THE CANNES FILM FESTIVAL Best Director award presented to Im Kwon-Taek in 2002 for Chihwaseon (Chwihwason) marked a watershed in both his oeuvre and the international prestige of South Korean cinema generally. It also provides a vantage point for an overview of the other streams of filmmaking that have coursed around Im’s 40 years of work in cinema, those that have supplied it as well as those it has supplied. Indeed, in academia, comparative studies of Korean cinema and other film industries are increasingly common and productive, marking a departure from the period when, despite its successful export industry in the 1960s, it was seen as an anomaly, a “hermit cinema,” essentially sui generis and disconnected from other national cinemas. But ever since the international box-office success of Swiri (Kang Che-gyu, 1999) and other Korean blockbusters, this scholarship has emphasized mass-marketed genre production. The resulting devaluation of Im’s work on the grounds of its success in the international film festivals rather than its appeal to East Asian popular audiences has more or less coincided with a corresponding decline in the status of the art film generally. Taking advantage of the global perspective opened up by Im’s Cannes recognition, Chihwaseon too may be considered comparatively—that is, in some of the national and international contexts that frame it, especially those of other reflexive art films.

Three such contexts appear most pertinent: first, Im’s own oeuvre, particularly the series of art films that secured his international reputation and that typically explore the artists and cultural forms of premodern Korea; second, equivalent films about artists made in other national cinemas; and third, other self-reflexive East Asian films, particularly Korean (which are often organized by narrative paradigms that Im developed but which modify or reconstruct the perspectives of his own work) and Chinese films (where a combination of similarities and differences in the respective contemporary political situations are vividly reproduced in the realm of cinema). Anticipating the consideration of these reflexive East Asian films below, we may provisionally note that many of the recent Korean and Chinese films that have distinguished themselves in the international film circuits (and which therefore may have been shaped by expectations about the tastes of foreign audiences) have been about failed artists, those who are personally and/or professionally dysfunctional. The Chinese case is illustrated by the disproportionate number of Sixth Generation films that feature demoralized bohemian subcultures, while the Korean is exemplified in the frustrated artist protagonists of Hong Sang-su’s The Day a Pig Fell into the Well (Daijiga umule pajinnal, 1996), Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors (O! Su-jong, 2000), and On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate (Saenghwal ui palgyon, 2002), with similar themes recurring in such otherwise disparate cases as Christmas in August (Parwol ui Kurisumasu, Ho Chin-ho, 1998), The Waikiki Brothers (Im Sun-nye, 2001), and Flower Island (Kkot som, Song Il-gon, 2001). Rather than celebrating or expressing optimism about the social function of art and artists and so supplying models for the reconstruction of a national cinema (as did Im’s earlier art films), these films all present narratives in which the artist is thwarted, as if the primary story that recent self-conscious Korean and Chinese cinemas have been inclined to tell is that of the uncertainty of present and future directions. It is ironic that such a domestic pessimism about an industry that only
a few years ago seemed so full of promise should coincide with Chihwaseon's success; yet, as we shall see, similar uncertainties are also inscribed in it. First then, let us look at the series of films about art and artists that comprise Im's distinctive achievement, at least as it has been recognized abroad.

IM KWON-TAEK'S ART FILMS

Though their narrative concerns vary, The Genealogy (Chokpo, 1978), Mandala (Mandara, 1981), Surrogate Mother (Ssibaji, 1986), Adada (1988), Fly High, Run Far: Kaebyok (Kaebyok, 1991), Sopyonje (1993), Festival (Chukche, 1996), Chunhyang (Chunhyang chon, 2000), and Chihwaseon (2002) all attempt to reestablish continuity with the cultural traditions that had been lost during the massive traumas Korea experienced in the twentieth century: Japanese colonial occupation and attempts to extirpate the national identity in the first half; civil war and the division of the nation between a Soviet-maintained North and a South dominated by military dictators and a U.S. neo-colonial occupation in the second half; and throughout the century, an extraordinarily rapid modernization and industrialization. These art films have a double function in Im's attempt to create a Korean national cinema. On the one hand, they instantiate some of its possibilities; their successful evocation of premodern culture recovered lost traditions that became a source of popular domestic pride and the basis of the films' international prestige. The unprecedented and quite unexpected global position Im gave contemporary Korean cinema capitalized on the premodern nation; on the folkloric, even touristic appeal of exotic costumes and architecture; on the beauty of the landscape; and on the image of the beautiful—but always cruelly exploited—Korean woman. The tragedy of this figure became the vocabulary by which the suffering and the spirit—the han—of the distant past were made to suggest, if not diagnose,
the han of the present, and to do so in brilliantly orchestrated complex narrative structures. On the other hand, the centering of many of these narratives on artists also allowed for an allegorical self-consciousness about the overall project. Premodern Korea was represented not as a paradise of ordered and stable cultural wholeness, but as a hell of traumatic class and gender conflict. Since the films’ protagonists were often engaged on quests broadly analogous to Im’s own, he was able to dramatize in a popularly accessible form contemporary questions about the role of culture in progressive social movements at a time when draconian censorship and military terrorism made direct address impossible.

These films, then, contain some components of the reflexive structures of films about filmmaking itself. A system of parallels is established in which the protagonists become surrogates for the filmmaker. The nature and social implications of their art provide a model and a measure of Im’s aspirations for his own art, and the degree of their accomplishment as artists can also refer to his own success at making a film about it. Sopyonje is the consummate case. The attempts of the pansori (folk opera) master, Yu-bong, to defend national musical traditions against the intrusions of foreign industrial culture are analogous to Im’s attempt to create a Korean national cinema that motivates the film as a whole. In this case, the patterns are resolved successfully; though Songhwa, the pansori singer, suffers terrible injuries, the narrative logic implies that these are essential for the expression of han in her sublimely beautiful singing. Correspondingly, Im makes a sublimely beautiful though often harrowing film about her that generates a renewal of domestic appreciation for pansori and wins international acclaim and foreign appreciation for a uniquely Korean art form. Similar elements are present in So’s ceramics or Dani’s drawings in The Genealogy, in the relation between spiritual and social concerns in Mandala, in the social uses of scholarship and classical painting and of the folk story itself in Chunhyang, in the interpolated digital film narrated by Chun-sop to his daughter in Festival, and so on. All these films contain the possibility, however elliptical, of the interpolated work reflecting back onto the main diegesis, in a way similar to self-reflexive scenes about filmmaking found in both Western and other avant-garde or art films.

Semiologists designate these last as constructions en abîme or “in escutcheon” or mirror constructions, “works of art that are divided and doubled, thus reflecting on themselves.” The classic example used in Western scholarship is Fellini’s 8½, even though the way it is dominated by this doubled structure makes it anomalous. More commonly, the mirroring component is only part of the total diegesis: the film of the Odyssey that is being made in Godard’s Contempt, for example, or the films that Buster Keaton dreams in Sherlock Jr. Im’s representations of other art forms are both simpler and more complex: simpler in that they are about mediums other than film, thereby obviating confusing overlaps between the formal properties of the main and the represented film; and more complex in that the formal properties and social implications of the represented art may not translate directly into cinematic equivalents. Chihwaseon, Im’s film about Chang Sung-op (1843-97?), an important painter of the late Chosun period, is a film of this kind: contradictions intervene between the film itself and the diegetically represented art, making the allegory incomplete and partially negative, so that Chihwaseon generates not only analogies between the two artists—their personal qualities and their life’s work—but also patterns of disanalogies and contradictions.

Treated as a personal odyssey reminiscent of the quests of the monks in Im’s Buddhist-themed films, Chang’s desire to make his existence meaningful is phrased in terms of two overlapping areas: art and politics. In both spheres, his difficulties are exacerbated by his being born in the lowest of the strictly hierarchical social strata of feudal Korea, and then orphaned. The art themes revolve around the centrality of painting in the aristocratic world of late Chosun society, where it is the pivotal cultural activity. Painting is a social ritual where the practice of art mediates the external world into a model of correct human and social behavior; successful paintings transform nature into culture. To perform this function, Chang must master the classical Chinese rules of representation, and then transcend them to achieve a superior expression of both his individual sensibility and the national Korean identity. As the critics comment about the first work we see him paint, it follows all the rules, but stands outside them, and yet while being outside, still confirms them. Combining respect for tradition with creative transformation of it, Chang has the ability to become a nexus between a specifically Korean individual vision and a harmonious Korean social order.

The competition between Chinese aesthetic suzerainty and Korean independence in painting is a reenactment of and parallel to late Chosun period macro-political struggles in which Korea is a battleground between a collapsing Chinese military power and an aggressively modernizing, proto-imperialist Japan. With a weakened and rudderless monarchy, a
corrupt nobility, and an exploited peasantry, Korea is torn between a conservative faction that sees China as the best ally for its attempt to retain traditional Confucian social organization and a progressive faction that wishes to link notions of human equality to Japanese economic and military power so as to modernize and reform Korea. The privileged social role of painting and Chang’s position in it inevitably draw him into this cultural struggle. He generally favors the proto-democratic possibilities of the reform party, but the conflicts between his headstrong temperament and his extraordinary abilities, and between his lowly origins and the aristocratic social milieus of his patrons, prevent him from fulfilling himself as either an artist or a political being. He is tormented equally by the demands of his aesthetic sensibility and by the apparently insoluble question of making his painting contribute to democratization, the end of domestic exploitation, and the defense of the nation against foreign invaders. Unable to harmonize the individual creative act with its social context in his art, his career is riven by contradiction, and so he finally immolates himself.

The impossibilities that consume Chang reflect a historical situation generated by the social role of painting as it was constructed in late Chosun society. Dependent on aristocratic patronage for his education, Chang is displaced from his own class and obliged to work in a medium monopolized by members of the ruling class, who attempt to exploit him for both their own aggrandizement and to make gifts that will appease foreign intruders, both Chinese and Japanese. The only way common people can benefit from his art is by vicariously identifying with his reputation and social mobility, and the only political function for the common people that Chang himself can envisage for his work is quietist. Translated into modern terms, Chang’s tragedy is that he is superlatively gifted in the dominant art form of the time, but he cannot make it the vehicle of a progressive aristocratic/bourgeois public sphere, and especially not of a proletarian public sphere.

Though these impossibilities allow Im to create Chang as a dramatically complex protagonist, Chihwaseon subordinates the momentum of his personal drama to the political issues his life manifests. And so while the film is valuable as a reassertion of Korean cultural achievement and historical memory, it is also a transparent allegory of parallel issues in contemporary Korea. Questions about painting translate fairly directly into questions about cinema, which in Korea is still intellectually and politically engaged. During the Minjung movement (the social uprising of the 1980s and early 1990s in which large sections of the middle class joined with workers, farmers, and students in the demand for democracy), the Korean New Wave of the early 1990s was the privileged cultural practice where political issues were mobilized. It was also where a progressive Korean artist could feel that his or her work might contribute to the struggle for a freely elected government and liberation from foreign influence.

In this context, Chang is a “surrogate father” for Im himself. The equivalent for the overwhelming authority of Chinese painting is the Hollywood film industry, and the influence of Japanese connoisseurs who attempt to collect his work mirrors the Japanese financing that, in an era where mass-marketed genre films have replaced the East Asian art films of the 1980s and 1990s, has recently subsidized the less profitable art filmmakers. Japanese financial support for Taiwanese master Hou Hsiao-hsien is an obvious case in point. Im’s ambition to create an authentic Korean cinema is a contemporary parallel to Chang’s ambitions as a painter. More specifically, Im’s life work of attempting to forge a quality cinema that is also involved in the democratic modernization of Korea is projected in Chang’s desire to combine supreme aesthetic achievement and popular political significance in painting. And as well as figuring Im’s attempt to create a specifically Korean art film and secure Korea’s international reputation, many of the ancillary qualities of Chang’s practice recur in Im’s own sense of his vocation. For example, his frequent remarks in interviews that he sometimes feels possessed by a power outside him while making his films echo Chang’s claim that his “brush was moved by some mysterious force.”

On the other hand, differences between the two artists suggest that Chang is not an accurate allegorical self-portrait so much as an idealized or self-justifying one: Im represents the painter as he would like to see himself. Certainly the steadfastness of Chang’s rejection of official favor contrasts with Im’s acquiescence to politicians during the long night of the military dictators, as does his refusal to release any but the most perfect of his works or to debase himself by making pornography—temptations before which Im has sometimes faltered. In other respects, Im appears to be using Chang to justify the contradictions in his own oeuvre and his failure to address social issues directly. When Chang’s mentor, a senior in the reformist party, accuses him of having been blinded by his popularity and having strayed from the authentic realism of Korean genre painting by not depicting the people’s suffering, he replies that, despite its exaggeration, his art offers them consolation and that he has no desire to change the world.
In other cases, the identification between Im and Chang is routed through Im’s long-time photographer, Chong Il-song, who shot most of his greatest films and who himself trained as a classical painter. Chihwaseon is persuasive as a film equivalent to Chang’s work by virtue of Chong’s virtuosity in creating moving-picture photography as magisterial as Chang’s painting. The magnificence of Chong’s landscape photography is emphasized in a series of key montages in which the film passes back and forth between shots of Chang’s work—a landscape or a sky full of swirling birds—and Chong’s photography of a virtually identical scene. These sequences recall the painting contests within the narrative, as if Chong were deliberately displaying the modern medium’s parity with the ancient one, perhaps even the superiority of the movies over painting. Especially compelling is his use of filters to create perfectly composed monochrome landscapes, evoking the monochrome of Chang’s ink painting yet enlivened by a single patch of fluorescent color: a snow-bound courtyard impossibly illuminated only by the gold of the flame with which Chang burns his rejected paintings, or the red of a woman’s dress in a sea of verdant foliage.⁷

Sustaining the identification of Im with Chang, the strength of these formal parallels returns us to the possibility that Im’s art might have a more directly progressive function in the lives of ordinary people than Chang was ever able to achieve—that is, the possibility that the self-alienation generated by the compromises of his dependence on the military government during the 1970s and his difficulties in directly addressing the Minjung movement might be overcome. The degree to which Chang provides a precise metaphor, if not a model, for Im’s own career can be explored in the second of our contexts, the tradition of the international art films, a tradition to which Chihwaseon again makes a double reference.

**CHIHWASEO AND WESTERN FILMS ABOUT ART**

The notion of the art film—a narrative film aesthetically superior to generic industrial production—has undergone many mutations since it emerged in the mid-1920s, but the modern concept crystallized around the postwar series of European New Waves that often exploited devices parallel to those of modernist literature and painting. I have previously argued that the propriety of linking Im to this tradition lies in the combination of his formal innovations, especially the audacious, kaleidoscopic narrative structures of *Mandala* and *Sopyonje*, and his rigorous control over the formal and narrative aspects of most of his mature films, a specific mode of production resembling that of the European auteurs.⁸

More recently, the concept of the art film has been extended to include the Chinese Fifth Generation and other Asian New Waves that became successful on the film-festival circuit in the last quarter of the twentieth century by exploiting Im’s key motifs: exotic locales, premodern cultures, and very attractive women. Summarized by the concept of Orientalism, these essentially touristic properties reach their apotheosis in Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Zhang Yimou’s subsequent martial arts films. Many of these Asian art films have also featured modernist devices that draw attention to the narration and cue filmic self-consciousness: the moment where the Gong Li character in *Ju Dou* (Zhang Yimou, 1990) self-consciously bares her chest and so foregrounds the way in which she is constructed as a spectacle has become a point of reference in Western criticism that has attempted to justify what appears to the Chinese authorities—and less benighted foreigners—as Zhang’s degrading self-Orientalization.⁹ More completely articulate forms of reflexivity are possible, even in films that make use of another medium as an allegorical intertext: the photography of the protagonist in Edward Yang’s *The Terrorizers* (*Kongbu fenzi*, 1986) is a conspicuous example of such a modernist internal mirroring.¹⁰ Chihwaseon’s international analogues include these, but Im’s film also references another form of “art film” with which the dominant tradition sometimes overlaps: films about painters.

Given the authority of indigenous dramatic traditions, East Asian films that use another art form to raise questions about cinema have commonly privileged theater, but they also include works about painters: Mizoguchi Kenji’s *Utamaro and His Five Women* (1946) and the several other Japanese films about Utamaro,¹¹ for example, or the more recent Chinese Sixth Generation films, including *Frozen* (*Jidu hanleng*, Xiaohuai Wang, 1996) or *Beijing Suburb* (*Beijing jiaoqu*, Hu Ze, 2002), that use the global art market as a metaphor for the commodification of culture and indeed all aspects of life under Chinese capitalism. But there is also a Western tradition of films about artists, including *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951), *Lust for Life* (Vincente Minnelli and George Cukor, 1956), *The Mystery of Picasso* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1956), *The Horse’s Mouth* (Ronald Neame, 1958), *Andrei Roubliev* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1969), *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986), *Dream of Light* (*Quince Tree of the Sun*, Victor Erice, 1990), *La belle noiseuse* (Jacques Rivette, 1991), *Basquiat* (Julian Schnabel,
An American in Paris, for example—the fact that the protagonist is an artist is only incidental to the plot, and the qualities of his painting have no particular thematic significance or relation to the film’s own formal or ideological ambitions, specifically since Hollywood’s need to naturalize its own mode of production inhibits the use of questions about other arts to interrogate cinema itself. But in other cases, the qualities of the artist and his or her art may refer back to the film in which they occur.

Western capitalist films about artists almost always mobilize a cluster of post-Romantic stereotypes that have become both naturalized and de-historicized. The artist is typically represented as a natural genius, with a corollary set of secondary characteristics: spontaneity, generosity, and quick-temperedness, for example, and an ungoverned appetite for wine and women. Totally committed to his art, he—or she, for Frida Kahlo is cast in the same mold in Taymor’s film—ignores the mores of bourgeois society and lives as a glamorous but tragic bohemian misfit whose gifts are fully appreciated only after death. The genealogy of this idea of the artist is well understood as a pop-culture version of the ideology of art that emerged in the bourgeois era along with two late eighteenth-century developments: first, the commodification of culture that occurred when transformations of the social order attendant on the industrial revolution deprived artists of their previous feudal patronage and forced them to sell their work on the market; and second, the failure of the American and French republican revolutions which denied artists an immediate social role and forced them into the quasi-religious exploration of individual consciousness. Van Gogh’s progress in Lust for Life is paradigmatic of this bourgeois projection of the artist’s obsessive personal interiority and lack of a social role (though initially the film demonstrates a quite anomalous concern with the working class). The artist develops from being actively involved with exploited miners to making paintings about workers and finally to expressing only his own psychic anguish and isolation in the absence of a market for his work. The only significant exception to the combination of inflated religiosity and alienated individualism traditional in films about such Romantic artists occurs in The Horse’s Mouth, where the crowning achievement of the artist Gully Jimson is not an individually made easel-painting but a community-produced mural. Unable in his dealings with rich and aristocratic patrons to secure a wall big enough for his visions, Jimson at last finds one in a chapel that is about to be destroyed. Here, with a motley group of local girls and boys, he paints his masterpiece depicting the creation of the world.

Im’s Chang is cast from the same mold as these artist-heroes. Though it may have echoes of Taoist transcendentalism, Chang’s unconventionality is, in the context of the Western bourgeois tradition, entirely conventional, and reflects the early stirrings of Korean capitalism and other social transformations that would eventually parallel those of late eighteenth-century Europe. In fact, by the early 1920s, when the first account of Chang was published, the idea of the genius artist had been internalized in Korea. But Chang resembles one modern artist especially: Jackson Pollock. Along with the drinking, womanizing, and general recalcitrance the tradition requires, Chang and Pollock—and Chihwaseon and Pollock—are linked by more specific details. Both artists are portrayed as driven by obsessions they do not fully understand. For them, painting is fundamentally an erotic activity (Chang frequently insists on the presence of beautiful young women when he works, for example, and Pollock’s discovery of his drip method is figured as semen dripping from a stiff brush). Both aspire to take a foreign tradition—for Chang, the classical Chinese landscape, and for Pollock, Parisian Modernism—and remake it...
specifically in native national terms; both do so by radically expanding the medium’s vocabulary, including painting with fingers and sticks. A gestural, essentially calligraphic practice in which physical poise and control make the body a conduit for some more-than-human power is crucial for each artist. And they both end by killing themselves.

Painting, for both Chang and Pollock, is not primarily the production of an object but a process in which the painter finds a way to situate himself in the moment or to align himself with natural forces. The resulting painting is the product and trace of this existential positioning. Summary statements of Pollock’s achievement—including Harold Rosenberg’s view that in Action Painting “the act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life,”13 and Rosalind Krauss’s that Pollock “transformed the whole project of art from making objects in their increasingly reified form to articulating the vectors that connect objects to subjects”14—echo the existential and somatic bases of Chang’s practice. This is expressed in the film by the great Chosun calligrapher and scholar, Chusa (Kim Chong-hui):

A blank paper is like the Great Void. The Great Void is held together by an invisible axis. . . . Calligraphy works on the same principle. The letters are written by the brush, the brush is moved by the fingers, the fingers by the elbow, the elbow by the arm, and the arm by the shoulder. And the elbow, arm, and shoulder are all moved by the body.15

Even though he manifests it to an extraordinary degree, this attunement to natural forces is intrinsic to Chang’s received tradition. But for Pollock, it involves a fundamental reconstruction of the nature of art in which his unique genius prompts him to break categorically with some aspects of his received tradition. On the one hand, he abandons the easel and paints on the ground “as the orientals do” (as he says in the film), and on the other, he abandons the copying of nature in his art since (as he says in the film) he himself is nature, at least in those moments when he is totally attuned to his relation with the canvas.

The primacy of this state of complete being-in-the-present also has implications for all other art forms, and so recurs in the process of filmmaking. Since the moment of authenticity is manifest in the act of painting, rather than simply in the object that is produced, it is imperative that in both films the painters must be seen in the process of inspired creation. Whereas the narrative allows the actors playing Gully Jimson or Van Gogh to make only minor additions to prefabricated paintings and whereas in La belle noiseuse the hands and arms of a real painter (Bernard Dufour) strategically replace those of the lead actor (Michel Piccoli) when he is painting, the actors playing Chang and Pollock themselves appear to actually create works of art and so they must “act” the manual skills of the inspired artists whom they are representing. Ironically, Pollock unconsciously dramatizes its own inauthenticity in this respect in the film-within-the-film that it contains. Its conclusive peripeteia occurs during the dramatic reenactment of Hans Namuth’s filming of Pollock at work; the inauthenticity lived by Pollock when, rather than being fully possessed by the urgency of his art, he merely acts its processes for the camera, is so excruciatingly self-alienating that it drives him back to drink and hence eventually to his death.

However, the parallels between the cinematic representations of Pollock and Chang are incomplete, or rather, they break down at fundamental differences in their respective historical-cultural positions and the incommensurate social implications of their art. As Chang’s career comes to be defined by the tension between individual genius and social alienation and the other contradictory symptoms of the artist in the period of capital, the personal narrative duplicates the historical process. Represented by Im as lowly in origin and self-identified with what appears to be an emerging class of oppressed farmers, Chang is both drawn to and only equivocally accepted by the aristocrats who are his patrons. Yet at the same time, this system of artistic patronage is itself being replaced by the market. Pollock, on the other hand, lives in a period in which the alienations intrinsic to cultural activity under capitalism have both become naturalized and are being newly reconsolidated in an ideology of heroic self-expression.
His alienations are depicted as motivated not by political responsibilities, but by personal, indeed subconscious, traumas, and his private aesthetic struggles do not directly represent social issues, but only his relations with his wife, lover, and the handful of painters, critics, and dealers who are, however ambiguously, his friends. Though it functions as a defense against an uncomprehending and alien public, this restricted milieu is ostensibly autonomous, as indeed the value of his art itself was critically understood by Pollock’s friend and critical champion, Clement Greenberg, to reside in its autonomy, its separation from social and political reality.16

The projection of the autonomy of Pollock’s aesthetic situation represents the hyperbolic recycling of the Romantic ideology of art during the Cold War, precisely that moment in American history when McCarthyism and the domestic repercussions of the putative Communist threat had terminated the social involvement of the Popular Front artists of the previous decade. The repressed Other of Abstract Expressionism was the culture of the Soviet bloc and North Korea: Socialist Realism, the same cultural system that has, of course, been anathema in South Korea since the Korean War. In this respect, the parallels between the two films are inverse, and they mirror each other in what they cannot express. Prevented by Hollywood’s own need to repress the sociopolitical context of bourgeois culture, Pollock instead elevates the psychoanalytic and the erotic/familial as the determining contexts of art, while Chihwaseon, with no theory of the psychological available to it, phrases its personal drama in terms of social alienation. Pollock dies because of the psychoses that accompany his genius, Chang because his genius can find no social reciprocation.17

Through the story of Chang’s aspiration to make art functional within the struggle against domestic corruption and foreign invaders, Im reasserts the ideal of a genuinely popular modern Korean culture that had subtended, however “non-ideologically,” all his art films. Even during his accommodations to the military dictatorship in the 1970s, he consistently returned to the working class as the privileged subject of his historical retrospection. In the 1980s and 1990s, when his vision had found a degree of social reciprocation in Minjung cultural politics, his heroes were all emblems of an incipient popular artist, one who would combine high cultural standards with a progressive political address. But in Chihwaseon, he made Chang’s destruction by the impossibility of precisely such a conjuncture into a fable of his own failure to imagine a fruitful collaboration between the working-class and traditional culture, or to make an art that would imply or portend it.

The fundamental paradox of Im’s most successful film is thus that it dramatizes one of Korea’s greatest painters who was unable to solve the problem of his own mature work: How can film and popular culture participate in progressive social movements?

The impossibilities confronting both Im and the Chang onto whom he projects his own situation are, of course, multiply overdetermined. The narrative impasse Chang faces reflects conditions and contradictions inherent in the biographical material and its historical moment: the lack of mechanical reproducibility in nineteenth-century Korea inhibited any broadly demotic social utility for painting and, as the film recognizes and as the subsequent history of Korea proved, the historical conditions for democratic social change were not present. Given the absence of a powerful or progressive bourgeoisie and the voraciousness of surrounding nations, Chang’s—and by implication, Im’s—conclusion that Korea should have strengthened itself internally rather than allowing the factions to introduce different foreign elements is empty. Since neither a middle-class merchant capitalism nor a bourgeois commercial culture like those of Tokugawa Japan had emerged in late Chosun Korea, the preconditions for an emulation of Japanese rapid modernization simply did not exist.

But Im’s dramatization of his own uncertainty in Chang’s failures also reflects objective factors in the contemporary Korean film industry, including the cultural reverberations of the International Money Fund crisis in the late 1990s and the consequent withdrawal of chaebol ((family-owned industrial conglomerates) funding from the film industry; the international success of Swiri and subsequent blockbuster films that competed with Hollywood in the East Asian market (though only by duplicating Hollywood styles rather than by creating distinctively Korean alternatives); and especially the depoliticization of the youth cultures of the late 1990s and the growth of a hedonistic cinephilia. As Kyung Hyun Kim has pointed out, the “first two years of the new millennium (2001-02)—precisely the period of Chihwaseon’s production—“should be remembered for the rising popularity of crass comedy films and the waning of the New Korean Cinema.”18 The crisis is arguably also an intrinsic function of the entertainment feature film, especially one that is pitched to appeal to the global market and the Cannes judges, for while the feature industry has become increasingly oriented to entertainment genres since the achievement of democracy, radical-labor documentary film and video production has flourished in Korea more so than anywhere else in the world.
But the negativity of the allegory also reflects contradictions in Im’s use of a painter as its vehicle, for though Chang and the other premodern artists Im has treated may embody exemplary qualities (Koreanness, ability to express han, concern for common people, beauty, association with the landscape, and so on), the limit to their viability as models for a progressive cinema lies not in the aesthetic per se, but in material and social conditions: the mode of cultural production. For since all are individual artisans, they cannot represent the condition of contemporary culture, especially the industrial cinema, with its division of labor, mechanical reproduction, extended manufacturing processes, and dependence on enormous capital investment. Im’s attempts to address the precise forms of alienation intrinsic to contemporary culture will, then, remain oblique until he undertakes a film about a modern artist, especially about a filmmaker—the privileged subject of the art film. Other Korean filmmakers working with the formal structures he innovated have more directly approached questions of cultural production under advanced capital, as have several members of the most recent wave of Chinese filmmaking to achieve visibility in the West. Their films about painters and about rock musicians more acutely reflect the prospects for cinema in conditions where extremely rapid economic and political transformations have caused equally dramatic cultural crises.

**RECENT KOREAN AND CHINESE FILMS ABOUT ART**

Park Kwang-Su was a major force in the clandestine political ciné clubs of the early 1980s, a true underground comprising the first independent cinema in Korea. The clubs were in the vanguard of cultural opposition to the U.S.-supported military dictatorships that followed the death of Park Chung-Hee, and their pioneering small format agitational documentaries were subject to severe police repression. After a period of study in France where he began but failed to complete two documentaries, Park returned to Korea and turned to fiction features. Two of his most important films—*Chilsu and Mansu* (*Chil-su wa Man-su*, 1988) and *A Single Spark* (*Arumdaun chongnyon Chon Tae-il*, 1996) —are reflexive narratives about art that allegorize the situation of Korean cinema as it was transformed by Minjung politics. Announcing the emergence of what would soon be known as the Korean New Wave, the first film was a story about two contemporary painters, Chil-su and Man-su. Where Im’s Chang was forced to negotiate the social possibilities of his art in a feudal Chosun controlled by a decadent aristocracy collaborating with Chinese or Japanese imperialism, Chil-su and Man-su work in a South Korea subject to global capital and U.S. imperialism. And where Chang’s received cultural context was classical Chinese painting, for these two it is U.S. industrial mass culture: they eke out a meager living painting billboards in a Seoul colonized by video games of car chases in Miami Beach, American pop music at Burger King, and *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976), the most degraded form of Hollywood cinema. Despite these differences, the relation between aesthetic and political practice is as integral in *Chilsu and Mansu* as in *Chihwaseon*.

Both the modern commercial artists come from broken families: Man-su is from the lower middle class, but his economic opportunities at home and his freedom to work abroad are curtailed by the fact that his father is a political prisoner who has been jailed for the last 30 years, and who has thus sacrificed his family to his ideological beliefs. Chil-su, from a lumpen background, with a dead mother and an alcoholic father, also wishes to leave Korea for the U.S., which he knows only through the images of cinema and video games. They are hired to paint across the side of high-rise buildings in high-rise buildings in a Seoul subject to global capital and U.S. imperialism. And where Chang’s received cultural context was classical Chinese painting, video games, and advertisements that feed indi-
individual fantasies of empowerment while maintaining the political impotence of the masses.

Even more so than in *Chihwaseon*, the art work represented in *Chilsu and Mansu* reflects the film itself in a contradictory way: the two painters figure the apparent historical impasse Park himself faced, allowing him to dramatize the limitations that circumscribe his own practice without indicating any resolution. This indeed was the situation faced by attempts to envision an emancipatory popular cinema in Korea at the time. But eight years later, in 1996, the success of Minjung politics and the rapid progress towards a democratically elected, non-military government—and the domestic and international success of the Korean New Wave—allowed Park a much more optimistic return to questions about culture’s role in bringing together artists and workers. His next reflexive film, *A Single Spark*, was based on the successful struggles of a radical writer and used the codes of Socialist Realism to allegorize the possibilities of a modern political cinema. The same year also saw the release of Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Frozen (Jidu hanleng)*, one of a new “generation” of reflexive films from China in which contemporary artists play a key role in the indictment of a complex social disorientation.

Unlike the Fifth Generation, which was a clearly demarcated, socially linked group of filmmakers that emerged as Chinese Communism began to deconstruct itself, the Sixth Generation was a diffuse, underground response to a more advanced stage of the transition to capitalism. Likened in a seminal Chinese commentary to both a “scene in a fog” and a “city of mirrors,” the Sixth Generation is shrouded in the post-Tiananmen combination of increased penetration of global capital and continued political repression. Intertwined with cognate movements in other arts, Sixth Generation films, especially those produced in the first stages of the movement during the mid-90s, are loosely similar in their social location and in their themes and style. Most are set in the mundane world of the generic modern city rather than in the emphatically Chinese environments of premodern myth or highly politicized modernity. They share a concern not with colorful or exemplary heroes, but with drab, unexceptional protagonists. Stylistically, they approach documentary or the simulation of documentary techniques with long takes and frequent cutaways to the environment, which adds a sense of verisimilitude but also dilutes the narrative structure. Most of them were
produced very cheaply, guerilla-style, on 16mm or video. They were also made outside state financing and censorship protocols, and so could not be exhibited legally in China and/or were banned there, becoming known internationally through their successes in foreign festivals. Many of these films featured alienated artists and at least two of them, in addition to Frozen, were based on painters: The Day (Dongchun de rizi, Wang Xiaoshuai, 1993) and Beijing Suburb (Beijing Jiaoqu, Hu Ze, 2002). The weak narrative momentum of these films (especially Beijing Suburb) is exaggerated so that the diegetic looseness mirrors the dispirited aimlessness and lassitude of the characters, who, like the filmmakers themselves, work on the edges of society and legality.

Frozen, which is noticeably better photographed and has higher production values than most of the others, concerns an art student who, guided by his mentor, is shifting his attention from expressionist/realist woodcuts to performance art. Having performed earth, water, and fire burials for the first days of autumn, winter, and spring, Qi Lei proposes to kill himself in an ice burial on the first day of summer. Most of the film is a desultory alternation between his catatonic depression and the tragic-comic episodes that spiral round it—such as his brother-in-law’s attempts to hoard his art work, hoping it will increase in value after his death; two classmates’ performance of eating bars of soap which causes them to vomit; or another friend’s entrapment in a psychiatric clinic. The ice burial goes as planned; Qi Lei dies of hypothermia; and a posthumous exhibition of his work is a brief success. Up to this point, the film appears as an allegory of life in capitalist China, with Qi Lei as an average guy except that, as an artist, he feels his alienation more sensitively than most and has a medium in which he can express it. The rejection of woodcuts (a medium whose heritage as a vehicle for popular culture during the Communist period has been replaced by its capacity to produce commodity objects that generate market relations in culture) in favor of performance art (a medium that has no such commodity status) resonates with the same anti-materialist logic that accompanied the emergence of performance art in the West in the late 1960s, and logically culminates in the artist’s ultimate rejection of materiality: his death. But then the film opens up a surprising coda that exposes the suicide as a cleverly orchestrated fake, contrived by the artist and his mentor with the cooperation of his sister and a doctor. Hiding out in a beautiful countryside retreat, the artist longs to revisit his old world. Eventually, he takes a taxi through the electric Beijing night and makes fleeting contact with his sister and his girlfriend. But this glimpse of the life he has lost is so traumatic that in the end he actually kills himself by slitting his wrists.

As in Chihwaseon, suicide suggests the impossibility of envisioning a positive function for art and a participatory role for the artist in contemporary China, a reversal of the critical optimism that fueled the Fifth Generation and, even more categorically, of the Romantic optimism of Communist-era Socialist Realism. This disillusionment appears to be objectively justified by changes in the Chinese art world since 1989, when the social repression that began in the Tiananmen incident was paralleled by the repression of the expansive and innovative utopian avant-garde art world that had emerged in the 1980s. Chinese art historian Gao Minglu comments: “In the nineties, no artist has been able to escape from the commercial waves of the transnational economy. The art world is now dominated by a concern for commercial success. . . . Avant-garde artists, for whom critical recognition, not financial benefit, had been the only reward, now find themselves with no public outlet.” As a result, those artists who have not fled abroad or turned to remunerative realistic painting find themselves trapped in the same terminal pessimism that afflicts Qi Lei.

The combined impact of a repressive government and the increased penetration of transnational capital are fully and cogently realized in Beijing Suburb, which also focuses on a painter, Fang Jian. He and his loose community of other painters, poets, and bohemians—most of them artists playing themselves—lack residency permits and so can neither live nor work legally in the city. They exist as outsiders in that rigidly bureaucratic society and are vulnerable to both state harassment and their own feelings of impotence. At the
Apart from its formal clarity, *Beijing Suburb* is especially interesting since its diegetic analysis of the state of Chinese art dramatizes both the parallel conditions in Chinese art cinema and the material properties and social existence of the film itself. It allegorizes the mode of its own production and the conditions of cultural production generally. The generally “imperfect” production values—reliance on long takes, location shooting, “real” protagonists, and the other neo-realist, quasi-documentary features—mirror the impoverishment of the artists’ resources. As well as exaggerating the narrative attenuation characteristic of the Sixth Generation, the film flaunts provocative motifs that seem calculated to annoy authorities: extended scenes of male nudity, scenes of police taking bribes, and two very graphic but distanced scenes of sexual intercourse between Fang and his lover, the wife of a prosperous businessman. Like the illegal art and performances it represents, *Beijing Suburb* itself exists outside the authorized Chinese cinema; it is only clandestinely screened in underground bars and similar subcultural milieus, apart from which, again like the art work it diegetically depicts, its audience is primarily foreign. Given this situation, there can be no clear decision as to whether the film is an authentic testament to cultural repression or a calculated rehearsal of such a gesture aimed at foreign audiences, who are no less titillated by accounts of problems with the present, still nominally Communist, Chinese government than they were by the possibility of reading Zhang Yimou’s early 1990s historical costume dramas as allegories of the oppression of the Cultural Revolution or Maoism in general. In a globalized cultural economy, the line between Orientalism and self-orientalization remains indeterminate.

**CODA: ROCK’N’ROLL**

Although films about painters and other such fundamentally artisanal artists cannot fully allegorize the conditions determining collaborative industrial modern arts such as cinema, films about rock’n’roll do at least have the potential to approach such a specificity. Rock’n’roll is an important motif in Sixth Generation films. The inaugural work in the movement, Yuan Zhang’s *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing za zhong*, 1993), for example, was partially written by and prominently features rock star Cui Jian. And a minor—and symptomatically homeless—character in *Beijing Suburb* is a musician. The allegorical use of music in *Beijing Bastards* is, however, less than coherent. It is in a Korean film, Im Sun-nye’s *The Waikiki Brothers* (2001), that the cultural situation has been most brilliantly dramatized through the use of pop music.
The film traces the development of a band of rock-n'rollers from amateurs in high school through their attempt to make a living on the provincial night-club circuit. But their youthful enthusiasm is gradually eroded and their integrity, both musical and personal, is comprised by low-life entrepreneurs and sordid intrigues. One by one, members leave until only Song-u, the main musician, remains. Eventually he loses his job to a pretty but cynical and untalented young synthesizer player. Resolutely puncturing the conventions of the American rock-n'roll film, which typically portrays the glamour of the rock-n'roller's life, *The Waikiki Brothers* represents pop music as a job, ill-rewarded and soul-destroying. Though Im finally softens her pessimism in a coda where Song-u begins to revitalize his career and life by joining with a woman singer he once loved, the overall sense of cultural desolation is harrowing.  

1. The romanization of Korean names generally follows the McCune-Reischauer system, with the exception of those that have acquired other standard forms in the United States. I am very grateful to Professor Insoo Cho for his advice about Korean art, especially for many observations about Im's departure from the historical record in his representation of Chang Sung-op, the subject of *Chihwaseon*. I am also grateful to Nam Lee, Hanju Kwak, Berenice Reynaud, and Esther Yau for other advice and assistance. Earlier versions of parts of this essay appeared in “Yesul, Yonghwa, Yesul Yonghwa: Chwihwason Kwa Ku Tongnyu Yonghwadul,” in *Chihwaseon*, ed. Paek Mun-im (Seoul: Yonsei University Media Art Institute, 2004).


4. No written biography of Chang appeared until Chang Chi-yon's *Ilsa yusa* (1922). The film depicts only the skeletal details of what is known of his life: his being an orphan whose genius was discovered by a local aristocrat; his promiscuity and drunkenness; his rejection of the king's commission and his eventual disappearance. Im has said that one of the reasons why he chose Chang as the subject for his film is that, since biographical information about him is sparse, he could simultaneously ground his story in a real figure and rewrite his biography according to his own needs. See Im's comments on Chang in *Chong Sung-il*, ed., *Im Kwon-Taek by Im Kwon-Taek (Im Kwon-Taek i Im Kwon-Taek ul Malhada)* (Seoul, Korea: Hyonmun Seoga, 2003), Vol. 2, 449-524. The biographical parallels between himself and his subject that Im cites include similarities in their unhappy childhoods and their love of

**The Waikiki Brothers: metaphor of cultural decay**
drinking. He also emphasizes the fact that Chang was a working professional who made his living by selling his art. He states summarily, “Chihwaseon is the film into which I projected myself the most” (453). Insoo Cho estimates that the narrative is 80-percent fictitious.

5. A fabricated figure, named in the film as Kim Pyong-mun.

6. The so-called “true-view landscape” (chingyong sansu).

7. Insoo Cho has pointed out that many paintings here attributed to Chang are in fact by other, often more modern, artists.


11. For example, Utamaro’s World (Akio Jissoji, 1977) and Sharaku (Masahiro Shinoda, 1995).

12. After the Independence Movement in 1919, the occupying Japanese allowed limited freedom of publication in their Korean colony. The new magazines of the period introduced the motifs of Western Romanticism, including the idea of the artist as bohemian.


16. For example, “once the avant-garde had succeeded in ‘detaching’ itself from society, it proceeded to turn around and repudiate revolutionary politics as well as bourgeois.” Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in _Pollock and After: The Critical Debate_, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 22. Pollock’s “action painting” coincided with his and other painters’ conclusive turn from concerns with the Popular Front politics of the late 1930s to their own individuality and their own unconsciousness. Compare: “But by 1943 political disagreements (e.g., the collapse of the social base for a revolution) and changed social conditions (e.g., the growth of the private art market and of a knowledgeable audience for the arts) had caused some artists to assert their own individuality with strength and confidence.” Serge Guilbaut, _How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War_ (trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 75.

17. Significantly, the conditions framing artistic production mirror those of biological reproduction: Pollock’s wife, Lee Krasner, refuses to give him children because she fears the demands of his unstable ego; but Chang, at the very moment when he desperately attempts to impregnate a lover who wants to be the mother of his children, is thwarted by the agents of the state, who intervene and force him to ejaculate uselessly outside her body.


19. Park was one of the founders of both the Yallasong Film Studies Group and the Seoul Film Group, the two most important film collectives that, as well as making samizdat films, translated several Third World cinema manifestoes.


21. The epithets are Dai Jinhua’s; see Dai, 72. Dai characterizes the cultural environment as comprising “the ambiguous ideology of the post-Cold War era; the implosion and diffusion of mainstream ideology; global capitalism’s tidal force and the resistance of nationalisms and nativisms; the penetration and impact of global capital on local cultural industries; cultures’ increasing commercialization in global and local culture markets; and the active role local intellectuals, besieged by postmodern and post-colonial discourse, have undertaken in their writing” (72).

22. Yang Fudong’s semi-documentary films utilizing his artist friends, which have been so well received in Western art circles, are closely related.


24. Thus, the very high-profile academic Dai Jinhua has noted that virtually all her information about the Sixth Generation “was communicated to [her] only by overseas publications and friends.” Dai, 91.

25. This redemptive coda is emphasized by Chong Chae-hyong, who also otherwise reads the film as a social allegory; see Chong Chae-hyong, “One Bright Ray of Fantasy in a Cold Waterfall: Notable Films Shown at the 4th Pusan International Film Festival,” _Yonghwapipyo (Film Critiques)_ 2 (30 June 2002): n.p.