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# Domesticating Gangsters?

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## *Home/work conflicts in South Korean family drama gangster film*

### Abstract

Gangster films are largely an urban genre set in the mean streets of metropolitan ganglands. A significant proportion of South Korean gangster films depart from this spatial convention, however, setting their central family or romance plots in the domestic space of the apartment. This paper addresses the question of why we find gangsters in domestic space in South Korean cinema and examines what the domestic setting ‘does’ to the gangster film. *The Show Must Go On* (2008), is discussed in detail to exemplify the ways questions of masculinity, gendered family role performance, and class anxieties are crystallized around domestic space. What emerges in this spatial shift is a new subgenre, the ‘family drama gangster film’. This form combines elements of the traditional gangster narrative with family melodrama, producing tension between the conflicting obligations of the gangster towards gang and family. The paper concludes that the family drama gangster film emerged as a response to a conjunction of socio-economic and film industry factors and became a vehicle through which conflict between competing ideologies of Korean familism are negotiated, mostly resolving in favour of affective familism.

### Key words

Korean film, gangster film, family melodrama, domestic space, genre theory

### Author

Dr Mark Plaice, Lecturer in Korean Studies, University of Central Lancashire

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## Introduction

Representations of domestic space are a distinctive theme in South Korean film. This paper employs the lens of genre studies to explore the role of domestic space in the Korean gangster film. The central questions raised by placing gangster characters in domestic space are powerfully illustrated by the moving scene that closes the gangster drama, *Uahan Segye (The Show Must Go On)*, (Han, 2007). In this sequence, a middle-aged man sits cross-legged on the floor wearing only shabby underwear. His humble meal of instant ramen noodles appears at odds with the empty plushness of his suburban home. He is alone and watching a video message from his family overseas. He cries miserably into his noodles and smashes them onto the floor in frustration. He is centred between the screen through which the viewer observes him from behind and the screen of the huge luxury flat-screen TV upon which he watches his distant family. The low camera angle places the audience on the sofa behind him, literally drawing them in to witness the drawn-out reality of his misery. This is heightened by an uncomfortably static medium-long duration shot that presents, uninterrupted by editing, the final 65 seconds of diegetic action. When the man goes to fetch a cloth, he walks out of frame, and the camera mutely captures the empty domestic space in which his family now exists only through the TV screen. The man returns to clean up and squats down, head hung low, and as he continues to cry over the split noodles; the screen fades slowly black.

This is the type of deeply affective scene that might close a melodrama. Yet this touchingly human character, In-gu, is in fact a violent and successful gangster, who has recently murdered his gang Boss. Indeed, in a transnational generic form that combines action and melodrama, In-gu is far from the first East Asian gangster capable of both ‘doing and suffering’ (Stringer 1997: 33). Yet, the absent family connotes the broadening of the social milieu of the Korean gangster film inaugurated by films such as *Chin’gu (Friend)* (Kwak, 2001) (Kim SY 2004: 73) and *Kamunui yeongwang (Marrying the Mafia)* (Jeong, 2002). This initiated an expansion of the genre-space beyond the urban gangland milieu and into domestic spaces. Moreover, the absence of In-gu’s family also highlights the incompatibility between being both a gangster and a ‘family man’. Such incompatibility was rarely seen in 1990s Korean gangster films and appears to have emerged with this domestic spatial shift. What, then, explains this expansion of gangster narratives into domestic space, and what effect does this new spatiality have on the genre? This paper suggests that the domestic setting resulted in a generic hybridization of gangster and family melodrama conventions. The resulting new sub-generic form; the family drama gangster film, is structured by the contradiction between gang obligations and family duties. This is significant in two ways. It draws back into cinema some of the conventions of family drama that have been more commonly found in TV drama since the 1980s, and demonstrates the flexibility of gangster tropes that have enabled the gangster film to produce new permutations and remain relevant to Korean audiences.

Gangster films have been a popular mainstay of the Korean film industry since the 1990s, as recent films such *Mayak wang (Drug King)* (Woo, 2018) and *Akin jeon (The Gangster, The Cop, The Devil)* (Lee, 2019) attest. Gangster films accounted for twenty percent of the annual top ten domestic Korean films between the years of 1995-99 and over a quarter of films in the annual top ten lists in the period 2001-2010. Their diversity and enduring popularity suggest they express themes that resonate with Korean audiences. From the late 1980s, with the easing of the censorship regime, Korean gangster films started to address the niche created by imported Hong Kong gangster films (Choi 2010: 61). In 1990, Im Kwon-taek’s *Chang’gunui Adeul (The General’s Son)* broke box office records (Choi 2010: 61). The film’s popularity spawned a new cycle of period gangster films whose narratives drew upon the experiences of urban migration and rapid modernisation through a central contradiction between urban colonial modernity and rural Korean tradition. In the later 1990s, a new cycle of ‘dark city’ gangster films transposed this contradiction to a contemporary Seoulite milieu in which gangland both allegorises corrupt modernity, and functions as a sphere of traditional values predicated on the (much transgressed) gangster code of loyalty. From 2001 onwards, the success of films such as *Friend* and *Marrying the Mafia*, saw another resurgence in the popularity of gangster films.

During the first decade of the millennium, gangster films were produced in great numbers and accounted for a higher proportion of domestic film production than ever before.

In many films gangland remained a heterotopic space, a refuge for Korean characters unable to conform to state law; to the standard dialect of Seoul; to the gender, educational, and behavioural norms of the modern citizen; or to the sartorial and attitudinal *moures* of urban modernity. At the same time, the social world of the Korean gangster film expanded, drawing gangsters into diverse new spaces and relationships that allowed them to negotiate contradictions at the heart of Korean modernity. A key theme of office-based corporate-style gangster films was the dilemma of how to successfully negotiate the embedded contradiction in Korean capitalist society; the clash between neoliberal values of individual competition and the mutual obligations of Korean networks. A variation of this theme is seen in films where the urbanised gangster returns to the rural settings for ameliorative encounters with traditional Korean communities. In the films discussed here, conflicts in domestic space allow the gangster film to explore contradictions between the demands of work and family and between opposed ideologies of familism. More recently, films such as *Naebujadeul (Inside Men)* (Lee, 2015) and *Asura (Asura: City of Madness)* (Kim, 2016) deploy the gangland milieu to trace the contradictions embedded in the relationship between the law, the modern democratic state, and rife corruption found in relations between prosecutors, police, politicians and the media, thus adapting the format for the era of political scandal under the administration of (later impeached) president Park Geun-hye (2013-2016). It is this creative flexibility of permutation that has enabled the gangster film to pivot around a matrix of interrelated generic oppositions to remain relevant and entertaining to Korean audiences.

Korean melodramas have a longer history. They grew out of Korean and Japanese oral and theatrical forms and developed in relation to rapid socio-economic, political and technological changes. Colonial era Korean melodrama films were influenced by shinpa, a Japanese theatrical adaption of western melodrama for Asian tastes, and by Korea's indigenous street opera, pansori (Paquet 2005: 44). Pansori tales, such as *Chunhyang jeon* and *Simcheong jeon*, modelled standards of female behaviour appropriate to different relational roles according to Confucian ideals, (caste wife and filial daughter respectively). This ideological function was perpetuated in later Korean melodramas, which, as Keehyeung Lee suggests, 'mediated conflicts between oppressive social norms—in particular, the dominant patriarchal and Confucian regulative ideals—and gendered Others.' (2004: 527) In post-colonial Korea however, such conflicts were often no longer merely the result of the common tropes of heterosexual romance, class difference, and third-party interference. In the 1950s melodramas, such as *Jayu buin (Madam Freedom)* (Han, 1956), the scandalous tale of a wife tempted into extra martial affairs while working outside of the home, focused on themes of modernisation and free love, both seen as manifestations of westernisation (Paquet 2005: 46). During the apotheosis of their popularity in the 1960s, Korean melodramas addressed social issues such as class disparities and economic struggles, reflecting 'the uneven effects of rapid urbanization and modernization' on people's lives (Lee 2004: 527). By bringing social issues into the private sphere of domestic space, melodramas made visible the opportunities for work and self-expression afforded to women by modernisation and the conflicting duties and proprieties demanded of them under traditional Confucian patriarchal codes. From the 1980s onwards, with the diffusion of screen media into the family home, popular television drama increasingly displaced the cinematic genre. Despite their 'formulaic thematic structures and predictable narratives', television dramas continued to address strains on the family, especially in relation to women's struggles, suffering, unfulfilled potentials and desires, and sacrifices (Lee 2004: 528-529). In short, melodramas in Korean have provided a genre space through which largely female audiences have been able to negotiate their ambivalent experiences, caught betwixt traditional societal codes and rapid socio-economic development and social change.

Both gangster films and melodramas address contradictions between tradition and modernity in Korea. However, the opposed gendering of the two genres underscores the ambivalence of both Korean modernity and traditional social norms. While both genres tend to validate traditional values over those of modernity, the narrative functions of the two genres are diametrically opposed. In the androcentric gangster film, traditional codes of loyalty regulate

male relations, just as Berry and Farquhar suggest they do in Chinese cinema (2006: 135-136). They provide a nostalgic fixed point amid the maelstrom of social transformations, where, when all else fails, you can still rely on your Hyeong (big bro, gang boss or senior, older male friend) for support. If gangland is predicated on traditional codes, modernity can only erase ('going straight') or corrupt it. Melodrama, conversely, empathises the repression women face under the conventions of tradition in the form of patriarchal Confucian familism. Modernity may threaten the harmony of the social order, but it is modern society that offers women freedom and self-expression. Tradition demands self-sacrifice, duty and irresolvable *han*. Therefore, while resolution in favour of traditional codes sets up a counter-ideological space in gangster film critical of the dominant social order, it becomes ideological in melodrama. Given their common tradition/modernity opposition and their opposing gendered positions, what happens then, when the two genres overlap in the family drama gangster film?

In addressing this question, this paper contributes to a growing body of research on Korean gangster film, and Korean cinema in general. While questions about gangland families have received scant attention in the extant literature, the work of several scholars indicates the significance of this trajectory. For example, similarities between the gang and the family are well documented. Addressing American gangster media, Ingrid Walker (2007: 388-393) highlights a shift in the gangster genre. She takes *The Sopranos*'s (Chase, HBO, 1997-2007) as an example of how the separate worlds of the family and the 'Family' have become closely linked. Walker notes that in *The Sopranos* the gang boss's authority is undermined in both the gang and the family (2007: 391). This highlights the incompatibility of gang life and suburban middle-class modernity, which is exactly what is at stake in the Korean family drama gangster film.

Despite such transnational generic affinities, however, Korean film is produced and circulated in specific local and regional contexts that nuance the significance of family and domestic space. For Kyung-Sup Chang (2010: 8-13), South Korea's particular experience of 'compressed modernity', or rapid state-led modernization, resulted not only in the continued centrality of the family in South Korean society, but also in the coexistence of competing Confucian, affectionate, instrumental and individualistic 'ideologies of familism' (16-23). Familism, the 'precedence of the family over the individual or other social units', has endured in Korea, despite rapid industrialization and urbanisation (Finch and Kim 2017: 138). Confucian familism is based on traditional hierarchical social roles, while instrumental familism emphasises the family as the locus of social and economic support. Western/modern ideas focused on the nuclear family and the housewife/mother as a centre of affection and psychological support developed into affectionate familism, while individual familism combines a democratisation of family roles with the commercialisation of the family as the organising unit of consumption in consumer society. Stephen Toe echoes Chang's insights in his discussion of 'Korean Domestic Space' (2013: 171-189), which he situates within a wider theorization of the styles and spaces of Asian cinema. He draws attention to domestic space as a shared Asian experience, in which the impacts of social and generational change can be expressed and explored. These points underline the significance of studying how the family is re-negotiated in Korean film, a key theme that will be discussed in more detail below.

Studies of Korean gangster film furnish points of departure from which this paper builds. Chi-Yun Shin notes the genre's central contraction: the tension between the individualist materialism of contemporary society and nostalgia for traditional values (2005: 123), such as the gangster's code of loyalty, or *uiri* (의리 or 義理). Indeed, this opposition articulates Korean, Hong Kong and Japanese gangster/*noir* film in a transnational and regional genre form (Choi 2010b, Lee 2009). Kyung Hyun Kim situates gangster film on a trajectory of cinematic remasculinization, where emphasis shifts from the female characters of 1960s melodrama towards male centred narratives (2004: 32-33); a dialectic which I suggest approaches synthesis in domestic-set gangster films.

Different stances on masculinity in gangster film highlight themes that presage the generic transition into domestic space. Masculinity is threatened by the immaturity of youth (Heo 2004) and by powerful women (Gateward 2007: 196), or conversely, by excess that (over)compensates for the masculine lack and absent fathers of earlier Korean film (Seo 2010). Finally, Jinhee Choi suggests that gangland rivalries allegorise frustrations over workplace advancement (2010b). She also identifies concerns over the gangster's low status and illegitimacy that underpin character motivations in early 2000s gangster comedy cycles (2010a: 82). Clearly, ideological conflict over the family, the organisation of domestic space, problematic masculinities, and social immobility were all significant themes in 2000s' Korean film.

## Introducing the Korean Family Drama Gangster Film

Korean gangster film is strongly associated with an urban underworld comprising dark alleys, nightclubs, brothels, and gambling dens (Choi 2010b: 63; Kwak 1999). Gangsters live and die in pitched gang battles in downtown side streets, deserted dockside warehouses, and abandoned factories at the 'city's edge' (Kim 2010). Yet, out of a sample of over a hundred gangster themed films produced between 2001 and 2010 that were identified for this study, over a third contain significant domestic-set scenes. This paper begins by first tracing tentative reasons why a domestic setting emerges in gangster film, so as to draw out key themes for understanding its impact on the generic form. However, it is instructive to nuance these questions from a historically informed perspective. An analysis of 1990s Korean gangster films conducted for comparison reveals that a wider range of domestic, rural and commercial settings was displayed in 1990s Korean gangster films, especially the film cycle initiated by the popularity of *Chang'gunui Adeul (The General's Son)* (Im, 1990). Some of these films, (*O-ekseu [Ox]* [Lim, 1991]), exhibit the influence of the Hong Kong gangster film *Jing hung bun sik (A Better Tomorrow)* (Woo, 1985) by placing family members on different sides of the law. However, the gang boss's house more commonly served as both family home and gang headquarters, thus presenting the gang as a harmonious extension of the family unit. Examples include *Sin Paldo Sanai (The New Eight Province Men)* (Pyeon, 1991), and *Hwangjae O Jak-Du (Emperor Oh Jak-Du)* (Bang, 1992). Subsequently, however, domestic space virtually disappeared from Korean gangster films, in a shift towards a more narrowly confined gangland genre-scape in the cycle of gritty films that followed *Gaeimui Beopchik (The Rules of the Game)* (Jang, 1994). Why, then, did domestic space re-emerge in the trend-setting gangster films of 2001? And why is familial space reconfigured in opposition to gangland?

The socio-cultural and industry dynamics that contributed to the resurgent popularity of gangster film in Korea are well established. Changes in the film industry allowed new production companies to create a niche centred on gangster themed films (Choi 2010a: 64), which resonated with audiences in the context of national and individual malaise that followed the 1998 financial crisis. While gangster dramas set in an urban gangland provided the vicarious viewing pleasures of illicit prosperity and the 'remasculinated' (national) male body (Shin 2005: 123), gangster comedies explored the flip side of these themes. Moreover, the gang/family allegories and the gendered role reversal that often underpinned such comedies (Choi 2010a: 77) brought gangster characters into domestic space, thus making family a key narrative trope in gangster films.

Domestic space comprises the physical space of the home, and connotes the 'inner' private sphere demarcated for women under the strongly gendered labour-divisions of both traditional spatial practice and contemporary capital reproduction in South Korea (Chang 2010: 68-81). These powerful gender associations serve to either signal deficient masculinity ripe for recuperation (Kim 2005: 203), or to tame the threat posed to masculinity by the success of women in the 'outer' public sphere (Gateward 2004: 196). For example, in *Naduya ganda (A Wacky Switch)* (Jung, 2004), an unemployed 'house husband' recoups his masculinity through involvement in a gang, while a tough female gang-boss submits to marriage and domestication in *Jopok manura (My Wife is a Gangster)* (Jo, 2001). However, domestic space also comprises

the relational space of the family, affording affective relationships capable of correcting family role performance and ameliorating masculine excess, in films such as *Ddongpari (Breathless)* (Yang, 2006) and *Pieta (Pieta)* (Kim, 2012). Further, as domestic space literally manifests family social status, middle class aspirations and anxieties can be easily explored through the uncouth, underclass underworld of the gangster, the underclass symbol *par excellence*. For example, the double-protagonist plot of *Maengbu Samcheon Chigyo (Father and Son: The Story of Mencius)* (Kim, 2004) equates the contradictions faced by two working-class, single-parent fathers; a gangster and a fishmonger. They move into an elite neighbourhood, Daechi-Dong, to provide their children with the social and educational capital required for social mobility and the transcendence of underclass/underworld associations. Thus, the combination of its class, gender and affective connotations makes the domestic space setting an effective vehicle to explore the themes of social status and masculinity central to the new gangster film cycles from 2001 onwards.

What were the ramifications of this spatial repositioning and relational expansion of gangster narratives into the domestic space of the family? The contention of this paper is that the Korean family drama gangster film that emerged in the 2000s coalesced into a flexible yet recognizable 'hyphenated' sub-genre. The films that comprise this sub-genre are not unified by any particular consistency of aesthetics, verisimilitude or mode, but *are* linked by iconographic, spatial and thematic tropes. More specifically, their common domestic setting provides a genre contact zone, in which the central contradictions of the gangster film and the family melodrama combine to produce a contradiction between gang obligation and family duty that distinguishes the sub-genre. The generic form here does not comprise a cycle of films following the success of any particular film, nor is it well established enough to be classed as a genre in its own right. Indeed, it is not referenced in exhibition and reception para-texts. What is proposed here is a 'theoretical (sub)genre' (Neale 2000: 43), posited as a set of conventions through which intertextual relationships between Korean gangster film can be read. Moreover, the family drama gangster film model has significant explanatory power, because it reads through the generic inter-play that is characteristic of much of Korean cinema (Stringer: 2005), and is capable of accounting for a range of permutations around the central gang/family contradiction observed in many Korean gangster films.

One of the strengths of genre theory is that it suggests relationships between the texts and the cultures that produce and consume them (Altman 1999: 216-225). In this model, genres work through contradictions between different values expressed within societies. For instance, in Mitchell's account, the American gangster film is structured by contradictory validations of self-propelled success seeking and law-abiding behaviours (2003). From this perspective, the melodramatic dilemma between family and gang loyalties expressed in family drama gangster film combines and reconfigures the social contradictions that drive the structure and narrative of Korean gangster dramas and family melodramas. Melodrama can be seen as mode of film-making (Williams 1998: 42), perhaps the dominant mode in Korean cinema (Ableman 2003: 24). It operates in the register of affect rather than spectacle, and explores social and/or political contradictions through personal moral dilemmas (Langford 2005: 47). However, in the nuanced moral universe presented in Korean melodrama, it is frustration (McHugh 2005: 24), and suffering (Paquet 2007: 43), rather than resolution, that are most commonly emphasised. At the level of genre, Korean family melodramas generally focus on a contradiction between individual desire and family obligation, often highlighting the predicament of modern Korean women as they negotiate conflicts between the opportunities afforded them as modern individuals and the traditional obligations of motherhood and family duty (Lee 2000: 57-59; McHugh 2005: 23-31; Paquet 2007: 44-46). Korean gangster films, conversely, focus on the dilemmas of male protagonists, and explore contradictions between materialistic and individualistic modernity and the traditional communal values of the gangland milieu (Shin 2005: 123). Moreover, while traditional obligations to family are validated in the ideological foreclosure of individual desire in family drama, in gangster drama it is the transgression of traditional hierarchies and/or the gangland code of loyalty that marks out the antagonist or precipitates the protagonist's downfall (Choi 2010a: 69). In short, both family melodrama and the gangster film explore contradictions between individual and group, modernity and tradition;



and both tend to favour the spheres of tradition and community over individualism and modernity.

These contradictions are reconfigured in the family drama gangster film. Individual desire and the appeals of modernity are downplayed, and the central dilemma is recast as a clash between two traditional/communal spheres; gang obligations and family duties. Gangsters must choose between failing their family or abandoning gang affiliation. It is often the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of meeting both family and gang commitments that is emphasised. This predicament usually confounds resolution, ending in self-sacrifice or suffering, as the closing scene of *The Show Must Go On* illustrates. Hence, gang and family are opposed, as never before in Korean gangster film, and this opposition raises a question over which of the two spheres of traditional obligation should prevail. However, the 'generic economy' (Altman 1999: 152-156) in these films tends to progress through transgressions of either gang or family role performance, often both, and escalates to an impasse, usually around the potential loss of a family member or family connection. The resulting foreclosure of the gangster's dilemma is therefore predicated on affect rather than mere obligation, and consequently favours the family, while simultaneously foregrounding affectionate familism. Moreover, the validation of family over gang has three key implications. It stresses familial aspirations of social mobility over the gangster's low status, renormalises gendered excess, and also repositions gangland as an allegory for the world of waged labour. Thus, the family drama gangster film explores the predicament of Korean workers, who face similar contradictions between family responsibilities and the strenuous demands of employment at one of Korea's 'family-like' conglomerates, or chaebols (Chang 2010: 101-128).

## The Show Must Go On

On the surface, Korean family drama gangster films appear diverse. Yet on closer observation they are united by a common underlying contradiction between family and gang obligations and a number of shared thematic and narrative threads. These are delineated in the following discussion of a powerful example of the sub-genre, *The Show Must Go On* (hereafter *TSMGO*), which combines a strong family story with a typical gangster narrative. *TSMGO* was the fifth bestselling Korean film in the week of its release (Anon 2007a), and the fourth most popular gangster film of 2007 (Anon 2007b). The opening and closing scenes neatly summarise the central contradiction of the family drama gangster film. The closing scene, discussed in the introduction, is presaged in the opening scene, in which the overworked In-gu falls asleep at the wheel of his car on the way to manage a gang kidnapping. He has to work late into the night and has no time for his family. Unsurprisingly, he is ultimately abandoned by them, and left crying alone in the beautiful house he has worked hard to provide. Indeed, the incompatibility of gang and family life is underscored throughout the film's alternating scenes that juxtapose an action-packed narrative of gang treacheries with a powerfully moving family drama.

In-gu faces a serious double dilemma. He loves his wife, Mi-Ryeong, and teenage daughter, Hui-su, and tries to be a good father and provider. His work keeps him too busy to spend much time with his family, and although he is No 2 in a gang, he doesn't earn enough to provide a decent apartment for them. They live in a rundown apartment with bad water pressure, and his wife nags him to provide a better home. His work life is no less complicated. He must deal with inept underlings and conflicts within the gang. To complicate matters, his wife and daughter can't accept his criminal career. Gang and family obligations compete for his attention, reducing his efficacy in both areas, while gang rivalries make it difficult to protect himself and his ability to provide for his family while remaining loyal to his gang Boss. Indeed, the incompatibility of gang and family obligations finds its most complete and nuanced articulation in *TSMGO*, through the film's themes of low social status, illegitimacy, masculine excess and inappropriate behaviour, the stresses faced by precarious workers, anti-social working hours, and the failure to provide. These issues are neatly illustrated in a few key scenes that highlight the complex ways in which gangster status is problematized in the family drama gangster film.



In the first of these scenes, In-gu establishes his comic failure to conform to the norms of middle class parenthood. When called to attend a parent-teacher meeting over his daughter's grades, he assumes the teacher is fishing for a kickback, takes him into the homosocial space of the men's bathroom, and, lighting up a cigarette within a school building, attempts to bribe him. Short of cash, however, he hands him a 100,000 won (about £50) coupon for the 'room salon' he runs. The teacher responds by returning the coupon by post with a book on how to be a good father, to the utter mortification of In-gu's wife and daughter. Thus, in one short sequence, In-gu not only associates himself scandalously with bribery, prostitution, and disregard for both authority and propriety, but also displays a misguided conception of the duties of fatherhood and publicly embarrasses his family.

The incompatibility of his gangster status with fatherhood is further brought out in relation to violence and criminality. Unlike other cine-gangsters, In-gu never beats his family, but deep emotional wounds spill over into excess when he reads his daughter's diary and discovers that she is so ashamed of his profession that she wishes he would get killed on the job. Deeply hurt and thoroughly drunk, In-gu hands Hui-su a kitchen knife to so she can kill him herself. Clearly, powerless to prevent his daughter's growing detachment. In-gu can only resort to a strategy of simultaneous accusation ('You want me dead!') and submission ('OK, Kill me then!') in the hope that this will prompt cathartic reconciliation. Unfortunately, Hui-su is scared, and calls the police, who immediately arrest In-gu because of his police record. She then stands at the top of the stairs in her apartment building, watching In-gu being dragged out by the police below, in a shot that visually emphasises the inversion of parent-child hierarchies by placing Hui-su above her father. In-gu is indeed powerless, both as a father whose daughter rejects him, and as a gangster whose parental authority is literally undermined by his criminal status.

In later scenes, the violence, danger and criminality of the gang world precipitate both an escalation of shame that leads to familial rupture, and an impasse through which the fear of loss reignites familial affection and prompts reconciliation. The final straw comes when In-gu is attacked in public by a rival gang, and is arrested again. The first his family hear of this is when they are sitting together on the living room sofa watching TV. The low angle camera captures their shocked expressions as they watch him being led away in hand cuffs on the news. In-gu returns to an empty home; his wife and daughter have left him. Mi-Ryeong later explains how she has always been ashamed of living on his 'dirty money'. However, just as familial strife, the gang violence also escalates, leading to a shoot-out in which In-gu is shot and seriously wounded. This occasions the pivotal impasse through which family bonds that had failed under the pressure of traditional and instrumental familial expectations are re-forged through love. With In-gu at death's door on the operating table, Mi-Ryeong and Hui-su realise how much they love him, and the family is reunited. In this way, *TSMGO* illustrates the way affect is often re-kindled by the cathartic effects of potential loss or death in family drama gangster films. It also exemplifies the reintegration of wayward family members through affection, which the sub-genre singles out as the glue that binds families together, even when traditional or instrumental roles break down or are absent.

In the family drama gangster film, the gangster's status and involvement in the underworld are clearly inimical to the responsible performance of family roles and duties. The reverse is also true, and family commitments conflict with gang obligations in two ways in *TSMGO*. For example, In-gu neglects important gang responsibilities when he visits Jeju Island to win his wife back. Family problems also underlie the rivalries that ultimately tear the gang apart. The gangster narrative in *TSMGO* is a fairly common tale of rivalry between gang 'lieutenants'. In-gu's main rival is 'Director No', the inept and conspiratorial younger brother of the gang Boss. While the Boss in such narratives is commonly the manipulative instigator of rivalries, in *TSMGO* it is the conflict of interests between family affection and gang duty, together with the Boss's consequent indulgence of his bungling brother that triggers tragedy. Jealous of his relationship with his Boss-brother, Director No double crosses In-gu, and when he is accidentally killed in the ensuing confrontation, the Boss comes after In-gu for revenge. In-gu remains loyal to the end, but in the end, he has to tearfully kills his Boss to survive. In the gang, as in the family then, it is conflict between gang and family loyalties that leads to disaster.

In-gu's shootout with his Boss would usually signal the end of the film in most gangster dramas, but in *TSMGO*, the show does indeed go on. Once the gangster narrative ends, the family drama takes over and presents In-gu with further dilemmas. Although reunited with his family after the shootout, he is imprisoned and needs to seek the protection and financial support of a rival gang headed by his boyhood friend, Hyeon-su. Thus, despite having decided to go straight and asking his Boss's permission to leave the gang with a legitimate business that he had run, In-gu is once again forced back into gang life in order to provide for his family. Predictably, however, the new luxurious house he is finally able to provide for them does little to ameliorate the inevitable contradictions between his dual family and gang roles, and In-gu is ultimately deserted by his family. Mi-Ryeong takes Hui-su to Canada to study with their son, who had been studying abroad the whole time. It is while watching the jolly family video they send him that In-gu breaks down in tears at the end of the film. Although he clearly did his best to negotiate intractable dilemmas, In-gu ends up alone. Exploring the hows and whys of In-gu's fate reveals two further aspects of the family drama gangster sub-genre.

In-gu's predicament exemplifies the structural role of moral agency in mediating between happy or tragic endings in the family drama gangster film. Jinhee Choi points out the function of moral agency in her discussion of the Korean drama (2010: 74-75), persuasively demonstrating that Korean gangster protagonists often lack the power to propel the narrative forward, because their agency is blocked. They are left with only moral agency; the power to choose how to react to the circumstances and contingencies they face. Indeed, this is commensurate with the melodramatic mode's common foregrounding of moral choice (Langford 2005: 47). Given the insolubility of the conflict between gang and family obligations, the moral options available in family drama gangster film usually entail a choice between selfish self-preservation or self-sacrifice for the family, which produces the variety of endings observed in family drama gangster film narratives. In In-gu's case, despite trying to go straight, he ended up with no real alternatives. He could either risk familial rejection by resuming gang affiliation to support his family, or risk losing them if he failed as a breadwinner. His irresolvable dilemma appears to leave In-gu with no alternatives, yet he is still culpable for choosing to continue to be a gangster. Did he secretly want to resume his profession? Or, are we to read his decision as heroic, as sacrificing himself for his family?

The ambivalent ending of *TSMGO* does not focus on the In-gu's moral failings or decision making, but on his resultant suffering. In *TSMGO*, as in most family drama gangster films, the narrative focus is on the intractability of In-gu's predicament rather than his moral choices. He can't be a gangster and a good father; yet at the same time, he can't support his family without being a gangster. He can't win. Whatever way he exercises his moral agency he is going to end up alone. This is typical of melodrama's emphasis on recognising the virtue of 'victim-heroes' (Williams 1998: 69), which manifests in Korean melodrama in the appreciation of *han*, the enduring pain caused by suppressing personal desire and happiness to fulfill one's social or familial role (Paquet 2007: 43-44).

## Permutations

In-gu's tragic ending is repeated in most family drama gangster films, but differing family relationships, protagonist pairings, plot contingencies, and moral choices produce diverse permutations of the central gang/family opposition. For example, the family relationships in these films cover the entire range, from heterosexual romance (*Jopok manura 3* [*My Wife is a Gangster 3*] [Jo, 2006]), husband/wife and whole family (*Gamunui wigi* [*Marrying the Mafia 2*] [Jeong, 2005], *Gamunui buhwal - Gamunui yeonggwang 3* [*Marrying the Mafia 3*] [Jeong, 2006]), parent/child (*Kaunteudaun* [*Countdown*] [Huh, 2011]), adult child/aged parent (*Ggangcheori* [*Strong as Iron*] [Ahn, 2013]), and siblings (*Su* [*Soo*] [Sai, 2007], *Gilleodeului suda* [*Guns and Talks*] [Jang, 2001]). There are also adoptive relationships (*Busan* [*City of Fathers*] [Park, 2009]), and more *ad hoc* family unit assemblages (*Yeui eopsneun geotdeul* [*No Mercy for the Rude*] [Park, 2006]). Sometimes family and gang plots are juxtaposed fairly evenly (*Haebaregi* [*Sunflower*] [Kang, 2006]), while in others either family (*Breathless*) or gang (*Miseuteo sokeurateseu* [*Mr. Socrates*] [Choi, 2005]) plots dominate. Equally, gang life

obstructs family duty in some films, while in others the reverse is true. For example, a gang fight costs Eun-jin her baby in *My Wife is a Gangster*, while in *No Mercy for the Rude*, assassin, Killar, gets in trouble trying to protect his girlfriend and 'adopted' child. Conversely, the gangster is often simply caught in the middle, as in *Biyeolhan geori (Dirty Carnival)* (Yu, 2006), in which, Byeong-du's phone constantly interrupts his execution of gang or family duties with demands from the competing sphere.

Narrative contingencies and moral choice usually combine to produce tragic endings, but family drama gangster films based on heterosexual romance tend to end happily. For example, in *Boteu (Boat)* (Kim, 2009), Hyeong-gu double-crosses the corrupt gang-boss who raised him, and sacrifices himself to protect his friend, a Japanese gangster called Toru. His moral choice favours, over the dysfunctional instrumentalism of his own 'family', the affectionate familism so powerfully evinced by Toro, who struggles to provide for his senile grandmother and illegitimate nephews. Hyeong-gu's tragic ending contrasts with the happy ending in *I Beon'gaui gijeokeo (Miracle on First Street)* (Yoon, 2007). Bil-je is tasked with evicting a whole village for property development, but after falling for local woman, Myeong-ran, he risks his life by betraying his gang in order to save the village. Similarly, in *Pureun Sogeum (Blue Salt)* (Lee, 2011), assassin, Se-bin, has to choose between saving her little sister or her gangster lover, Du-hun. Drawing on romance conventions, however, this film ends happily, and Se-bin resourcefully manages to save both of them.

As *Boat* illustrates, aspects of the central gang/family contradiction are often distributed between dual protagonists. In *Gangjeok (Les Formidables)* (Jo, 2006), the two protagonists' contrasting dilemmas underscore the association between gang and work. Seong-wu's dilemma is that his job affords him neither the time nor the funds to take care of his terminally ill son. But he is a cop, so his job is real wage labour, not gang duty. He is contrasted with Su-hyeon, whose dilemma is that his 'family' is a gang, a group of orphanage kids raised as gangsters by an evil gang-boss. Family/gang obligations prevent him from going straight and settling down with his girlfriend. Similarly, in *Nae ggangpae gateun aein (My Dear Desperado)* (Kim, 2010), family duties, and the threat of arranged marriage, are what Se-jin wants to escape in order to pursue a corporate career in Seoul. This presents an opposite dilemma to her romantic interest, low-life gangster Dong-chul, who ultimately sacrifices his gang role, and potentially his life, in order to help Se-jin succeed. Clearly, traditional family obligations are more problematic for female characters. While Se-jin escapes them, in *Countdown*, the 'wayward mother' character, Ha-yeon, is reunited with the daughter she abandoned when their lives are threatened and fear of losing her reignites affective bonds.

Ha-yeon's dilemma between traditional motherly duty and the freedom of her criminal career contrasts with that of her co-protagonist. Gun-ho, is a 'post-gangster' corporate debt collector, for whom family comprises merely the lost memory of his Down syndrome son. Although he saves Ha-yeon and her daughter, he tragically chooses suicide when he recovers suppressed memories of his responsibility for his son's death. Hence, *Countdown* exemplifies a darker strain of family drama gangster films in which the family dissolves yet still inspires affect and action that is already 'too late' (Williams 1998: 69). Thus, in *Hwang Hae (Yellow Sea)* (Na, 2010), and *Pairan (Failan)* (Song, 2001), gangsters Gu-nam and Kang-jae, respectively, pursue traces of their already dead 'wives'. Kang-jae's 'paper marriage', which secured a visa for Chinese-Korean migrant, Failan, is just as fake as the mother-son relationship in *Pieta*. Nevertheless, even fake family relationships are affective. In *Pieta*, the violent gangster, Kang-do, is tricked into experiencing affect when one of his victims' mothers impersonates the mother that had abandoned him as a baby. When she then leaves him, the impasse of maternal loss prompts an ethical epiphany that leads to a gruesomely tragic moral choice. This permutation of the gang/family opposition identifies Kang-do as inimical to the happiness of his victims' families, and he can only remove himself from the equation through suicide.

As this brief discussion demonstrates, family drama gangster films encompass varied family relationships; place differing emphasis on gang and family plots; and often employ dual protagonist structures to perpetually rearticulate the central contradiction between gang and family in new and entertaining ways. Gang obligations are often clearly correlated with those

of work, and the different implications of traditional and affectionate familism, especially for women characters, are clearly distinguished. Indeed, even in bleak tragedies, such as *Pieta*, and grizzly action packed post-family blockbusters, such as *Yellow Sea*, contingency and affect remain central to the production of narrative impasse, and moral choice resolves in favour of the family. Moreover, while the central gang/family thematic is flexible enough to interact with other generic tropes to produce a variety of endings, it is the intractability of dilemmas and consequent suffering that are usually emphasized. The family drama gangster film generic form, then, emerges from a diverse set of narrative structures, relationships, themes and iconographic elements, which although not all present in each film, are circulated between, and thus interconnect, the texts discussed here. Crucially, however, the specific dilemmas that structure each film all cohere around the central contradiction between gang and family obligation.

## Concluding Discussion

This paper has addressed the juxtaposition of gangster and family drama narratives in Korean film since 2001. Anxieties over masculinity and social status that intensified during the post-IMF malaise were manifested in early gangster comedy, drawing gangsters into domestic space. This eventually led to the emergence of a compound genre form, the family drama gangster film, which combines and reconfigures contradictions seen in gangster and family drama films between tradition and modernity, and individual and group, to produce a structuring opposition between two communal and traditional spheres; gang and family. Permutations of this opposition stress the incompatibility of gang and family obligations, bringing about contingencies that block agency, while plot development builds towards an impasse at which potential loss both arouses affective epiphany and activates pivotal moral choice. While the narrative emphasis falls on suffering or sacrifice associated with the intractability of the family gangster's dilemma, the gangster's moral agency is effected in favour of the family, rather than the gang, which is thus recast as allegory to the domain of wage labour.

The family drama gangster film model presents an interpretive strategy that can be potentially applied to a variety of films. As a reading strategy, however, is not grounded in para-textual discourses surrounding the films it explicates, and consequently courts critique as a theoretical genre model. Moreover, in focusing on the relationship between genre and space or setting, it cuts across more easily discernible modal differences between action and comedy in Korean gangster film, and therefore may oversimplify much of the complex genre hybridity at play in individual films. Nonetheless, this simplicity is a strength; facilitating the flexibility required to account for a wide variety of thematic permutation and to enable a significant range of films to be read in a new way. At the same time, it signals directions in which other interpretive models might be developed. For example, the questions addressed in this paper were framed from the perspective of gangster film, and quite different analyses might result by reversing this framing to address why gangsters emerge in Korean family drama. Similarly, reversing the family vs. 'gang as work' contradiction to focus on films in which 'gang as family' is opposed to the realm of corporate labour would open another avenue for further research.

My main aim has been to delineate the parameters of family drama gangster film as a sub-genre of Korean gangster film. It is also important to consider the social and industrial contexts in which this new symbolic form functions. First, taking a broad historical perspective, the family drama gangster film performs similar functions to those of earlier comedy/melodrama cycles. 'Melodramas of social transformation' (Ableman 2003: 10), or 'modernization comedies' (Chung and Diffrient 2015: 74), such as *Romanseu bbabba* (*Romantic Papa* (Shin, 1960), explored the shifting gender and family relations of the 1960s. Since then, however, both Korean society and the film industry have changed considerably. Family drama gangster films emerge at the apotheosis of key societal transformations; the neoliberalisation of Korean society and generational changes in conceptions of fatherhood. They also emerge from a radically reshaped Korean film industry, which, since its late 1990s renaissance, has been orientated towards the youth market (Desser 2007: 77). A new 'remasculinized' genre regime favours action, comedy, romance and blockbusters. Such globalised/hybridised Hollywood-inspired formats tend to ignore the 'lives and struggles of people in the nation' found in earlier

Korean melodramas (Jin 2016: 83). How then can we account for the renewed emphasis on family drama themes in post-2001 gangster films? Do gangster films re-localise the Korean action film to better highlight 'lives and struggles' meaningful to domestic audiences? Or do they merely auger a new market niching strategy? The generic fluidity of new Korean cinema has been well established (Stinger 2005: 99), and many films combine elements that will appeal to different social segments so as to attract the largest audience possible (Howard 2008: 100). In this light, the family drama gangster film's combination of androcentric action and family drama might comprise an ideal hetero date night couples' film for the youth market. Such conjecture, however, is hard to establish without industry and audience research that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Beyond its place in the genre regime, how can the potential social functions and audience appeal of the family drama gangster film be evaluated? The main themes of family drama gangster film appeared in the early 2000s in films that address extremes of masculine excess and deficiency, alongside concerns with social mobility. They may, therefore, have processed threats to the male breadwinner role following the IMF financial crisis just as other gangster films did (Shin 2005: 123, Gateward 2007: 195-198). However, male assumption of familial responsibilities, instrumental (breadwinner) and affectionate (caring father), were normalised rather than problematised once the central family drama gangster film work/gang conflict coalesced. This suggests that these films address the plight of the working family in contemporarily Korean society. If the appeal of genre films lays in social contradictions they address (Altman 1999: 207-15), then the contradiction operative in these films relates to disparities between the realities of work cultures in Korea and changing beliefs about gendered parenthood roles, both the product of Korea's compressed modernity. First, Korean families have undergone considerable transformation over the last century. The shift from rural based multi-generational stem families to urban nuclear families (Finch and Kim 2017: 137) redistributed reproductive labour responsibilities from groups of female relatives to the heterosexual couple. At the same time, opportunities for work outside the home have afforded single or divorced women greater independence, even if gendered limitations on opportunity and significant wage gaps persist (Finch and Kim 2017: 136). Moreover, participation in the workforce has also increased for married women, rising to just under 50% by 2001 (Sung 2003: 345). Surveys taken in 2015 showed that both parents worked in close to 45% of Korean families (Noh 2016). Nevertheless, many women still leave the workplace in their 30s, during the 'peak phase of childrearing' (Finch and Kim 2017: 136) and continue to provide significantly more reproductive labour than men (Yoo 2017: 4411). Mothers who keep or return to their jobs face considerable burdens due to social expectations that they should retain primary responsibilities for childcare (Sung 2003: 346). Clearly, the burdens women encounter are magnified under Korean modernity, in which traditional reproductive duties dovetail with the labour demands of a neoliberal economy.

Korean men face similar predicaments. New models of masculinity predicated on affectionate familism encourage men to be more caring, participatory and engaged husbands and fathers. These are perpetuated in the media. For example the television program *Syujeomeoni dorawassda* (*The Return of Superman* (KBS2, 2013-present) films celebrity fathers looking after their children for 48 hours. Although male attitudes to domestic gender roles vary (Moon and Shin 2018: 185), most men no longer see domestic work as the exclusive domain of women. They expect to participate in house-work and child care, and report that it is fair for both partners to contribute to some degree (Midgett 2020: 9). As well as being more inclined to do their fair share of domestic work, most contemporary Korean fathers feel they are less authoritarian and more openly caring than their fathers. Yet the reality is that they contribute less reproductive labour than they aspire to (Yoo 2017: 4409-11). One reason for this is that any Korean businesses, especially chaebols, require their (mostly male) staff to work long hours and to socialise with colleagues after work to enhance team cohesion (Kim 1998: 181-182). Such corporate work cultures are a product of Korea's 'militarised modernity' and state developmentalist ideologies. Under Park Chung-hee (1961-79), diverse disciplinary measures, particularly universal male conscription, were deployed not only for regime legitimisation, but also to transform Korean society for the twin aims of anti-Communist nationalism and rapid economic development (Moon 2017: 51). Militarised male social relations spilled over into

corporate cultures (Moon 2017: 57), which were also devoted to national developmental goals (Kim 1998: 184). In this climate, workers were required to subordinate private (i.e. family) interests to the collective interests of the state and corporation.

More recent administrations have attempted to decrease standard workloads, with the 2004 amendment of the Labor Standard Act reducing the work-day to 40 hours a week. Despite this, just under half of all employees report working over 48 hours a week (Park, Yi and Kim 2010). Consequently, many men are too exhausted to help out with domestic duties (Moon and Shin 2018: 188, Kim 1998: 181-192), and the home continues to be seen as a place of rest and recuperation for men (Midgett 2020: 11, Kim 1998: 170). While this leaves women problematically and literally ‘holding the baby’, it also demonstrates the types of conflict between the demands of the workplace and the new duties that Korean men feel they should (or want to) assume at home. Little surprise, then, that many men feel ‘depressed and resentful’ when faced with progressive models of masculine domesticity and loving fathers found in television shows like *The Return of Superman* (Moon and Shin 2018: 181).

In short, Korea’s compressed modernity compounds the expectations placed on both women and men. Modern social and familist ideologies afford opportunities and expectations for women to work outside the home and for men to take greater responsibilities for reproductive work inside the home. Conversely, each gender remains encumbered by traditional expectations, albeit reshaped by Korea’s experience of militarised modernity; many Koreans continue to sacrifice their desires and ambitions for the family, the corporation, and the country. It is precisely these conflicts, at least the male side of them, that family drama gangster films explore. However, such conflicts embedded in post-colonial Korean life have intensified since the shock of the IMF financial crisis in 1997 (Kim, AE 2004), the concomitant neoliberalisation of Korean society (Harvey 2005: 106-112), and the irregularisation of the workforce. Since 1998, the percentage of workers on part time or short-term contracts has increased, while wages for irregular work fell (Shin 2013: 341-346). This equates to greater competition for jobs and promotions; to longer working hours to maintain living standards; to more households in which both partners need to work, and to new pressures for men and women. Hence, post-IMF neoliberalisation has heralded a radical change in family and gender roles in Korea.

The Korean gangster film, then, with its built-in affinity for family themes rose to prominence during a period of intensifying social and familial ideological tensions. It provided an ideal vehicle through which melodrama’s focus on the conflicting obligations of work and family (Langford 2005: 41) was reintroduced into Korean cinema. The resulting family drama gangster film sub-genre provides a textual space in which the impact of neoliberalism on the family can be renegotiated alongside competing ideologies of familism. In contrast to the more conservative ideologies of familism prevalent in earlier melodrama cycles, the family drama gangster film reinforces affectionate familism. This potentiates socially integrative functions from a variety of possible viewing positions that ameliorate, temporarily at least, the conflicts faced by many families. At the same time, melodrama’s veil of affect has ideological implications. It serves a depoliticising function, by reducing the economic inequalities of Korean society and the pressures placed on the Korean family to questions of individual moral choice (Langford 2005: 47). Despite reifying the transformative potential of familial affection, the family drama gangster film format is capable of darker and more critical permutations. It produced films in which the family disintegrates into absence, loss, or mere memory. The format, thus, anticipated the more fervently critical indictments of the predicament of the neoliberal subject seen in thrillers such as *Keom-eun Jib (Black House)* (Shin, 2007), and *Simyau FM (Midnight FM)* (Kim, 2010). Perhaps, therefore, as the closing scene in *The Show Must Go On* invites, we might, provocatively, suspend judgment. We might surrender to the pleasures crying alongside In-gu; of dwelling on the those loved ones we are too busy to spend time with. For, do we not also find ourselves caught up in similar dilemmas that have become such a common experience under neoliberalism?



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