow that Jeong-in is bound to that small building in more ways than one. She is also shown forced to join anti-communist military drills while brandishing a wooden toy rifle, a ludicrous image signalling her fragile existence as an internal alien. She thus embodies the precarious condition of thousands if not millions who were associated with the enemy ideology in the anti-communist frenzy of post-liberation South Korea, a human object of intense surveillance, re-education, manipulation, and exploitation. In a pivotal scene of a gathering for a movie projected outdoors one evening, she must confirm to the illiterate village elder that his son, who had been working at an electrical plant far away, had in fact died after an accident, the notice of which Jeong-in had kept hidden in order to protect the older man. Upon

realising what had happened, he strikes her and explodes with invective that dredges up her background. This tense confrontation is interrupted by a fire engulfing the library, a result of Jeong-in's having left a candle burning by a window. In one evening, then, the grounds that anchored her already precarious existence in the village are completely upended, just as her affection for Seog-yeong has also become undeniable. The Korean romanticisation of the enduring, fateful impact of one's "first love", an exhaustive trope in melodramas, is given here a richly historical significance by the plentiful links to the times in both the setting and the narrative. This moment in the film also comes at the midway point, signalling the turn in Jeong-in's life for good, as well as the impossibility of return—to her life in the village and to her existence as someone bound by her past.

The first step in that journey of Jeong-in's new life comes when she agrees to follow Seog-yeong to Seoul. Seog-yeong, stricken by love and a hero's complex, is determined to rescue her, despite warnings from his student group leader that her background and their enormous class difference would make his plans untenable. This concern comes true almost immediately, as the couple gets ensnared in a roundup of student protesters in Seoul. In their separate and harsh interrogations, Jeong-in's parental stigma is introduced, but Seog-yeong's own family ties are offered as a chance to evade further incarceration if he formally denies having associated with her, or even knowing her. In an excruciating scene in front of a disheartened but resigned Jeong-in, he makes this choice. His subsequent redemption, by begging his powerful father—tellingly, at a construction site of his father's company—to intervene in gaining her release, ultimately does not result in his desired outcome, for she slips away from him and disappears into the mass of developing South Korea.

Pondering what motivated Jeong-in's decision, beyond any sense of betrayal, raises the larger question of why these lovers could not have stayed together in the South Korea of the time. Seog-yeong had offered her an exit from the enclosed environment of her village, but the smashing of his dreams of their life together brings home the reality that Jeong-in is now bound to an equally confining set of circumstances. For her to achieve true agency over her life, then, she had to make another escape. In turn, the broader historical judgement on the Park era comes to the forefront: What were the underlying basis and purpose of the stark differences in social or class identity in the intensively anti-communist, regimented mobilisation of the Park years? "Once in a Summer" suggests that one's family background and association with the militarist, developmentalist

state, the roots of which dated back to the Korean War and colonial eras, together determined an individual's prospects for freedom and agency. The overlapping life trajectories of Jeong-in and Seog-yeong, alas, were but a brief crossing before they again split along very different tracks. The train likewise figures prominently in the film, mostly as a conduit for transmitting people and ideas from the urban to the rural. There is also a scene, after the couple's decision to leave the village together, in which the couple is shown walking insecurely along railroad tracks leading up to Seoul, a sure reminder of the train's customary signification of fate. And fittingly, they go their separate ways at Seoul Station. Their contrasting outcomes after arriving in the capital likewise invite consideration of their differing class backgrounds, with Jeong-in's very plebeian standing in unavoidable conflict with that of the decidedly privileged Seog-yeong.

Class-based exploitation of the youth becomes an unequivocal theme in a film that bridges the 1960s and 1970s through the life of Jeon Tae-il, a young labour activist who died of self-immolation in 1970, at the age of 22. This manner of death, strikingly recreated in the film, is reflected in its English title, "A Single Spark" (Bak Gwang-su, 1995), but more revealing is the original Korean title, "The Beautiful Youth Jeon Tae-il" (*Areumdaun cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il*), which accentuates the scope of loss from a life so tragically shortened. Here, the determinant structures are sweatshop capitalism and authoritarianism, which both produced and relied upon the labour exploitation and government corruption that drove Jeon to the breaking point. This connection is enhanced by a second, parallel story—shown in colour as opposed to the depiction of Jeon's young adult life in black and white—set a few years later, in the mid-1970s, of a young couple: one a "factory girl" harassed by the police for trying to organise her fellow workers; and the other a dissident intellectual, on the run from the police state of the 1970s' *Yusin* dictatorship, who is researching the life of Jeon for a biography. He also provides the voiceover narration, in which he guides the viewer through his discovery of the connections between his circumstances and those of Jeon. The elaboration, indeed the agonising theorisation, of this relationship in the subsequent 1980s would draw many university students and intellectuals to the factory floor to awaken their proletarian senses as well as to provide the labourers guidance and solidarity. In "A Single Spark", which was perhaps the earliest theatrical feature in the labour film genre to appear after democratisation and viscerally recreated the harrowing experiences of resistance in the Park years, this inter-class alliance understandably features parallel lives and fates.



Unlike “Once in a Summer”, however, the gap between the two tracks is small and maintained in the same direction. Furthermore, their crossing takes place posthumously, through a process of learning and awakening that reflected the growing impact of Jeon’s death on the subsequent labour and democratisation movements.

The political overtones are not as explicit in “The President’s Barber” (*Hyojadong ibalsa* [“The Barber of Hyoja district”]; Im Chan-sang, 2004), but they are just as striking. As with “Once in a Summer”, the focus is on the violent structures and vulgar cultures of the anti-communist authoritarian system. The life of the title character, whose geographical proximity to the president’s mansion leads to his role as the president’s barber, takes an absurd, then appalling turn as he finds himself an unwitting eyewitness to major historical moments. (Indeed “Barber” is the closest replica in South Korean cinema of “Forrest Gump”.) His experience, over two decades, thus stands as a sharply calibrated lens into life under Park Chung Hee’s rule. The story actually begins in 1960, the year before the coup through which Park took power, with a dramatically comical recreation of the April 19 student revolution that overthrew President Syngman Rhee. This date also marks the birth of the barber’s son, Nagan, the narrator of the film’s voiceover. Over the course of his upbringing, Nagan (“joyous peace”) grows symbolically as the stifled yearning for democracy and hence the allegorical counterpart to Park, references to whom include “Yongan”—“royal countenance”, literally “the dragon’s face”—which the barber is sternly warned not to nick when he shaves the president. The more frequent epithet for Park is “Gakha” (“his eminence”), which Park’s chief bodyguard equates with the similar-sounding “gukka” (“country” or “state”), a refrain that he forces the barber to recite while doing military-style push-ups as punishment for the helpless man’s ignorance.

In such a crude way breezy violence infuses the exercise of authority visited upon the barber. In a disturbingly amusing parallel, the characters of the president’s chief bodyguard and the KCIA chief, both of whom are using the barber as a pawn in their machinations against each other, take turns in different scenes kicking the barber in the shin in a fit of rage—a behaviour shown also in the films, discussed below, on the 1979 assassination of Park. Currying favour with the president is the reason these underlings do this, but they are also generally given free rein to abuse their power, for ultimately it comes from the dictator, who himself tries to keep his hands clean, distanced from the unpleasant, petty details of the enforcement of his reign. The barber, having garnered the president’s confidence

through his regular visits to the Blue House, eventually comes face to face with the horrors of such proximity, when Nagan, thanks unwittingly to his fearful father, absurdly becomes ensnared in a scheme to nab political opponents as communist spies. What follows is an extraordinarily unsettling scene, barely mitigated by its comical undertone: The boy Nagan undergoes mild torture through electric shock, although he remains happily unaware of what is happening to him, just as the casual torturer himself is unable to act upon his doubts about what he is doing. However distressed he gets, however, the barber is too intimidated to tell the president that Nagan has been abducted by the state security apparatus. Nagan is eventually released, but the ordeal has paralysed him.

An ensuing, poignant montage follows the desperate barber, with his crippled son on his back, as he walks on dilapidated bridges and past stacks of unused construction lumber, decaying emblems of South Korea's developmentalist construct. He must travel far away from the geographies of power to find a medicine man in the wintry mountains of Gangwon province, who gives him an encrypted diagnosis of his son's malady—which is also the barber's own—as well as the prescriptive resolution, which can come only with the passing of the “dragon” itself. After the president has died, and after the barber finally demurs, in his own amusing way, an offer to service the next dictator, Chun Doo-hwan (though not so named, his bald head is enough to give him away), the now 20-year-old Nagan regains his mobility.

As we know, Park's passing did not mean the end of military dictatorship. South Korean society's paralysis thus came less from the outward form of authoritarianism as much as from the inward debilitation that sapped young people like Nagan of their joy, dignity, and curiosity—that robbed them of their youth. This is illustrated by the barber's young brother-in-law and Nagan's uncle, who is shown as an energetic, happy young man passionate about American popular culture and eager to go on his Vietnam War adventure, the closest he would get to the US. After he returns from his stint in the war, however, he has completely changed: broken, reticent, and sobered by his treatment at the hands of American soldiers. His outcome is thus an accompaniment to what would befall Nagan himself, thanks to his father's inextricable side job as the president's barber. The feeble and clueless barber, thrust into privilege, even power, by the incidental location of his barber shop, had been easily taken in and corrupted by this order and thus represented the older generations' responsibility for failing to protect the children and youth. Still, however

much the director, Im Chan-sang, sought to demonstrate the banality of coercion and violence under Park's rule, showing a boy undergoing torture seems to have crossed a line into the blatant embrace of shock value. As Lim noted, however, while conceding the lack of any evidence of this having actually occurred, every young adult who really was tortured by the state was, in the end, someone's child.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, in the film's semiotics, Nagan, in embodying the country's fledgling democratic spirit, was everyone's child.

### CRIMINALITY AND KARMIC VIOLENCE IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

Films set in the 1970s and 1980s have tended to shift the generational focus to those in positions of fateful power in order to associate the government and the times with criminality. The idea is that, as an unelected and increasingly brutal autocracy veering towards fascist rule in the 1970s and 1980s, the South Korean military dictatorships blurred if not decimated the line between legality and illegality. Understandably, the favoured theme in such dramatisations has been the underworld, the realm of organised crime that, in the rapidly industrialising and globalising South Korea of the era, operated as a fixture in the social landscape as much as the heavy-handed regime itself. The logical unfolding of this relationship resulted in Park's being killed in 1979 by his own henchman, the stunning event that two major films have made their narrative focus. These works in turn drew upon a popular upswell in gangster films starting in the 1990s, corresponding to the start of *hallyu* cinema, when it seemed several major hits every year came in this genre. Tellingly, the blockbuster that epitomised the trend, "Friends" (2001), was a historical film set in 1970s' and 1980s' Busan, which became a clichéd backdrop for several of these treatments. As the excessive violence probably de-sensitised the moviegoing public and invited ever more in-your-face showings of brutality, films featuring the underworld remained popular, and likewise some of the more stimulating releases have featured a historical setting.

For the 1970s, known for the *Yusin* constitutional dictatorship that began formally in late 1972 but characterised the entire decade, the films have naturally taken a dark, unsettling tone. Many of President Park's signature *Yusin* programmes actually began at the start of the 1970s or earlier, including the export-led industrialisation drive through state

oversight, intensified anti-communism, the manipulation of elections, the prosecution of dissent, and mass mobilisation campaigns like the New Village Movement. Some of these features are interwoven into a visceral accounting of the 1970s' tandem of autocracy and criminality by "The Drug King" (*Mayag-wang*; U Min-ho, 2018). Starring Song Kang-ho in the title role, the film is about a brazen methamphetamine manufacturer and trafficker in Busan, Yi Dusam, who styles himself a businessman contributing to the national developmentalist drive to export manufactured goods. Starting with his entrance as a runner in the thriving trade in knockoff goods with nearby Japan, Yi revives his life after a close call and bout in prison by hitting upon the explosively lucrative potential of *ppong*, the slang for "hiropong" (philopon), until he eventually becomes undone by his creation, both the chemical and the organisational. The government's official crackdown on this and other organised crime activity actually fuels the thorough participation of venal officials in making such activities rewarding, if not thriving. The state's monopoly on legitimate violence is thus expressed as an effort to exercise a monopoly on criminality, with the KCIA, the foremost secret police agency, managing the chain of bribery and selective suppression. This ever-growing kleptocracy eventually buckles under its own weight, a lesson embodied in the singular semi-clean character in the film, a prosecutor sent down to Busan from the outside, named Kim, who becomes Yi Dusam's foil and the audience's proxy for historical perspective and judgement. Kim is shown on multiple occasions walking through and observing sweatshops staffed by overworked female labourers, and in one of his interrogations he asks Dusam to fathom the astronomical difference between his illicit profits and these workers' pittance in wages.

The condemnation is directed at not only the drug king, but the *Yusin* system as a whole, if not the de facto king himself, Park Chung Hee, whose portrait appears prominently in government offices and whom Dusam cites as his role model (they both came from Manchuria, Dusam notes). Indeed real-life events, including the manipulation of elections and even the dissident Kim Dae-Jung's kidnapping, are woven into the story. Yi Dusam launders his activities and riches by latching onto public campaigns and causes, from the New Village Movement to public anti-communist leagues, and even by heading local civic groups devoted to music and the arts. He believes that, endowed with the same entrepreneurial and patriotic spirit, he is doing the president's bidding at the local level. The difference in legality is but a formality, as both Yi's and Park's

empires depend on corruption and violence, so Yi might as well put up a legitimate front. “Let’s match the wave of the times”, he exhorts to his partners, which might even constitute historical payback by weakening the Japanese people through addiction: “Isn’t selling meth in Japan patriotic?” Like the Walter White character in the American television series *Breaking Bad*, Yi Dusam also has to take charge of making the stuff himself, and for this he recruits a master narcotics concocter, whom he refers to as “Professor Baek” and someone akin to “grandfather Dangun”, the mythical progenitor of the Korean people. The comical confluences extend to Dusam’s sense of his invincibility and indispensability, both hallmarks also of strongmen like Park Chung Hee, especially as their prolonged time in power turns such belief into a self-legitimation creed. They come to feel external to the workings of fate itself, that they can bend the larger structures of destiny to their own will, a delusion that usually leads to their downfall. With Park, that came in the fall of 1979, in a process that began with student demonstrations in Busan and ended with his assassination on October 26. Yi Dusam’s own *untergang* in “The Drug King” naturally overlaps with these real events, as his enemies start to close in on him during the student protests. Amid his increasingly drug-addled downward spiral, Dusam makes his way to Seoul for Park’s funeral and wonders how those idiots whom Dusam had paid off handsomely could have actually killed Park. His paranoia of grandeur reaches a peak here: “I’ve devoted my life to helping our country’s modernisation”, he claims in channelling Park, and this is what I get?

For the ensuing decade, such a relationship between criminality, violence, and dictatorship is both reinforced and complicated by the remarkable “Memories of Murder” (*Sarin ui chu-eok* [“Remembrances of murder”]; Bong Jun-ho, 2003), about the best efforts by local police detectives to catch a serial killer in the mid-1980s. Even before the stunning revelation of the actual killer in 2020 brought renewed attention to the film, “Memories of Murder” had become a box office hit and drawn considerable praise in cinephile circles as director Bong Jun-ho’s early masterpiece, with particular emphasis on the film’s projection of mood and narrative through visual cues.<sup>71</sup> The story is based on unsolved murders from 1986 and 1987 (and beyond) in the southwestern corner of the capital region, about an hour from Seoul. This distance is far enough to give the setting the remote feel of a gritty, run-down town with its insular particularities, while still highlighting the national culture of everyday violence as the medium for exercising authority, especially that of the police.

A local police detective, Bak Duman, who brags of his talents in discernment but does not hesitate to get physical, and his unruly partner, Jo Yong-gu, are joined by a detective from Seoul, named Seo, who arrives to help solve the case. Seo, much more studious and controlled, usually seems to be looking for something different from what his partners seek, and he quickly sees through the local policemen's coercive methods of extracting "memories of murder" to confirm their easy suspicions—until he, too, desperately joins the prevailing institutional culture.

The depicted violence of the police, however non-lethal and hackneyed, far surpasses that of anyone except the serial killer himself, which is one of many signs that the habits of casual brutality have long become normalised in this setting, even as they face increasingly stiff pushback from civil society. Such routines are personified in the ever-explosive detective Jo, who routinely kicks people—actually a fallback behaviour for all the detectives—but eventually gets his comeuppance in his favoured right leg. True to the humorously disconcerting tone of the film, the local police flail in both their actions and logic in the quest to find the killer. As for detective Bak, aside from his breezy roughness, he appears well-intentioned and even sympathetic, but he is also laughably wrongheaded. At one point he consults a local shaman and at another point he checks out fellow bathers at a public spa because he is convinced that the killer, who has left no hair at the crime scenes, must be shaving himself in the nether regions. This scene also points to the steadiest visual motif in the film, the gaze—that of the police and especially of detective Bak, who often stares into the camera while eyeing a suspect or simply the audience, as if he is looking at the still-at-large killer himself. To the end Bak maintains his faith in the compelling authority of his gaze, not only for helping him solve problems but to weaken a suspect into giving himself away. Such self-legitimation, characteristic of the autocratic surveillance state, ultimately fashions reality out of tunnel vision, representations of which make many appearances in the film.

In addition to constant reminders of the police and the police state, such as loudspeaker pronouncements of civil defence drills, the uncomfortable tension of the mid-1980s, marked by government oppression but also increasing societal resistance, comes from the makeup and manner of the local citizenry. The final suspect is, significantly, a quiet young man of nondescript nature (aside from his soft features) who, under interrogation, stands defiant, apparently out of his awareness of the absurdity of the exercise but also out of indignation. He retorts that people in town have

caught on to the beating of suspects into confessions, and he is determined not to allow this to happen to him. In this way he adds to the rising suspicion about the investigation, from university students physically fighting back against the policemen to the insistent questioning from an investigative journalist. In a scene with the detectives and their chief at the police station, under the portrait of dictator Chun Doo-hwan, a final young person, the singular female police official, Gui-ok, offers the men a critical clue in the investigation. But her idea is gigglingly dismissed by Bak, and although dressed professionally in uniform, she is expected to fetch coffee for everyone. A bumbling masculinity, as a stand-in for the hoary dictatorship, is surely on trial here, but its impact extends beyond the nature of the governing regime to the real consequences of failing to solve these heinous crimes. That in the film all the victims of the serial killer are young females—although the actual victims, more numerous than in the film, ranged widely in age<sup>72</sup>—highlights the broader victimisation of the people by the system at large.

The overlap between criminality and governance shines through in other films set in the 1970s and 1980s as well. For the latter decade, and in a similar vein to “The Drug King” examined above, is “Nameless Gangster” (*Beomjoewa ui jeonjaeng* [“War against crime”]; Yun Jong-bin, 2012), a work whose Korean title is the name of a publicly declared “war on [organised] crime” by President Roe Tae-woo. In this story, the main criminal begins as a dirty customs agent in Busan, who gets into the Japan meth trade by working with one of the major gangs. But unlike in “The Drug King”, he mostly escapes legal punishment, primarily through his own shamelessness, a metaphor perhaps for the survivability of the army general, Roh, who became elected as democratic South Korea’s first president in the late 1980s. For films set in the 1970s, in the depths of Park Chung Hee’s grip on power, notable offerings include “Gangnam Blues” (*Gangnam 1970*; Yu Ha, 2014). Here, the rapid development of paddy lands south of the Han River into the wealthiest real estate in the country provides the setting for two friends who rise up through the underworld in conjunction with the corrupt political networks scaffolding the *Yusin* decade.

The hit movie that helped inaugurate the *hallyu* films’ portrayal of the 1970s and 1980s as a period rife with criminality through state power was *Silmido* (Gang Useok, 2003). The title refers to a small island in Incheon Harbor, where hardened criminals were secretly trained for a mission to kill the North Korean leader. In immediately highlighting the parallels

between legality and criminality, the film begins with shots of North Korean commandos attempting a raid on the Blue House to kill Park Chung Hee in early 1968—the supposed trigger for the South’s retaliatory action to eliminate Kim Il Sung—interspersed with scenes of gangsters going about their violence and then being nabbed and sentenced to death. They are instead secretly put through a gruelling training regimen for their mission to Pyongyang, but in the process they develop a renewed sense of community in their island camp, even as their previous identities in the mainland are disappeared. The entire plan is suddenly cancelled in 1971 for political reasons, but the 30-odd trainees remain destined to become cannon fodder, as the camp commander is now ordered to wipe out all traces of the assassination project lest it become known to the public. Such vulnerability at the whimsical hands of a state veering towards legalised dictatorship would be a chilling portent of the Yusin system’s inauguration very shortly afterwards, in 1972.

Needless to say, the unequal, unjust, and corrupt delineation of power under Yusin relied on the larger structures of state-guided industrialisation, anti-communism, dictatorship, and militarisation that had reflected, since the 1960s, the ruling priorities and approaches of the man who, interestingly, has remained unnamed in the movies. This refusal to utter the name of Park Chung Hee appears to have become a trope in historical films, including two works that recreate his assassination, “The President’s Last Bang” (*Geu ttae geu saramdeul* [“Those people at that time”]; Im Sang-soo, 2005) and the more recent “The Man Standing Next” (*Namsan ui bujangdeul* [“Directors of Namsan Headquarters”]; U Min-ho, 2020). In neither film does Park’s name get mentioned, at least not fully, and like in “The President’s Barber”, even the participants in the spiteful rivalry that prompted the killing, Kim Jae-gyu and Cha Ji-cheol, are given different names.<sup>73</sup> As for Park, in “The President’s Last Bang” he is referred to only by the informal KCIA code name of “Harabeoji” (grandfather) or simply “Gakha” (his eminence). This ploy of using a false name for the ruler at once comments on the lingering impact of military authoritarianism as well as on the ongoing contentiousness surrounding that period and its dominant political figure. The film scholar Kyung Hyun Kim suggests that this denial of real names is part of the filmmakers’ larger rejection of verisimilitude in their respective re-tellings of history.<sup>74</sup> The filmmakers might have also wished to avoid the headaches of litigation. “The President’s Last Bang” acknowledges as much in its blank opening



shot, which was supposed to have shown real documentary footage but deleted it in accordance with a judge's ruling following a lawsuit by Park's son. Instead, the text on screen simply says, in a playfully Orwellian manner that portends what's to come, that the "persons and events appearing in the film do not correspond to reality", while the next frame's wording says exactly the opposite, at least in English (in Korean there is a reminder that the originally planned film footage was removed due to a court order).

Such confusion at the start acts as a prelude to a film that, like some other Korean historical films such as "YMCA Baseball Team" (Chap. 5), is a comedic, indeed absurdist, take on a deadly serious topic. "The President's Last Bang" is titled in Korean, "Those People at That Time", a variation on the title of a hit song ("Geu ttae geu saram": "That Person, then") at the time, the singer of which was present, as shown in the films, at the dinner gathering where Park was killed. Using a reference to this song as the film's title also captures the enveloping mood towards the end of 1979 while drawing attention to the people—or rather, the kinds of people—who surrounded the reclusive president increasingly beset by a siege mentality. Set in a 24-hour period between October 26 and 27, "The President's Last Bang" can be considered in fact a character study not of Park but rather of Kim Jae-gyu, head of the KCIA and hence the chief enforcer of Yusin repression. The irony of such a man killing Park is of course extraordinary and hence teeming with potentiality when attempting to dramatically contextualise the event. Here the viewer gets a glimpse of the regime's brutalities through the activities of Kim's (fictional) assistant. He commandeers young women for Park, checks on the KCIA torture chambers, and like other KCIA operatives is shown liberally spouting vulgarities in a preening display of his summary power, and all this in the few hours before that fateful dinner gathering of October 26. In that short span Park is shown increasingly wanting to distance himself from the KCIA chief, who for his part is enraged at the grip on Park held by his widely despised chief bodyguard, Cha Ji-cheol, portrayed as a boorish buffoon who struts around the Blue House in his underwear. Kim, worried about how his failing health could erode Park's confidence in him, has been pondering for a while whether, to get rid of Cha, he should kill Park too (or vice-versa). This would also address the ongoing unrest in the southeast of the country led by student demonstrations—something that Park sees as little more than a nuisance, insulated as he is in Cha's cocoon. Such a mishmash of realisations, rationalisations, and connections mirrors

the confusing disjunct between the Yusin mechanisms of oppression, shown in the film as actually falling far short of a disciplined or well-ordered apparatus, and the unsettling volatility outside Park's inner circle.

Fittingly, Kim's shooting of Cha and Park at the dinner that evening is depicted as a farce, featuring jamming guns, flying digits, shorting circuits, screaming yet nurturing young women, and a grovelling former general taking refuge under the dining table. But as chaos ensues with the outbreak of violence, Park himself is shown calmly bewildered by what's going on. Earlier in the dinner, rather than a commanding presence Park had appeared indeed as a meek, needy "grandfather" wondering how to clamp down on ungrateful students and opposition politicians. And earlier in the day, the movie had further cut him down: Like his lieutenants, he displays a fondness for speaking Japanese, listening to Japanese songs, and uttering Japanese aphorisms, and perhaps most damningly, personally engaging in the petty corruption that lubricated the elaborate network of transactions that constituted the regime. But true to form, he remains unfazed as Kim delivers the *coup de grace* while cursing Park in Japanese. And in highlighting the explosive potentiality of this act, a visual commentary appears in the form of a blood-splattered folding screen that looks uncannily like a plum flower painting by the revolutionary nineteenth-century artist Jo Hui-ryong (Image 1).

Astoundingly, this elaborate assassination scene marks just the halfway point of the film; the rest of the story, in dampening any revolutionary



**Image 1** KCIA chief Kim in front of a blood-splattered folding screen after assassinating President Park Chung Hee, in "The President's Last Bang"

potential assigned to his actions, follows Kim as he tries to assemble a convincing account of what happened within a ruling apparatus that quickly falls apart. Not only Park but the entire security state thus is exposed as a paper tiger, or at least as a beast unable to function without its brain (or heart). Lines of authority suddenly appear unclear and unreliable, as everyone discovers that the leader's cold, naked body on the coroner's table, which is beckoning some solution, instead produces a cacophony of meek reasoning and impulses. This impression is reinforced by the film's doubling down on the fascist sheen of the regime's outer form. The clean columns of both interior and exterior backdrops, including a Nuremberg rally scene straight out of a *Star Wars* film, add to the gleam of grand monuments and marble prominently visible since the start of the film. The incongruence between this persistence of the regime's imposing externalities and its internal collapse seems to comment on the overlaid structures of life under Park. They quickly crumble upon his death, mangling collateral fates but also the common perceptions of the link between actions and consequences, so authoritative had been the dependence on one person built over nearly 20 years. The dramatisation of Park's assassination is thus less concerned with commenting on the man himself as much as on the enveloping mentalities and practised behaviours of those around him. Hence, like in "The President's Barber", the karmic judgement visited upon individuals for having colluded or simply touched by the system, willingly or not, is a microcosm of the damning judgement on the collectivity as a whole.

In "The Man Standing Next" (2020) as well, heavenly vengeance strikes Park first, the victim of the very instruments of violent surveillance and secrecy that he created and depended upon, but the character studies apply more to those surrounding him, starting well before the killing. Here, the motivations of assassin Kim Jae-gyu, KCIA director, undergo further elaboration: The president's bodyguard and subject of Kim's growing rage, Cha (surnamed Gwak in the film), has now been authorised to eliminate Kim by Park himself. The president blames Kim for allowing a previous KCIA director to pilfer state (read: Park's) funds, reveal secrets openly in front of the US Congress (the so-called Koreagate scandal),<sup>75</sup> and publish a damning memoir in Japan. For his part, Kim now considers Park, as a besieged emperor beholden to nefarious sycophants, as having betrayed the 1961 "revolution"—the May 16 coup—that Park had led but that so many other military men, like Kim, had supported. (As he shoots Park dead, Kim issues an execution decree to that effect.) Kim's

appropriation of lethal historical judgement thus appears driven less by idealism, despite his possibly noble intent and careful planning, as by personal vendettas and paranoia, the same traits exhibited by President Park. This is perhaps why, as the story moves on, the growing presence of the next military dictator, Chun Doo-hwan, becomes creepily conspicuous. Like the 1961 “revolution” itself, in the end the assassination takes shape as something more akin to a palace coup, with the promises of change that would release South Koreans from dictatorship severely attenuated by age-old principles and approaches, despite (or because of) two decades of historical development.

### THE FIGHT FOR SELF-DETERMINATION IN THE 1980s

In hindsight, then, as well as for constructing historical meta-narratives, the liberation from autocracy would have to be shown as something taken, not given. The fateful forces that had gripped South Korea from the start, and especially since 1961, would not relinquish their hold on their own, even if they turned their guns on each other; the oppressed people would have to fight for their freedom, against what had long seemed like the fixed order of things built over decades, centuries, or millennia of cultural and political practice. While the cinematic portrayal of the democracy movement generally acknowledges the deep historical roots of the spirit of resistance, as shown above, the focus lies on the decade of the 1980s, in a process that began with the tragedy of Gwangju. The Gwangju Uprising of 1980 has received plentiful filmic attention, as to be expected, with its waves of historical impact reaching far beyond the 1980s. For the immediate term, however, this event sparked and inspired that decade’s ostensibly unstoppable buildup towards the massive demonstrations of 1987 that forced the democratic transition. Throughout, the story of determined and heroic resistance accentuates the people’s sacrifice, but it also firmly implants agency in their hands for a grander struggle.

The crucial start of that decade of democratisation, the 1980s, provides the setting even for a film that, aside from a brief mention, skips over Gwangju: “The Attorney” (*Byeonhoin*; Yang U-seok, 2013), which became a record-setting box office hit. A commemoration of former president Roh Moo Hyun’s deeds as a civil rights attorney in Busan in the early 1980s, when he helped defend a group of students falsely charged with communist subversion, “The Attorney” relies on flashbacks internal to the storyline but that do not connect to the present day. The reflection of the

past in the present (and vice-versa) is instead left implicit, although the film seems to have joined a wave of popular dramatisations in response to the conservative political turn of the late 2000s following Roh's term in office (and his shocking suicide of 2009). This shift also accompanied the continuing "Park Chung Hee syndrome's" nostalgia for the former dictator and the political re-emergence of his daughter Park Geun-hye in the early twenty-first century. Without explicit reference to Park or his successor Chun, the Roh character in "The Attorney" is clearly profiled as a counterpart to the strongmen. Indeed the story arc of Roh's transformation from a parvenu real estate lawyer to a self-sacrificing civil rights attorney signals the consensus meta-narrative of South Korean history, now widely agreed upon, that democratisation flowed from, or at least accompanied, the economic developments. The point of disagreement remains over the timing of that breakthrough moment—whether it indeed had to wait until the 1980s or even as late as 1987—and who the protagonists were or should be considered to have been: Park and the military and business elites, or the victims and resisters, especially the workers and students. "The Attorney", while addressing the existence of these contending perspectives even from the time of the late 1970s and early 1980s, clearly falls into the latter camp.

In fact the difference between the two rulers, whether Park or Chun, was irrelevant, the film seems to argue. More important was the stout structure of the developmental anti-communist military autocracy that bred oppression, corruption, and, most of all, the open violation of the written law itself. As partly a classic courtroom drama, the story depends on the heroic lawyer using both the letter and spirit of the law against a governing order that flaunts its capacity to disregard official norms. Here the state's justification for such craven illegality, even more than the sustenance of the military dictatorship or of autocracy in general, is national division, more specifically the cause of anti-communism, which is portrayed as the ultimate legitimisation for the behaviour of the governing and legal orders. The prosecutors, judges, military officers, police officials, and secret police officials are all in on the act, using the cause of nabbing "commies" (*ppalgaengi*) to validate whatever they do in flouting codified legalities. Included in this group are the economic elite, the corporate heads and entrepreneurs who, as long as they did not oppose the anti-communist developmental state, were given material rewards that would presumably filter down to the common people. For the lead character—interestingly, also not named for the actual historical figure—this bargain

is rejected when he is forced to choose between continuing his comfortable existence as a real estate lawyer who rode the system or dedicating himself to upending it by defending a young person whom he had earlier berated. Up until this awakening, the protagonist had repeatedly dismissed student resistance activities while determining that, now with his achievement of professional success, he could serve his country by racing as a yachtsman in the Olympics.

The prodding towards enlightenment comes from several supporting characters: a journalist buddy from his high school days who is struggling against corrupt editors at his newspaper; the young heir to a big construction company who wants fervently to help democratise his country, just not yet because it's not quite the right time; a mentoring civil rights lawyer who tells the puzzled attorney that the two men fundamentally see the world differently; and most of all, an elderly single woman who runs a pork stew restaurant (a Busan specialty) that the attorney had frequented since his days as a desperately poor student. When her son disappears in a roundup of members of a reading club charged with circulating communist material,<sup>76</sup> her agonisingly personalised pleas to the attorney bring home the systemic dimension of the problem. He immediately changes course, which requires that he re-engage in his studies and decline the construction tycoon's lucrative offer to hire him. The main character's turn thus should stand for the country's readiness to transition to freedom, but this familiar story of an epiphany that triggers self-sacrifice probably would have been more compelling had the attorney come to his senses before, not after, he had achieved material comfort. Although the attorney-hero is shown rejecting the young tycoon's analysis of the times by insisting that the timing is always right for democracy and justice, his own transition only after he gains wealth weakens his own argument, and presumably that of the film as well.

Notwithstanding this particular glitch, the film thus counters the widely held view even now that rationalises the timing of democratisation—its achievement in the 1980s, if not specifically in 1987—as something that could only follow an extended period of intensive industrialisation under uncompromising anti-communism. In other words, the people were not ready for democracy under most if not all of Park Chung Hee's rule; it took the extra bit of brutality—and economic development—of the 1980s under the rule of Chun Doo-hwan, the man whom just about everyone in the South Korean political spectrum now vilifies, for things to reach this critical breaking point. However strained for political purposes this

narrative seems, it is understandable that Chun, who finally died in 2021, would provide this historical marker for the 1980s' decade in everyone's eyes. For 1980 was the year of General Chun's consolidation of personal power, including his formal inauguration as an unelected president and, more importantly, of the Gwangju Uprising that began on May 18.

Among the numerous cinematic recreations of Gwangju are two from director Jang Seon-u. The first is the wrenching "A Petal" (*Kkonnip*, 1996), based on an extended short story by novelist Choe Yun, an unremittingly bleak portrayal of Gwangju's devastating impact on a severely traumatised girl survivor. Afterwards, as she wanders around in a daze and is further victimised at every turn, especially through sexual assault, she becomes an embodiment of the massacre's wide-ranging societal complicity, as well as its severely heavy burden on the forging of national memory and identity.<sup>77</sup> The second film from Jang is "May 18" (*Hwaryeohan hyuga* ["Fascinating vacations"], 2007), which like "Taegukgi" (Chap. 6) is a straightforward dramatisation of a major historical tragedy through a particular family—and even featuring, like in Korean War films, the trope of separated brothers. The older brother and his love interest allude to real historical figures from the event whose bond became immortalised in a famous song, which is played over the ending credits and still operates as a rallying cry in some political circles.<sup>78</sup> This reflects the continuing hold of Gwangju in the popular memory of that year and of its impact on the grand struggle for democracy. The striking contrast between the beautifully bucolic scenes of regular people and places, on the one hand, and the menacing military bearing down on the city presents visually the film's insistent, though not very sophisticated, depictions of the moral stakes. Its adherence to stark realism also continued the approach of the first such explicit depiction of Gwangju, "Hour Glass" (*Morae sigye*), a television miniseries from 1995 that appears to have set the groundwork for the wave of epic cinematic portrayals of modern Korean history that appeared thereafter.

Gwangju films reached a new level altogether with another star vehicle for Song Kang-Ho. After having played "The President's Barber" and then "The Attorney", but before he starred as "The Drug King", he returned to the role of a charmingly fallible everyman of the film's title, "A Taxi Driver" (*Taeksi unjeonsa*; Jang Hun, 2017), who in the spring of 1980 transports a German journalist looking to cover a civil uprising that had just begun in Gwangju. Based on the account by the real reporter, Jürgen Hinzpeter, the lead character himself, named "Kim Man-seop"

(also “Kim Sabok”) in the story, was never identified until after the film’s release. But the taxi driver’s greater importance is as a representation for the people as a whole, or at least of the middle and older generations. The contrasting youth appear in the characters of a university student in Gwangju and of the taxi driver’s own little daughter, forced to grow up early because of her mother’s death and her financially strapped father’s many challenges as a single parent living in Seoul. Into this scenario comes the chance to make a major fare by driving the reporter Hinzpeter down to Gwangju, an opportunity that the shamelessly resourceful Kim Man-seop seizes. In their joint journey south they serve as stand-ins for the perspectives of two populations whose awareness, eventually, of what was really happening would be crucial for turning Gwangju into a historical watershed. Hinzpeter was one of several crucial foreign correspondents in Gwangju during the uprising, which took place from May 18 to 27, when government troops sealed the city and blockaded press coverage, and his smuggled film footage and photos later provided critical evidence for rallying the democratisation movement. The taxi driver, on the other hand, in reflecting South Korea’s populace as a whole, likewise was transformed upon his discovery of what took place, a process in which his taxi served literally as a vehicle for truth, engagement, and awakening.

Indeed, the taxi is central to the film’s plentiful visual symbolism, including as the carrier not only of people and their fates but also of mirrors, which provide a (reflecting) window for witnessing, revealing, enlightening, and chronicling. The mirror draws the viewer to the cab driver as he is viewing things, such as goings on behind him and of course his passengers, including the reporter. The latter is shown in the mirror at times operating his film camera (with its own mirrors), which in turn provides perspective and, more importantly, documentary evidence. The mirrors also signal reflection in thought, and here the damage to a side mirror of Kim’s cab early in the story offers a portent of upcoming disruptions to his life. He also hangs a small family picture frame on his rearview mirror to remind him of the confluence of his present life centred on his daughter and his past life centred on his deceased wife. In grim contrast is a chase scene later, as taxi drivers spot in their mirrors menacing military vehicles, emblems of the repressive present that draws from the past. In all these ways the mirror is strongly associated with the passage of time—the karmic connections between actions and extended outcomes, which, given the setting of the Gwangju Uprising, are also endowed with an unmistakably historic weight. The journalists who appear in the story, including



Hinzpeter, express repeatedly this core justification for their activities in the face of danger, and they are joined in this ethos by the students and citizens, and eventually the taxi driver himself. In challenging a deadly regime that stifles the transmission of truth, they persist for the sake of a collective goal that will reward their sacrifices. In this way, looking into a mirror is above all a metaphor for reflecting on the connections between the past, present, and future within a setting of extraordinary historical significance.

Cinematically, Gwangju's epochal import is conveyed also through colour schemes that mark the event's major sequences. As in "May 18", the main character's little green cab is blended into a lush spring background of verdant mountains and fields as it approaches the stricken city early in the film. The pastoral surroundings thus offer a stark contrast to the ensuing scenes within Gwangju, already reeling from the paratroopers' atrocities on the third day of the uprising. Most of the narrative takes place within this moment, on May 20 and 21, when the confrontation between soldiers and citizens reached a peak, culminating in the direct mass shooting of demonstrators in the main thoroughfare that killed dozens if not hundreds. The scenes of Kim Man-seop and Jürgen Hinzpeter's witnessing (and participating in) this seminal moment are dominated by clouds of teargas enveloping the carnage (Image 2), producing a grey fog of war



**Image 2** German journalist Jürgen Hinzpeter and Korean cab driver Kim Man-seop surrounded by tear gas in "A Taxi Driver"



**Image 3** Hinzpeter and Kim approaching the scene of a burning television station, from “A Taxi Driver”

that contrasts sharply with the earlier green as well as with the other dominant colour within the city, the angry nighttime red of fires and danger. The fires erupt from the citizens’ attack on a local television station that continued to spew government distortions (Image 3), and the glowing red bathes the threatening hunt by secret policemen for the visitors from beyond Gwangju, and especially of their precious cargo, the reporter’s video footage.

Like Hinzpeter’s film canister, Kim’s taxi is a critical transmitter of the evidence that would help enlarge and extend the historical impact of Gwangju’s struggle, a process that relied on the resolute mobility of the two main characters as couriers between Gwangju and the outside world. Here taxis, and taxi driving as a profession, act as the primary symbol of the film. As a vehicle on the roads, the Seoul taxi of the main character is the carrier of fate, albeit not quite on the semiotic level of trains on tracks. It connects Kim Man-seop the cab driver with Hinzpeter the journalist and transports them to an end that would significantly alter many lives. More generally, taxis, including those that the two men encounter in Gwangju, take on this unknowingly determinant role of taking people from one place to another, which sometimes redirects the destiny of the taxi drivers as well. When told that local cabbies have been prosecuted by the army for driving citizens to protest sites, Kim retorts that it’s not as if taxi drivers can know whom they will pick up as passengers. The professional integrity of taxi driving, finer details of which are a point of

contention between Kim and the locals, thus references their common service of facilitating arrivals at proper destinations. In the film's historical framing, taxis and cab driving also stand for the integration of Gwangju and the rest of the country, indeed the world, in the struggle against South Korea's military dictatorship and its barbarous actions. The taxis thus represent and enable the drive for democracy, as it were, a venture that demands cooperation. Once in Gwangju, Kim's Seoul taxi keeps breaking down, at one point requiring a tow from the local drivers. They also give him Gwangju licence plates to help him and the reporter exit the city, a narrow escape that demands a final expression of professional and moral solidarity from the local cabbies.<sup>79</sup>

The other major symbol for agency through mobility is shoes, which like trains take on a consistent signification in the spectrum between fate and freedom in South Korean historical films. In "A Taxi Driver", footwear is introduced early on as an emblem of the growth of both Kim's daughter and his financial struggles. At a crucial juncture towards the end of the film, when Kim decides to postpone his return to Seoul and reunion with his daughter, he does so right after picking out a new pair of slippers for her (Image 4). As with Jae-sik, the Gwangju university student, she represents the country's promise, for whom shoes can provide protection and expedite the movement towards a democratic future. The fate of



**Image 4** Kim Man-seop in front of a shoe shop in "A Taxi Driver"

Jae-sik himself is shown firmly attached to his sneakers, something that Kim comes to recognise as well. A shot of sloughed shoes strewn on the streets following a chaotic crackdown on protestors shows the outcome when citizens, especially young people, are stripped of their means of mobility, and hence also of their agency and freedom.

This symbolic significance of shoes features prominently also in “Ordinary Person” (*Botong saram*; Kim Bong-han, 2017), one of two major theatrical releases of 2017 commemorating the 30th anniversary of the 1987 democratisation. Unlike the other film, “1987: When the Day Comes” (below), “Ordinary Person”, though equally accomplished and compelling, did not enjoy much box office success. One reason perhaps is because, although the film is set in the early months of 1987 that helped fuel the explosion of mass unrest in the spring, its scope is limited and its characters are fictional, albeit highly representative and realistic. More to the point, like many other films discussed in this chapter, “Ordinary Person” highlights the blurring of the boundary between legality and illegality, as the plot revolves around the fabrication of crimes by the criminal state through its constitutive organs, especially the police. The two main characters are both part of the state enforcement apparatus: a struggling local detective in Seoul, Gang Seong-jin, who casually exercises his summary powers of petty abuse over apprehended pro-democracy demonstrators; and a stony KCIA operative, Choe Gyu-dong, who lures Seong-jin, through money, favours, and intimidation, into investigating a concocted serial killer case. Institutionalised gas-lighting through the abuse of informational power is thus a major theme in the film’s portrayal of this government under military dictatorship. But so is the potential of using information, through the institutions of the press and universities, as a critical tool of resistance. Such potency is represented by the cop’s closest friend, Chu Jae-jin, an investigative newspaper reporter who headlines the sprinkling throughout the film of quotidian acts of budding public defiance. Jae-jin tells his anxious buddy that he just wants to lead the life of an “ordinary person” in a “sensible” society, in which one is free from being hounded by corruption at every turn. When Seong-jin must make a life-altering choice upon being confronted by Jae-jin’s determination to expose the state’s criminal fabrication, the fates of people close to him fall into his stained hands.

Still, just as everything seems to be falling apart, “Everything will be fine” emerges as the operative slogan in the latter part of the film—to

show that the struggle against the corruption of dictatorship must be viewed in the bigger picture and over the longer term. In the immediate setting of early 1987, however, the structures and habitual practices of abusive authoritarianism bear down on the protagonist's closest surroundings and relationships. In "Ordinary Person", this starts with an ordinary dog, unleashed and straying around the police station grounds but serving symbolically as a source of hope and reflection. Seong-jin's growing affection for this creature and his sudden, angry discovery of its precarious existence help drive his risky awakening. Indeed Koreans' customary scorn for dogs—deeply ensconced in their everyday speech in which the word "dog" (*gae*) is attached to countless things as a vulgarity—and their contemptuous expectations of a dog's absolute, abject servitude are integrated, in highly suggestive fashion, into the dialogue throughout. As for Seong-jin's family, the long ordeal of living under military rule, as in "The President's Barber", is signalled by the disabling of his boy's legs, indicating the people's paralysis and common experiences under a system predicated on bullying. That Seong-jin has not been able to get his son's condition medically treated reflects his poverty and hence vulnerability to the exploitative workings of power. A final representative of the voiceless, sacrificing masses is Seong-jin's wife, who is mute but demonstrates through her facial expressions and hands the core humanity from which can spring hope. But this awareness comes late, and in the first half of the film Seong-jin's relationship to his wife replicates more that of the regime to the people. Eventually his downfall within the system is finalised through his enactment, in desperation, of precisely what he had previously forced his own captives to do: put his thumb print, smeared in blood-red ink, on a fabricated confession sheet on his way from torture to jail. But all around him, everyone else seems to be finding their legs and voices, rising up in the spring of 1987 determined to join the growing chorus on the streets.

Featuring an almost identically rousing ending sequence of such protests and released in theatres just a few crucial months later, "1987: When the Day Comes" (*1987: geu nari omyeon*; Jang Jun-hwan, 2017) presents a riveting and frenetic account of actual events from the first half of 1987. This intense six-month span began with the death under torture of one protesting university student and ended with the death of another such young person, who was struck by a teargas canister. These tragedies book-ended the buildup of popular anger, culminating in swelling street rallies around the country in June, that forced the regime's declaration of an

immediate transition to electoral democracy, which finally and formally brought to an end over a quarter-century of military rule. Like “Taegukgi” (the Korean War) and “May 18” (Gwangju Uprising), in one sense “1987” is a rather straightforward chronicling of an epochal event. The film also feels like a breathless action film, a string of dozens of one-minute scenes that introduce and follow many of the major real figures in both the regime and the resistance, as well as of fictional characters such as a love interest of the second killed student. At the cost of contextualisation and character development, the cumulative effect of these quick cuts is an intervention in historical memory: The democratisation of 1987 came from countless individual encounters, moral choices, and sacrifices by Koreans seeking to shatter the imposing structures of tyranny. Excluded from the film’s characters, however, are the most well-known and influential political figures, such as the two main opposition politicians (who later became presidents) and the dictator himself, Chun Doo-hwan. Chun’s ubiquitous presence nevertheless is felt through his looming portrait in government offices, as well as through a key directive from him near the film’s end. His absence as a character also reinforces the film’s narrative focus on that one (half-) year, despite the storyline’s dramatisation of the provocative remembrance of Gwangju, the event that had solidified Chun’s stranglehold on power at the start of the decade. Beyond that moment in 1980, however, a sense of the deeper historical backdrop that made 1987 possible is mostly missing, which is understandable but still regrettable.

In addition to the heavy sacrifices made by the students and young people in general, and despite the portrayal of contributions from a dizzying array of characters both large and small, the film, including through its symbolism, seems to attribute the most decisive impact to certain institutions: the police on one side, and organised religion and especially the press on the other. Newspapers and print media in general are featured as indispensable instruments for those in the resistance, whether prison guards, students, or intellectuals. As in “A Taxi Driver” and “Ordinary Person”, reporters and the journalistic profession as a whole (or at least certain newspapers in Seoul) come across as fearlessly curious seekers of revelation and truth despite the formidable repression that they suffered. Indeed the film is presented somewhat like a documentary, with ringing typewriter-font subtitles identifying new characters and settings. Likewise, the centrality of religious figures, from Buddhists and Protestants to especially the Catholic clergy, accounts faithfully for their actual contributions, a history that extended much further back than the 1980s but proved



**Image 5** Bak Cheowon, head of the Anti-Communist Investigation Agency, looking at fleeing dissident Kim Jeong-nam hanging over a stained-glass church window, in “1987: When the Day Comes”

especially critical in the spring of 1987. This was when a priest openly announced details of the government’s cover-up of that student’s torture death from January. In another scene, the anti-communist police violently barge into a church in the hunt for an opposition figure on the run, whose dangling from the roof while being chased is visible through a stained-glass image of Jesus on the cross (Image 5). Here the morality play is somewhat heavy-handed, but the highlighting of institutional religion’s role makes sense.

On the other end is the impression of an internally divided security apparatus as having been decisive. Such a depiction can rankle historical sensibilities, but in the film’s subtext it is meant to show the true character of the absolutist dictatorship, with the whims of the strongman quickly shifting the fates of all of his underlings fighting amongst themselves to do his bidding. This phenomenon is personified in the main character—if there is any single figure to fill that bill—Bak Cheowon, the head of the Anti-Communist Investigation Agency, which functioned as a secret police organisation. Originally from the Pyongyang area, his story was typical of refugees from the Korean War period who had experienced the terrible recriminations under communist control in the north and came south to



**Image 6** Bak Cheowon’s image superimposed over the portrait of dictator Chun Doo-hwan in “1987: When the Day Comes”

constitute the bedrock of anti-communism in South Korean politics and culture. Early in the film, his lingering northwestern accent is ridiculed by the unruly prosecutor who refuses to cave to the regime’s many forces pressuring him while he investigates what happened to the tortured student. At the end of the film, Bak’s undoing comes at the hands of a rival police agency, which functions as one tool of the dictator’s that swats down another. Bak’s fervent anti-communism and what he believed was his unimpeachable loyalty to the regime come crashing down as all for naught by this apparent betrayal, a realisation visualised by the superimposition of the glare from Chun’s portrait onto the fallen Bak (Image 6). Such refracted impressions of those in service to the regime are a recurring motif.

Reflecting back on the history of South Korea’s developmentalist anti-communist dictatorships, the balance between the officially republican government and its unofficial autocratic reality shifted with the times. But the common strain was not military rule as much as a regression to traditional means of autocratic domination through the criminality of the state itself, regardless of who established the system or who was in charge. The films set in the quarter-century era of military dictatorship have largely



established strong historical connections to the deep collective past while implying its lingering, fated presence in contemporary times. Reckoning with this dark past and its shadowy remnants constitutes a core component of this project, and the historical films have contributed to the process by commonly imagining South Korean history as grounded in generational conflict and disjuncture. This explains the thematic primacy of the travails of the youth, including their struggles for the self-determination of democracy against an entrenched, powerfully set world of sullied adults. The three-plus decades of post-democratic South Korea have served as a temporal mirror in this regard, reflecting but also spotlighting the country's historical outcomes and constant need for revisiting its dark past. Such exercises would continue for historical films set in the most recent, post-democratisation period as well.

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