

Heritage on Screen: South Korean Historical Dramas

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이논문은현재문화계 전반에 영향을 미치고 있는
‘역사붐’을기반으로하여한국의헤리티지산업의성장에대해논한다. 다양한역사허구물은
‘과거다시쓰기’의열정을보여줌과함께,
각콘텐츠간의상호작용으로시너지효과를내며역사의상품화를가속화시킨다.
현재대중문화속의 ‘역사’와 ‘전통’의의미를다룬글은많은데,
그대부분이작품의텍스트분석에만한정되어있는반면,
소비형태와산업에미치는영향에대한논의는거의되고있지않다.
이논문은최근사극영화를예로들어한국에서헤리티지산업이라하면무엇을뜻하며, 문화, 경제,
정치적상황들속에서어떤방식으로역사와전통에대한향수를충족시켜주는지를다룬다.

Examining the ‘history boom’ that sweeps across a number of cultural domains in Korea, this paper investigates the rise of national heritage industry. The demand for popular historical fictions, both in visual and literary media, testifies to the national impetus in re-writing the past. It, moreover, creates a synergizing effect when each medium/product feeds into the production of another, making further ripples in the commercialisation of history. While the recent circulation of the ‘historical’ and the ‘traditional’ in popular culture has been investigated in previous research, the issue of consumption pattern and its impact on industry have been often overlooked. However, the emergence of history as a commodity has appended a new commercial meaning to popular historical dramas (known as ‘the *sageuk*’ in Korean). In fact, different agents – the consumers, the industry, and the state – have their stakes in the national mobilization of history and memory with competing ideological and commercial interests. In this paper, I delineate South Korea’s heritage industry by focusing on the seamless integration of culture, economics, and politics that cater for nostalgia for national history and traditional heritage.

This paper contains the core ideas that I developed in my doctoral dissertation titled ‘South Korean Historical Drama: Gender, Genre and the Heritage Industry’. What interested me was the palpable revival of the historical drama (known as ‘*sageuk*’ in Korean). In the official historiography of Korean cinema, *sageuk* had been recognized as a conservative and reactionary genre and therefore, a box-office poison. However since the early 2000s, expensive, visually striking, and successful costumed pieces have been showcased to the audience. One can argue that the ‘*sageuk*boom’ reached its financial epitome with the phenomenal success of *King and the Clown/Wang-ui Namja* (Lee Joon-ik, 2005), which is the 2nd highest grossing Korean film in the history of Korean cinema. Now rivaling other mainstream genres, such as gangster action, romantic comedy, and the Korean blockbuster, the *sageuk* has made an indelible impact on the national film industry. The research was driven by the following question: what is the impetus behind the surge of the ‘historical’ witnessed in recent *sageuk* films?

For this, I took a diachronic view of the historical context of the genre and then adopted a synchronic approach by examining the industrial, political, and social contexts in Korea at the turn of the new century. My finding was that, firstly, national memory and transnational politics, such as ‘Purging the Past/*gwageocheongsan*’ campaign and history war with Japan (i.e. Dokdo dispute) and China (Northeast Project), fueled Koreans’ own interest in their past. What is significant in the context of this research is that the public interest in ancient history was soon channelled into the realm of popular culture, resulting in a number of fantastic narratives centered on an ancient past. For instance, Han Seok-jeong boldly claims that never have Koreans been so interested in history as in 2004, thanks to the controversial Northeast Project.¹ Similarly, Kim Wi-hyun reports that seven major South Korean newspapers and magazines together published a shocking 1,499 articles regarding the ancient dynasty of Gogurye in 2004 alone.² The anxiety over national history, prompted by internal and external forces, is the immediate foundation on which historical fiction came to be established in Korea. It has called on ordinary citizens to take on the role of historians, producing and consuming historical discourse. History has become a fashion and fetish in itself, where even the most controversial and taboo moments are under the investigative lens to be analyzed, discussed, and consumed in various medial platforms.

Working in tandem with the political context, the popular media, including cinema, television, publishing industry, and performance theatre, all capitalized on this interest in history, whether fictional or factual. In the case of the film industry, Korean cinema’s phenomenal growth since the late 1990s meant that the industry started to experience a kind of vacuum of narrative inspiration. Hence, a prominent film producer, Shim Jae-myung, and the manager of a major film company, No Jong-yun concur that the film industry ‘has turned to history for stories’.³ Financial stability also meant that detailed historical research and cutting-edge computer graphics could be made available, further raising the production standard of the *sageuk* and providing a satisfying spectacle for a local audience reared on Hollywood. What is more, despite their usual competition for public appeal, the recent exchanges between cinema and television in the area of historical productions show great promise for cooperation. When the strength and weakness of each medium are taken into consideration,

¹Seok-jeong Han, ‘The Northeast Project Controversy and the Memory of Manchuria’, *Cultural Science/MunhwaGwahak*, 40 (2004), p. 13.

² Wi-hyun Kim, ‘The Task of our Academy after Northeast Project’, *Dongyanghak*, 42 (2007), p. 314.

³ Jang-suBae, ‘Films based on Actual Historical Events’, *Kyunghyang Daily* (25 February 2004)

an effective cooperation can be realised by way of adaptations, sequels, and tie-ins. For instance, once television whets the appetite of the audience with an engaging period narrative, cinema then can recycle the material by adding spectacular action sequences and expensive visual designs. The case of ‘*Damo*(MBC, 2003) and *The Duelist/Hyeongssa*(Lee Myung-se, 2005)’ and to some degrees ‘*Painter in the Wind/Baram-uiHwawon*(SBS, 2008) and *Portrait of a Beauty/Mi-in-do* (Jeon Yun-soo, 2009)’ demonstrate such interdependence of television and film in the realm of historical productions. It is not only film and television capitalizing on the history boom, other sectors in the cultural industry – theater, musical, opera, and the bookselling industry – are also taking a ‘historical turn’. A newspaper article ‘The Book Market is in Love with the *Joseon* Dynasty’ is representative of reports that examine the popularity of both fictional and non-fictional depictions of the *Joseon* Dynasty. Related to this, a number of fiction novels have been made into *sageuk* films and television series. Kim Tak-hwan is one of the most sought-after writers of historical fiction in Korea now and his novels have been adapted from both the small and big screen. What is clear, therefore, is that a number of different popular media are working together to create and sustain the public’s interest in historical fictions, making an even greater social, economical, and political impact. The *sageuk* is reconfigured as a cultural genre, as a result; its form and content secured through the simultaneous development of the historical in different media sectors.

The government also responded to the nation-wide interest in history by facilitating the commodification of historical material and traditional culture with the ‘culture content industry’ framework. From the level of policy to the actual running of the culture content industry, the South Korean government has been taking a pro-active approach by devising ways to reap the economic benefits of its traditional culture.⁴ Investigating Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) and its many projects and initiatives, one can glance at the structural forces contained in the heritage management at the national level. In particular, ‘Digital Cultural Heritage Content (DCHC) project’ and ‘HanStyle initiative’, both led by KOCCA helps us locate the place of historical narratives and traditional motifs in the rapidly evolving Korean heritage industry. I have argued elsewhere that DCHC and HanStyle together with *sageuk* productions realize what I call the ‘heritage commodity triangle’. As such, different agents – the consumers, the industry, and the state – had their stakes in the national mobilization of history and memory with somewhat competing ideological and commercial interests. Collectively, these efforts translated to the emergence of history as a commodity, carving a unique space for historical narratives in the national heritage industry. Ultimately, the *sageuk* is the primary site in which these diverging aspirations and desires are played out.

Now I would like to focus on the synergizing effect of historical fictions where one product/medium feeds into the production of another, making further ripples in the commercialization of history. While the recent circulation of the ‘historical’ and the ‘traditional’ in popular culture has been investigated in previous research, the issue of consumption pattern and its impact on industry have been often overlooked. In current literature, *sageuk* texts are most commonly analyzed by historians and Koreanists who account for the transformation of traditional historical thinking and the liberal representation of the past. However, I shall approach the topic from a different angle by first giving

⁴ In Korea, the English translation ‘culture industry’ and ‘cultural industry’ are used interchangeably to signify the Korean word *munhwasaneop*. I use ‘cultural industry’ to avoid the more ideological and critical notion of the ‘culture industry’ proposed by Max Adorno and Theodor W. Horkheimer. See ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (London: Blackwell Verso, 1997)

general overview of the *sageuk* film trend of the 2000s by introduce the two terms ‘fusion’ and ‘faction. Then, I will engage with the concept ‘genrification’ which helps us understand the increased commercial viability of *sageuks*. Such a discussion willhelp us understand the dissemination of Korean heritage in popular culture.

New Historical Drama: Fusion *Sageuk* and Faction Films

The explosive impetus of the *sageuk* was witnessed in the year 2003 with the release of five costumed dramas: *The Legend of Evil Lake/Cheonyeonho*, *Romantic Warriors/NangmanJagek*, *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield/Hwangsanbeol*, *Untold Scandal*, and *Sword in the Moon/CheongpungMyeongwol*. Observing the burgeoning popularity of the *sageuk* in mainstream media, a weekly film magazine *Cine21* dedicated a special piece to ‘New Era of *Sageuk*’ in October 2003.⁵ Two television dramas *Damo* and *Jewel in the Palace/Daejanggeum* (MBC, Sep 2003 – Mar 2004) and two feature films *Once Upon A Time in the Battlefield* and *Untold Scandal* were given as examples of the ‘new *sageuk*’ to be analyzed and compared against traditional *sageuk*. This attempt in turn demarcated a new cycle of visual historical narratives that encompassed both the small and big screens. By 2006 when *Cine21* revisited the status of the *sageuk* in a piece titled ‘The Historical Film Fever of 2007: History Is the Jackpot’, it was clear that what first seemed like a passing phase was here to stay. As I mentioned before, the record-breaking success of *King and the Clown* in early 2006 was particularly noteworthy.

Heralding the revival of the historical drama, the popular media rushed to give the cycle a name. The two most widely circulated terms are ‘fusion *sageuk*’ and ‘faction *sageuk*’. As the amalgamation of the English ‘fusion’ and Korean ‘*sageuk*’ suggests, fusion *sageuk* evinces its hybrid quality, a celebration of pastiche and promiscuity. The word ‘fusion’ has acquired buzzword status in Korea, manifest in a flurry of fusion artefacts from food and music, to general fashion style. An eminent scholar Lee Uh-ryeong inaugurated ‘fusion’ as the key word of the twenty-first century, denoting it as a new kind of consumer taste.⁶ The ‘fusion’ drive provides the very motivation to rework and reinvent *sageuk* styles at both narrative and aesthetic levels. For instance, *Once Upon A Time in a Battlefield* advertised itself as ‘An Exhilarating Fusion History Comedy’. In *King and the Clown*, the indigenous clown play is reconfigured by motifs borrowed from the Beijing Opera, resulting in an hybrid style that is familiar yet different. In the area of costume design, a delicate beige undergarment worn by the Queen in *Forbidden Quest/UmlanSeosaeng* (Kim Dae-woo, 2006) manifests a fusion style: resembling a western brassier with tied ribbon at the back, the piece is in perfect harmony with other traditional garments, in its texture and colour.

‘Faction’, is a portmanteau word made up of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. Robert Brent Toplin defines the term in the following way:

Faction-based movies spin highly fictional tales that are loosely based on actualities. Their stories identify some real people, events, or situations from the past but blend these details into invented fables. [...] Drawing inspiration from myths and legends as well as traditional practices of cinematic history, the creators of faction employ history in a manner that is less subject to debate over veracity than are the biopics or historical epics of earlier years.⁷

While Toplin regards ‘faction’ rather negatively, containing expedient narrative strategies that protect the makers from the attacks of ‘fact checkers’, the word is used neutrally in Korea, denoting historical narratives where the boundary between historical fact and fiction is blurred, and the story is peppered

⁵ Dong-cheol Nam, ‘New Era of *Sageuk*: What Has Changed?’ *Cine21*, 424, pp. 48-51.

⁶ Uh-ryung Lee, ‘Why “Fusion” Now?’ *JoongAng Daily* (February 23, 2002)

⁷ Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 92.

with mystery and conspiracy. Its generic themes converge with what Jerome De Groot calls ‘historical conspiracy thriller’, where a ‘hero-adventurer’ appears as ‘investigator and iconoclast’ who pursues hidden knowledge or secret facts in the narrative.⁸ In other words, faction derives pleasure from dismantling factual history and inserting daring twists to the official historical discourse. The National Korean Institute came up with a Korean word ‘*GaksaekSilhwa*/Dramatised Real Story’ to replace the English word ‘faction’ when the word came to be used widely in everyday. What, then, are the narrative and aesthetic features of the new *sageuk*, characterised by the terms ‘fusion’ and ‘faction’? As a way to answer this question, I explore the following issues: the time frame, faction mode and fictionalization, democratisation of history in terms of class and gender, the quality of production design, and audience targeting.

Firstly, new *sageuk* explores various epochs from the Korean past. While the Joseon Yi Dynasty is still the preferred setting, more distant history is also revisited for cinematic treatment. One of the last kings of the Goryeo Dynasty of the fourteenth-century, King Gongmin, is featured in a period drama with a gay subtext, *A Frozen Flower/Ssanghwajeom. Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield* tracks back to an even more distant past by restaging a historic battle between the Kingdoms of *Baekje* and *Silla* in 660 AD. By suggesting a parallel between two ancient warring-states and the contemporary regional rivalry between Gyeongsang and Jeolla Province, *Once Upon a Time in a Battlefield* intervenes in the contemporary political and social debates in a historical setting. In addition, period drama set during the colonial period has witnessed a soaring popularity in the mid-2000s exemplified by the blockbusters such as *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* (Kim Ji-woon, 2008).

Secondly, recent historical drama, to varying degrees, have audaciously dispensed with the stiff historical tone that often dictated the narratives of earlier periods. This is where the faction mode, in particular, becomes relevant. The premise of the period biopic *Portrait of a Beauty* is *what if the celebrated genre painter Shin Yun-bok was a woman*. To add, *The Sword with No Name* (Kim Yong-gyun, 2009) completely subverts the official memory of Empress Myeong-seong, who was murdered by Japanese assassins in 1895, by imagining her as a tragic heroine of a forbidden romance narrative.

While historical films in the past, such as the heroic biopics in the 1970s, favoured the “‘Great Man’ theory of history”,⁹ new *sageuk* personalizes and democratizes history in terms of class and gender. History is drawn to the lower strata of the nation; there is a concerted effort to recapture the lives of ordinary people. Just as Amy Sargeant notes the prevalence of ‘downstairs’ and ‘kitchen’ histories in recent British costume films,¹⁰ recent *sageuk* films attempt to uncover the realities of subaltern lives, from those of the court ladies (*Shadows in the Palace*) to rebellious peasants (*Blades of Blood*). For instance, a lowly clown Jang-saeng carries an aura of heroism that the emasculated King lacks in *King and the Clown*. The film makes it clear that Jang-saeng is the protagonist of history, bringing change to the feudalistic world. Such narrative recontextualization transforms the royal palace which was traditionally plagued by the tragedies of the royal family, fights between jealous concubines, and

⁸ Jerome De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 56.

⁹ Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuses of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 20.

¹⁰ Amy Sargeant, ‘The Darcy Effect: Regional Tourism and Costume Drama’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 3&4 (1998), p. 179. Also see John Corner and Sylvia Harvey eds., *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents in National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 73.

the machinations of ambitious officials. Moreover history is being feminised as signaled by the prevalence of strong female protagonists who take the centre stage as detectives (*Shadows in the Palace*), scientists (*The Divine Weapon*), inventors (*A Private Eye*), and pilots (*Blue Swallow*).

In addition, historical research and pursuit of authenticity carry a new kind of *commercial* meaning. From the chic colonial period drama *Modern Boy* to the vibrant costume drama *The Servant*, recent *sageuk* flaunts meticulous period mise-en-scène rendered through high-production values. The production design accentuates the artistic quality and cultural prestige, yet distinctly under the ‘fusion’ rubric, where the image of the past is reinterpreted into something modern and appealing for the contemporary audience’s taste. The saturated media coverage points to the degree of attentiveness to visual detail. The makers of *Forbidden Quest* highly publicised the fact that 40% of the production budget was spent on the art department and that the costume designer JeongGyeong-hui personally designed 200 *hanboks* for the cast.¹¹ The new language of visualizing the past is guided by the principle of verisimilitude, recovering the viewing pleasures that were often lost in previous film and television productions.

What is more, the task of creating a new generic iconography has been left in the hands of selected creative experts – production designers, art directors, and costume designers – who competitively and cooperatively invent the new look of the *sageuk*. Their aesthetic achievements have received numerous awards and accolades. If we take the 2009 Grand Bell Film Awards as an example, a number of period pieces received warm attention, including *The Divine Weapon* (Best Picture, Best Editing, Best Sound), *A Frozen Flower* (Best Music and Best Art Direction), *The Good, The Bad The Weird* (Best Costume), and *Portrait of a Beauty* (Best Cinematography).

One way to make the *sageuk* more attractive to modern-day audiences is to amplify the contemporary resonance. Even though they are set in a historical past, these films penetrate into the issues pertaining to Korea at present; contemporary relevance and sensibilities are never compromised. For instance, the eighteenth century aristocrats supposedly upholding stiff Confucian morals reveal their decadent faces in *Untold Scandal* and they simultaneously communicate the specific social burden and issues that are pertinent in post-IMF Korea, such as the absence of fidelity in marriage and the dissolution of the family. In sum, turning away from the portrayal of tedious court politics and powermongers at the royal palace, binary depictions of women as either sexualised vamps or victims of Neo-Confucian ethos, and the moralistic hagiography of masculine heroes, recent historical dramas not only revise the *sageuk* formula but also open up fresh interpretations of the national past.

Ultimately, the appropriation of cutting-edge aesthetics and contemporary resonance contained in recent historical dramas are strategies to attract a broader spectrum of audience, especially the younger consumer group in their 20s and 30s who constitute the mainstream core. It is their eclectic taste that gives direction and momentum to the production of cultural content.¹² Films like *Untold Scandal* are undoubtedly aimed at a younger female audience, who not only delight in the period décor but also relates to the liberated female sexuality. The use of catchy dialogue, modernized costumes, and young stars in new *sageuk* is a sure sign of this trend. So far, I have listed a few

¹¹Ju-yeonBak, ‘What Radical *Sageuk*?’ *Newsmaker* 664 (March 7, 2006)

¹²Park Yu-hee, Yu-hee Park, A Study on Gender Appeared in the Historical Fiction: With Special Reference to Novels, Films, Dramas since 2000-’, *Study on Korean Classical Women Literature*, 15 (2007), p. 47.

characteristics of recent historical dramas to give you an overview of the *sageuk* boom. Now I move on to look at how genrification strengthens the market appeal of *sageuk* and accelerates the synergizing effect of historical fictions.

Broadly speaking, genre functions as a communal language in which the consumers and producers can communicate in the cultural industrial framework. Constantly in transition, a (trans)formation of a genre is enabled through cultural and historical processes, and its discourse is not headed towards a teleological end point. A concept famously espoused by Rick Altman, 'genrification', in particular, denotes the process of ongoing reconstruction and formalization of genres. In essence, genrification helps us trace the formation of a genre through naming and boundary drawing.¹³ In a Foucauldian way, new relations within old structures are formed through the genrification process. What I would like to demonstrate here is the clearly detectable way in which the generic status of recent *sageuk* is strengthened through genrification. This process helps audience to understand and appreciate different cultural texts in an instant and effective way. I shall explain this by giving the examples of the poster campaigns and period aesthetics. A 2003 film *Untold Scandal*, which paved the way for new fusion *sageuk*, was heralded for its audacious narrative, clever borrowing of a foreign source novel, and stunning visuals and designs. And one of its most effective promotion methods was the poster campaign. The poster for *Untold Scandal* is set indoors and accordingly it manifests the artificial and *staged* nature of the setting. Chung HyeSeung closely examines the theatrical poster saying:

Upon close scrutiny, one notices that the three stars in traditional attire are posing on a European style velvet canapé or settee. The dimly lit space displays black wallpaper with an abstract modern pattern, another 'alien' element in the supposedly *Chosun*-era interior.¹⁴

What is equally striking about this image is the self-conscious performance of the characters, who directly look at the camera. The poster image is not taken from a scene in the film; the characters/actors appear as if they are posing for a portrait in a private salon. This is in stark contrast to more traditional *sageuk* posters, such as Im Kwon-taek's *Chunhyang* and *Chihwaseon*. In both film posters, the images are captured from a scene that actually appears in the film, often revolving around the themes of love and man in nature.

This 'new' format of period poster campaign as done by *Untold Scandal* was deemed successful, so much so that other new *sageuks*, from *King and the Clown*, *Forbidden Quest*, to *The Servant* all used the triangular portraiture positioning of the actors. In such a way, this particular style of poster campaign has become part of the marketing strategy relevant to new *sageuk* films. The careful placing of the hands and the faces, turned slightly to the side, together with the luxurious costumes and colours help the audience immediately recognize and decode what the film has to offer: affluent class and the games of love, risqué costumes and decadence, and of course a touch of humour and frivolity. The standardization of *sageuk* posters that foregrounds the distinctive generic image is an apt example of how film genres are reconstructed discursively through genrification.

Next I would like to turn to the opening sequence of *Untold Scandal* and compare it with a recent hit television drama *The Moon Embracing the Sun/Hae-reul Pumeun Dal* (MBC, 2012). The

¹³Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), pp. 30-82.

¹⁴HyeSeung Chung, 'Reinventing the Historical Drama, De-Westernizing a French Classic: Genre, Gender and the Transnational Imaginary in *Untold Scandal*', *Post Script*, 27.3 (Summer 2008)

cinematography in *Untold Scandal* offers moments of visual treat; the camera carefully captures the fine texture of the period setting through static close-ups and slow tracking shots. One such example is Jowon and Lord Yu's breakfast scene that immediately follows the opening title. The scene begins with an over-head close-up of a colourful fish soup. Conversation between the two men has already begun. Yet the camera is still positioned directly over the dish and it follows the soup bowl to the dining table. There is a cut and only then does the camera retreat back to reveal the setting and the characters. In other words, the period object (fish soup) makes a grand entrance, before the human figures do, and not the other way around. While the morals of the characters might be less than recommendable, the visual composition and style still leave the audience in awe. *The Moon Embracing the Sun*, a television drama released ten years after *Untold Scandal*, begins with a sequence that bears striking resemblance with the abovementioned breakfast scene. Here, the Queen Mother Yun and the Prime Minister (Yeong-ui-jeong) Yun schemes political rebellion while drinking lotus flower tea. This scene also begins with an over-head shot of the large tea pot containing the large white flower. Their conversation has started but the camera seems to be fascinated with the beauty of the tea and the serving method; therefore, it closely monitors the traditional artifacts in the *mise-en-scène*. The unmistakable similarity between two scenes allude to us the strengthening of the *sageuk* genre through aesthetic choices, just as it confirms the importance of period designs in carrying the narrative in historical productions. The audience, as a result, becomes acquainted to such visual language of recent *sageuk*, allowing the genre to flourish through its power of recognizability as a cultural product. In other words, the circulation of similar generic images in both film and television augments the process of 'intertextual relay' in the *sageuk*, 'providing sets of labels, terms, and expectations that will come to characterize the genre as a whole'.¹⁵

The further industrial ramification of these expensive and carefully designed period texts can be understood by the idea 'the patina system', which opens up a venue so the viewer can buy into the film.¹⁶ The colourful traditional garments, high quality decors, and well-preserved architecture can work together to ignite in the minds of the audience a desire to possess their own heritage products. These flickering images on the big screen have the potential to be materialised into tangible products. This point leads the discussion nicely into the issue of commodification and consumption of history and heritage.

Selling Tradition: The Rise of Middle-Class Heritage Consumption

¹⁵ Steve Neale, 'Questions of Genre', *Screen*, 31.1 (1990), p. 49.

¹⁶ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 168.

The Consumption Trend Center at the Seoul National University selected 'Korea Chic' as one of ten keywords that describe the consumption trend in 2010. It reports that 'Koreans have become more proud of their national and traditional products and as the 3rd wave of *hallyu* strikes the world, a blue ocean called the brand Korea has opened'.¹⁷ This annual report, in particular, pays attention to the popularity of Korean-style housing (*hanok*). It observes that in television drama *The Birth of the Rich/Buja-uiTansaeng* (KBS, 2010), a distinctly Korean mansion feature as the accommodation of choice for the characters. The appearance of Korean house in pop culture reflects the popularity of Korean-styled housing in society. It is not only traditional housing areas like Bukchon and Seochon that have drawn public attention but also fusion *hanoks*. The trend report concludes that 'the commercial *hallyu* dependant on a select number of celebrities will pave way to food, design, fashion, and crafts, all based on the Korean theme'. In other words, a new form of *hallyu* will emerge as all-around Korean artifacts become prominent inside and outside the nation, a trend that will help strengthen international image of Korean culture. This report is part and parcel of a wealth of articles and reports that deal with the resurgence of the local and the traditional.

With this in mind, let's go back to the discussion on *sageuk* and its wider industrial implication. An internet news site describing the revival of traditional costumes (*hanbok*) states that 'just as *sageuk* texts exemplify a *mélange* of past and present, *hanbok* with fusion sensibility is in great demand'. Such reports emphasize the social influence of historical dramas; it is a culture-wide phenomenon that which enables a closer exchange between different markets. Hence, what is interesting about the article is that it confirms the point that fashionable *hanbok* and period *décor* displayed on screen certainly boost the appeal of heritage commodities. Visual opulence and conspicuous consumption, therefore, are not only relevant inside the world of film, but also outside in the real world. The article points out these fusion dramas have features (including costume design) that maximise the link between onscreen objects of desire and off-screen purchases on many levels.¹⁸

Greatly helped by the popularity of historical fictions, heritage consumption has become present across different demographic groups. The younger generation, the largest grouping to go to the cinema, may attend a chic period drama like *The Servant*, while the older generation, with higher purchasing power, can further indulge in traditional designs and modernized heritage artefacts. Moral criticism of excessive consumption and blind materialism had been of national concern until the 'IMF crisis'; however, the 2000s is marked by a stronger sense of quality and tradition over disposable transitory fashions.¹⁹ Accultured taste is now demarcated by carefully selected high-end heritage products. Most middle-class families may not be able to indulge in expensive leisure activities such as collecting rare antiques; yet, they can still wear 'utility' *hanbok*, buy a fashionable refrigerator decorated with traditional patterns, or even take a weekend trip to the old city of Gyeongju and stay at the first *hanok* hotel Millennium Palace 'Ragung'.²⁰ In sum, Korean-themed products are abounding,

¹⁷ Nan-do Kim, et al., *Treand Korea 2010* (Seoul: Mirae-ui Chang, 2009), pp. 141- 146.

¹⁸ 'Return to the Sexy Traditional Hanbok: 2012/2013 Hanbok Rental Trend', *Newswire*, March 30, 2012. <<http://www.newswire.co.kr/newsRead.php?no=613459>>

¹⁹ Seung-kuk Kim, 'Changing Lifestyles and Consumption Patterns of the South Korean Middle Class and New Generations', in *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities*, ed. by BengHuat Chua (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 74.

²⁰ Hotel 'Ragung' <http://www.smpark.co.kr/sub_main02.asp>

with ever-expanding innovations in design and decoration. Social and cultural meanings are created through such consumption, as the artefacts of the past come alive and are providing useful in everyday life. In the materialist orientation of modern life, heritage consumption has become an index of prestige, and the efforts to update and refashion the look of historical drama are partially due to the consumer's expectation of the desirable consumables seen on the screen. In similar vein, according to the Samsung Economic Research Institute, *sageuk* is a product in demand. It listed *King and the Clown* in the fourth place and the *Goguryeosageuk* in the fifth place in the 'Ten Products of the Year', a prestigious barometer for products that signify social influence.²¹ *King and the Clown*, in particular, has expanded our understanding of the power of the local and the traditional, igniting many trends from a high demand of tight-rope classes in Ansan, mass-production of hand-puppets, to increased number of tourists to the royal palaces. What is clear, therefore, is that a number of different popular media are working together to create and sustain the public's interest in historical fictions, making an even greater social, economical, and political impact.

²¹Jeong-ho Yi and others, 'Ten Hot Products of 2006', *CEO Information* (20 December 2006)
<<http://m.seri.org/doc/mov03.html?flag=0&menucd=0102&pubkey=db20061220001>>

Conclusion

The past is seen as a resource for many avenues in Korea: for mediation, for reconciliation, and for consumption. The logic of commodity production and consumption explains how the newly fashioned tradition and heritage culture is rendered in a visual form. Ironically, it is these products that serve as catalysts for the 're-evaluation of the historical past'.²² Recent *sageuk* provides a succinct example of how cultural heritage is reinvented, packaged, and circulated in Korea, a process mediated by the negotiation of the local and the global, and the traditional and the modern. Competing ideological and commercial interests drive the phenomenon; accordingly, the genre is positioned in this complex matrix of motivations. In sum, seamless integration of culture, economics, and politics cater for a nostalgia for national history and traditional heritage. Although Jean Baudrillard defined the modern world as a drive for consumption,²³ to treat these phenomena as mere symptoms of capitalist society would be to overlook the complex layers of aspiration at work, such as de-centring of globalization, re-examination of the nation's cultural heritage, and the negotiation of native culture in the international platform.

²²Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p 221.

²³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998)