13. Cosmopolitan Kŏjedo: Swing Kids (2018) and Historical Memories of the Korean War

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Abstract
Kang Hyeong-cheol's Swing Kids (Sŭwingk'ijŭ, 2018) is a work of historical memory that emphasizes the Korean War's multinational nature. Set within the Kŏjedo POW camp and merging the generic conventions of the musical with those of the Korean War film, it constructs an alternate history in which relations between a group of South Korean, North Korean, Chinese, and American characters play out in unexpected ways via dance. Swing Kids imagines liberation from the Cold War division system through the creation of a cosmopolitan community that transcends the boundaries of race, nation, ideology, and culture. It also offers a mythic origin story for K-pop, one of post-war Korea's most successful exports.

Keywords: Kang Hyeong-cheol; Korean War; K-pop; POW camp; musical

The climactic scene of Kang Hyeong-cheol's film Swing Kids (Sŭwingk'ijŭ, 2018) depicts a group of five dancers furiously tap dancing on a stage ablaze with lights while a big band plays a hot version of Louis Prima's “Sing, Sing, Sing.” The dancers, unified by their matching costumes and synchronized movements, toss canes in the air vaudeville-style as they dance their hearts out. The year is 1951, the occasion is the Christmas show at the Kŏjedo POW camp, and the audience, composed of POWs, American soldiers, and members of the international press corps, goes wild. Sergeant Jackson (Jared Grimes), the lead dancer, had introduced the performance moments before with a short speech:

We’re made up of a Chinese prisoner who would’ve been a brilliant choreographer if it wasn’t for the war; a bright, confident, strong-willed young woman who’s forced to provide for her family after losing both her parents; a civilian who became a prisoner only because he was wrongfully accused of being a communist; a communist dancer who could’ve stood
on the stages of Carnegie Hall if it wasn't for political ideology; and a humble black man who has found his only friends in life in these four individuals. Ladies and gentlemen, we are the Swing Kids and the title of this performance is... 'Fuck Ideology.'

Jackson’s introduction highlights the diversity of the dance team, which is composed of one Chinese, two South Koreans, a North Korean, and himself, a self-described “humble black man” who has just now “found his only friends in life.” “Fuck Ideology,” the title that Jackson gives the performance, sums up the film’s central theme; it also frames the dance team as a utopian third space between capitalism and communism—a community bound together by friendship and a love of dance rather than by national identity or political ideology.

_Swing Kids_, the highly anticipated fourth film by Kang Hyeong-cheol, director of the blockbusters _Scandal Maker_ (Kwasok Sŏk’aendŭl, 2008) and _Sunny_ (Ssŏni, 2011), is a work of historical memory. Like all such works of public remembering, it links the past to the present and invites an interrogation of the nature of the relationship between them. What does it mean to remember the Korean War through the lens of tap dance in 2018?

The South Korean film industry, like other sectors of Korean society, has been deeply engaged in the process of remembering and resignifying the Korean War, and since 1998 it has made over a dozen films set during the conflict. 1 _Welcome to Dongmakgol_ (Welk’ŏm t’u tongmakkol, 2005) is among the most popular and well-studied of these “division blockbusters.” 2 Park Kwang-hyun’s film uses a magical realist style to tell a story about a small group of North Korean, South Korean, and American soldiers who converge on an isolated village whose inhabitants are miraculously unaware of the war. Over time, their mutual hostility fades and the village becomes a utopian community from which the war has seemingly been banished. Kristen Sun has explored how the film offers an alternate history of the war that bypasses the Cold War division system, which since 1945 has maintained the rupture of the singular Korean nation into two hostile states. _Welcome to Dongmakgol_ “reimagine[s] a world beyond division” by constructing “affective spaces of imagined community between North Koreans and South Koreans”: as the soldiers laugh, sleep, eat, and even defecate together, they

develop profound bonds of friendship. The film culminates in a scene of “affective intensity”—a mix of ecstasy and despair—as the soldiers, now fighting side by side in a “North-South Joint Force,” defend the village from UN attack. The film offers a “utopian fantasy” of peninsular reunification, one that echoes South Korean president Kim Daejung’s Sunshine Policy of rapprochement with the North.³

*Welcome to Dongmakgol* is an ethno-nationalist work of historical memory. It depicts the soldiers’ and villagers’ shared Korean-ness as the ground on which reunification can be achieved. It recasts the United States as Korea’s enemy and depicts the American soldier as a foreign body that must be expelled in order to restore the “prelapsarian” community of ethnic Koreans.⁴ The film thus offers a vision of cultural purity, uncontaminated by foreign influence, as the means through which division can magically be healed.

*Swing Kids*, released 13 years after *Dongmakgol*, is set within the volatile Kŏjedo POW camp. It follows the efforts of Sergeant Jackson, an African American Broadway dancer who has been tasked by the camp’s commanding officer, General Roberts (Ross Kettle), with putting together a POW dance group. Roberts envisions the performance at the Christmas show as a publicity stunt that will put communist submission on display and offset Chinese propaganda that has painted the camp as a hotbed of US military abuse: “Communist POWs dancing the dance of the free world. Makes one hell of a punchline, eh?” The film charts the progress of the dance group from its inception through to its demise, against a backstory of communist and anti-communist POWs waging an internal war against each other. *Swing Kids* was inspired by the theatrical musical Ro Ki-su (2015), which Kang saw while mulling the question of why Korea was still suffering the consequences of the Korean War when the more powerful nations involved in it were not. Despite the film’s strong script, appealing cast, and high production values, *Swing Kids* performed poorly at the box office, due, perhaps, to the jarring juxtapositions of music, dance, and violence. Unlike *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, it has failed to attract significant attention from scholars.

*Swing Kids* overlaps with and diverges from *Welcome to Dongmakgol* in illuminating ways. It shares with that film a quasi-magical realist style, which it, too, uses to imagine an alternate history of the Korean War. And

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like the earlier film, it also reimagines a world beyond division by staging moments of affective intensity among enemy soldiers who come together in an isolated community. Yet the cultural work performed by these two pieces of historical memory-making is profoundly different. Rather than focusing on the intra-Korean conflict, Swing Kids highlights the war’s multinational dimension. It explores the war as an event that brings together people from four countries and shows what might have happened if enemies and allies had come together around a shared creative endeavor. Swing Kids offers a specifically cosmopolitan alternate history of the war, in which the experience of cross-cultural contact plays out in unexpected ways.

Swing Kids enacts this principle of cosmopolitan creativity within itself as it combines the conventions of the Korean War film with those of the American musical, a genre that has only a limited presence in Korea (another reason, perhaps, for its lukewarm reception). As a work of historical memory, Swing Kids uses the musical to imagine liberation from the strangling constraints of the Cold War division system via the creation of a community that dissolves the boundaries of nation, ideology, culture, and race. Koreans can best escape the unending Korean War, the film suggests, not through the restoration of some ethno-national purity but through engagement with non-Korean people and culture. In doing so, Swing Kids offers a mythic origin story for K-pop by tracing its roots to the intimate bonds forged within the enclosures of the POW camp. If Welcome to Dongmakgol is a Sunshine Policy film, Swing Kids is a historical memory for today’s hallyu era, when the ability to indigenize and re-export foreign culture serves as an essential component of South Korea’s global soft power.

**Genre and the Creation of a Cosmopolitan Community**

Swing Kids’ generic hybridity allowed Kang to combine the tragedies of war with the joyfulness of the musical, a tonal complexity that he was eager to realize. While Swing Kids lacks the combat scenes common to many Korean War films, it does exhibit a fidelity to the historical record that is one of the genre’s signal conventions. The film is set almost entirely within the Kŏjedo POW camp. Located on a small island southwest of Busan, the historical camp was built in January 1951 to house the large number of prisoners captured in the wake of the Inch’ŏn landing. The prisoners, who numbered 170,000 by 1952, were an ideologically and nationally diverse population. They included regular soldiers from the North Korean People’s Army and Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (PVA), anti-communist Chinese soldiers in the PVA
who had fought on the Nationalist side in the recently concluded Chinese civil war, and South Korean soldiers and civilians who had been impressed by the communists during their southward sweep following the war’s outbreak. These Cold War divisions were built into the camp’s physical structure. In adherence to the recently drafted Geneva Conventions, which required prisoners to be housed in their military units, and seeking to limit eruptions of violence between antagonistic populations, the United Nations Command housed the POWs in about three dozen separate barbed-wire compounds (all of which were overcrowded as much as five times beyond their intended capacity) according to their national and ideological affiliations.

Director Kang drew heavily on visual and written records to reconstruct the camp. Echoing a series of photographs taken by Swiss photojournalist Werner Bischof, the film includes such historically accurate details as wooden guard towers, a reproduction of the Statue of Liberty, and a performance by masked dancers in an open recreation space. The film incorporates archival film to introduce the social and political dynamics that roiled the camp. The film opens with actual newsreel footage that delivers historically accurate exposition: violence has erupted between pro- and anti-communist POWs over the American policy of voluntary repatriation, and while restoring order, American guards killed a number of POWs, which has led to world-wide condemnation. The film presents the communist North Korean compounds as self-governing and outside the control of the American guards, as they were in fact. It includes scenes of violent bloodshed between ideologically opposed compounds, echoing those that erupted regularly in the historical camp, where prisoners had access to a range of hand-made weapons including knives, guns, and Molotov cocktails—all of which appear in the film.

The character of Jackson, in turn, gestures towards the twinned history of the US civil rights movement and the Hollywood Korean War film. Korea saw the first deployment of a racially integrated US Army, a development that is highlighted in one of the most famous Korean War films, Sam Fuller’s Steel Helmet (1951), which also features a major black character and foregrounds the issue of racism.

Although Kang did not envision Swing Kids as a traditional musical, given the absence of characters spontaneously breaking out into song, the film follows the conventions of the backstage musical, a subgenre that narrates the progress of a group of performers as they prepare to put on a show. Classics include Busby Berkeley’s 42nd Street (1933) and Gold Digger series (1933, 1935, 1937); A Star is Born (2018) is a more recent entry. Swing Kids’ plot follows this subgenre’s basic skeleton: after Jackson receives his
orders from General Roberts, he hosts auditions and creates a team of five dancers; the team practices; conflicts arise and are resolved; and in the end the dancers put on a spectacular performance. The film interweaves about a dozen dance numbers into this story, most of which are narratively motivated as auditions, lessons, practices, and performances. Like the camp itself, the Swing Kids dance group is also rooted in the historical record: Korean singers, dancers, and other entertainers regularly performed on US military bases to entertain the troops. In these “8th Army Shows,” as they were locally known, Korean performers emulated a wide variety of American musical and performance styles including country, rock, and R&B. These shows served as talent incubators and laid the foundation for South Korea’s pop music of the 1960s and beyond.

The dance group that Jackson assembles is a cosmopolitan community that challenges the division system that is embedded in the camp’s physical structure and within the psychology of its inhabitants. It is a politically, nationally, racially, and sexually heterogeneous group. It includes, in addition to Jackson, a South Korean civilian man with a background in traditional dance, Kang Pyŏngsam (Oh Jung-se); a multilingual South Korean civilian woman, Yang P’anrae (Park Hye-soo), who in the first number belts out a fine rendition of Eileen Barton’s “If I Knew You Were Coming’ I’d’ve Baked a Cake”; a Chinese soldier with heart troubles, Xiao Fang (Kim Min-ho), who holds iconoclastic ideas about choreography; and Ro Gisu (Do Kyung-soo), a handsome young man and ideologically loyal member of the North Korean national dance company. The team thus includes dancers affiliated with each of the war’s major combatants, which allowed director Kang to dramatize what he called the “melting pot” situation inside the historical camp.5

The dance team constitutes the heart of the film’s alternate history—what might have happened at Kŏjedo but didn’t. The film offers the fantasy that the convergence of so many different nationalities, races, and ideologies within the camp might have led not to violence but to art. The dancers, fueled by a passion inexplicable even to themselves, create a beauty- and pleasure-centered community that exists nowhere else in the camp. Its utopian nature is indicated by the space in which they practice: “Freedom Hall,” a colorful blue and orange building and the only place amidst the grim barbed-wire enclosures where such a diverse group can gather. The film emphasizes the thrill of their cosmopolitan bonding via bits of magical-realism, as when

the dancers find themselves able to understand each other’s speech despite their language differences: “It’s strange,” Gisu asks himself perplexedly after his first rehearsal with Jackson, “Why can I understand this black man?”

The dancers’ growing openness to each other stands in stark contrast to the hostility to difference that suffuses the camp and undergirds the frequent eruptions of violence. Ideologically motivated hostility is pervasive. Jamie (A.J. Simmons), a white American guard, calls Gisu a “commie boy” before trying to break his legs, and a gang of South Korean prostitutes hurl the same epithet at one of their own, prompting a group of villagers to stone her. The film presents the North Korean POWs as even more ideologically vicious: acting under orders from Pyongyang, they poison scores of South Korean POWs, slit the throats of American guards, and provoke a frenzy of violence that sets the camp aflame. They are also hostile to cultural difference. When a new political operative arrives, he stokes the prisoners’ revolutionary fervor with exhortations to expunge any trace of American culture: “If Yankee ideas get into your head, cut off your head!” Swing Kids likewise highlights the racism of white Americans. Jackson is called a “nigger” multiple times by his fellow Americans, and one of the film’s last lines of dialogue is General Roberts’ order to “Kill all them fucking yellow gooks.” Like the North Koreans who can’t tolerate any traces of “Yankee” ideas, the Americans can barely tolerate the presence of non-whites. Both sides are committed to ideals of purity.

Musical Numbers

Swing Kids, like any musical, includes quite a few “numbers”: distinct, self-contained episodes that use music and dance as the primary modes of expression. While they are largely integrated into the narrative and work to advance the story, develop characters, and express themes, they also exist at one remove from the narrative’s harsh realism: they create an “ideal” that illuminates what is lacking in ordinary life. According to Rick Altman, musical numbers create a “space which is marked off, separated from the normal world, and reserved for an idealized, artistic presentation.” Within them, “the characters break out of the normal world into a realm of performance and art, a world where stylization and rhythm provide a sense of community and beauty absent from the real world.” In the marked-off space of the dance numbers, the laws of physics and the Cold War can be

miraculously—albeit temporarily—suspended. Characters dance to music only they can hear; time expands and contracts; and aggressive gestures morph into dance movements and then back again. Most importantly, the dance numbers serve as privileged spaces of affective intensity and emotional intimacy that offset the brutality of the camp. Within the numbers, things can happen that are impossible outside of them. As a result, Swing Kids, unlike most Korean War films, is saturated with an intensely joyous feel. Dance allows for the externalization of that which is inside—the feelings, dreams, and aspirations that cannot be spoken of outside of Freedom Hall. The numbers show how the Cold War division system, with its rigid insistence on separation and difference, might be transcended.

Stylized bodily movements enable enhanced communication between communists and anti-communists, which brings the cosmopolitan community into being and infuses it with emotional warmth. This can be seen in a simple, dialogue-less number that begins with the Chinese Xiao Fang and the South Korean Kang Pyŏngsam together in the same space but separated by barbed-wire fencing. Altman’s “ideal” emerges as these two POWs, who lack a common language, use their bodies to speak with each other. (Subtitles translate their movements into words.) Kang wiggles his shoulders to ask about Xiao Fang’s health; Xiao Fang wiggles his own shoulders with his arms upraised to say he is fine. He then performs some tap steps to ask after Jackson, who has been put in the stockade; Kang mimes walking slowly to indicate that he won’t be out for a while. Their “conversation” flows seamlessly—and comically—for several minutes. Dance serves here as a means to communicate across physical, ideological, and linguistic barriers. Their improvised modern dance creates a “realm of performance and art” that allows the dancers to express their affection for each other and for Jackson—a feeling that is otherwise inarticulable in the camp. The number offers a utopian glimpse of how the multinational encounters of the Korean War might have played out differently, generating new forms of creative expression rather than violence.

In another number, dance enables a temporary escape from the constraints of ideology. This one begins in the village outside the camp, as Jackson and P’anrae talk about an outbreak of violence instigated by the North Koreans. As they ponder whether Gisu is participating in it, the scene cuts to a shot of him standing alone in Freedom Hall holding a bloody knife, suggesting that his political obligations are pushing him towards actions he doesn’t want to commit. “Communism, capitalism,” says P’anrae bitterly. “If nobody knew what they were, no one would kill or be killed.” She spits out a pithy phrase—“Fucking ideology”—which Jackson repeats with
admiration. The transition from narrative to number—and from ideology to “ideal”—begins when P’anrae holds up the tap shoes that Jackson has given her: these are “magic shoes,” she says, that can make “war, food, miserable things ... just disappear.” As she begins to dance, David Bowie’s “Modern Love,” an upbeat pop song released in 1983, erupts on the soundtrack, an anachronism that helps the dancers take flight out of the camp’s mundane cruelties. A split duet, the number cross-cuts between P’anrae tap-dancing with abandon in the village’s dirt streets and Gisu, also wearing tap shoes from Jackson, dancing with equal abandon in Freedom Hall. Using parallel movements, they each crash through the barriers that constrain them: P’anrae bursts through a crowd of anti-communist protesters shouting “Annihilate the commies!” as Gisu kicks through the doors of Freedom Hall and a series of chained gates. Both dancers tap ecstatically on makeshift stages, run with their arms upraised, leap in the air, and splash through puddles, with each shot conveying a sense of unrestrained joy. For both dancers, the tap shoes function as talismans that enable them to express bodily what they can’t say in words: an intense desire for liberation from the “fucking ideologies” that constrain their lives. The number is a joyful celebration of individual freedom, one that is enabled by American tap shoes and British pop music. In contrast to Welcome to Dongmakgol’s vision of ethnocultural purity, this number depicts Western music and dance as instruments that allow for the authentic expression of a desire shared by a North and South Korean alike.

The number ends abruptly mid-song, however, and the joyful tone evaporates. Gisu stands motionless inside a closed-up Freedom Hall and P’anrae sprawls gracelessly in the dirt road: they haven’t escaped at all. The number ends on a pessimistic note that foreshadows the film’s tragic ending, as Gisu puts his tap shoes down and walks away from them. The magic of the shoes and the space of the musical number allows the dancers to express their desire for liberation but not actually achieve it.

For all the film’s explicit disavowal of ideologies, however, one could argue that the cosmopolitan community that comes to life in the dance numbers is largely organized according to the liberal values that the US promoted during and after the Korean War. The commitment to individual freedom, the belief in art as a cultural space outside of ideology, the promotion of creative expression as a form of democratic freedom—all of these ideals figured prominently in the cultural Cold War that the US waged in Korea and across Asia through agencies such as the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the Asia Foundation. And yet ... the form of dance that the film uses to animate these ideals complicates that reading.
Cosmopolitan Couple Formation

Tap dance is a uniquely American cultural form; it is not, however, American in any simple way. Tap dance developed out of the convergence of West African and Irish dance traditions, beginning in the Caribbean in the 1600s and continuing in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Constance Hill, it is a product of a “three-hundred-year musical and social exchange” between black and white people brought together by colonialism, slavery, indentured servitude, and migration. By the 1930s, tap had become an established feature of Hollywood musicals, where it was made famous by black dancers like Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and white dancers like Fred Astaire. After a mid-century lull, tap was revitalized in the late twentieth century by Savion Glover and has since been largely identified as a black cultural form. Swing Kids recognizes tap as an African American style of dance by making Jackson its sole purveyor, while also foregrounding its transmission across racial lines to Gisu.

Although the backstage musical subgenre emphasizes the formation of the performance group, it also orchestrates the formation of a couple. Rick Altman characterizes the Hollywood musical as having a “dual-focus” narrative structure that brings together two characters who represent different qualities. Typically, the couple is a heterosexual romantic one, but not always. Swing Kids places Gisu, the most skilled dancer and emotionally complex character, at the center of this process of couple formation. While the film hints at a romantic partnership with P’anrae, it gradually becomes clear that Jackson and Gisu constitute the film’s central couple. While there is no overt suggestion of sexual desire, they develop a level of emotional intimacy beyond what the other characters share.

Swing Kids introduces Jackson and Gisu as potential partners through a pair of scenes in which they watch each other dance for the first time. Jackson is introduced first. Gisu has snuck into a storeroom and, surrounded by American foodstuffs like Coca-Cola and Spam, has begun drinking Budweiser beer. Peering through a crack in a door that leads into Freedom Hall, he sees Jackson tap dancing. The scene cuts back and forth between close-ups of Jackson’s feet and tracking shots moving ever closer to Gisu’s single eye, the accelerating pace mimicking the rhythm of Jackson’s tapping and suggesting Gisu’s intensifying

fascination. Jackson is associated here with novelty (of this new dance form) and abundance (of American foodstuffs). Gisu’s introduction follows soon after when he crashes drunkenly into a dance party and performs a Russian kalinka folk dance, which associates him with the communist bloc. Now the gaze is reversed, as Jackson looks admiringly at Gisu squatting and kicking his legs out at an impossibly fast speed (another magical realist moment). Taken together, the two scenes establish that Jackson and Gisu are well-matched in terms of skill, are attracted to each other, and are associated with the ideological polarities of communism and capitalism. The foregrounding of each man’s voyeuristic gaze at the other electrifies the scenes with a hint of erotic charge.

Their relationship launches when they begin to dance together. Despite his immediate attraction to tap, Gisu resists being drawn into the dance troupe: as a loyal North Korean he must avoid contamination by “Yankee” culture. During his first lesson, he initially refuses Jackson’s instruction, performing some “communist” footwork instead, but as the lesson progresses, he allows himself to emulate Jackson’s movements. As he does, their identities transform from soldiers in hostile armies to teacher and student. Their relationship deepens during an idyllic quasi-number set on a bluff overlooking the camp. As they relax in a pair of chairs under a bright blue sky, they reveal their private feelings and allow themselves to envision a future beyond the war. They speak different languages, yet seem to understand each other perfectly. “Tap dance is driving me crazy,” admits Gisu as his face opens up into a rare, dreamy smile. “The sound of it makes my heart race. I know I shouldn’t, but it even makes me want to go to America someday. Then I will have the chance to tap dance with other Yankees like you. Just the thought of it gives me chills.” This is a big admission and marks the moment when Gisu’s love of tap overwhelms his loyalty to North Korea’s anti-American ideology. Jackson responds by giving him a photograph of the interior of a concert hall, seen from the stage. “Carnegie Hall,” Jackson explains. “We’ll all be up on that stage. That means you, too, kid. The grand stage of Carnegie Hall. Just picture it. A stage ten times as big as the one that we have here. With a big band of close to one hundred down in the pit. Thousands of seats, packed full of people just waiting to see us dance. Can you hear it? Thousands spring to their feet in a standing ovation!” Jackson starts to dance, as if living out this fantasy, and when he gets too close to the edge of the bluff, Gisu pulls him back to safety—an expression of care he hasn’t previously allowed himself. The scene cuts to a long shot as they dance together, laughing and acting out a shared fantasy of being together in a peaceful postwar future. It is an intimate moment of connection as they step out of their roles as teacher and student and into new roles as friends and peers.
They achieve a deeper level of intimacy near the end of the film, in the moments before the Christmas show performance, when they share a wordless encounter backstage. Gisu is standing alone, anxiously contemplating the hidden gun that he, having been blackmailed by the North Korean leadership, is supposed to use at the end of the show to shoot General Roberts. Jackson approaches and, noticing Gisu's nervously twitching arm, takes Gisu's hand in his own and holds it for a long moment. They gaze at each other, their faces uncharacteristically open and emotionally vulnerable. It is a moment of intimate connection but also shared sadness, as each one knows that this will be their last dance together: Jackson knows the group will be disbanded after this one performance, and Gisu knows he is about to sacrifice his life for the sake of an ideology he has come to doubt. Their relationship deepens still further after the group's big dance number, when Gisu steps onstage for an unplanned solo. Knowing it will be the last time he will ever dance, he gives a fabulous tap performance, demonstrating his mastery of this “Yankee” dance and signaling a small act of resistance to the North Korean leadership in the audience. The audience remains silent and unmoved, but as Gisu begins tapping in a circle, the interior of Freedom Hall fades away and is replaced by the interior of Carnegie Hall, filled with the lights and cheering audience that Jackson had described to him on the bluff. Gisu's dancing brings Carnegie Hall into existence—and Jackson, in yet another magical realist moment, sees it, too. Another exchange of intimate gazes follows. Gisu looks at Jackson as if to say, “See what I have created,” and Jackson looks back at him with awe for bringing their shared fantasy to life. It is a quintessential musical number, when the harshness of reality falls away and, in its place, arises a vision of what is most fervently desired by two people who share an intense and exclusive emotional bond.

This vision of Carnegie Hall fades, however, and the camp's dark reality returns. Gisu runs off stage to get the gun, only to be stopped by his brother, who takes the gun and begins shooting. A spasm of violence erupts in which the brother is killed, and in the lull that follows General Roberts looks towards the dancers and issues an order rooted in American racial ideology and its hatred of difference: “Kill all them fucking yellow gooks.” As a group of MPs approach the stage, Jackson tries to protect Gisu by standing in front of him and shouting “He's with me!,” asserting the primacy of their cosmopolitan partnership over the general's race-based notion of Americanness. The MPs turn their guns on Xiao Fang, P'anrae, and Kang, shooting them down as they embrace each other for protection. Gisu kneels over the dead bodies, distraught and pleading for them to get up, and as Jackson calls his name, an MP shoots Gisu. The
scene ends with paired close-ups of Jackson and Gisu, identically dressed and in the same kneeling position, as they gaze at each other in horror and despair, until Gisu’s face collapses into crying. And with that the cosmopolitan community, and the alternate history of the Korean War that it represented, is destroyed.

The slaughter of the Swing Kids is similar to the ending of *Welcome to Dongmakgol*, in which American bombers annihilate the joint North-South Security Force at the very moment when the soldiers’ feelings for and commitment to each other are most intense. For all their utopian sentiment and magical realist style, both films in the end acknowledge the persistence of the Cold War division system and the seeming impossibility of overcoming it. But where *Dongmakgol* blamed the US exclusively for the destruction of its unified ethno-national community, *Swing Kids* blames both the North Koreans’ ideological fervor and the Americans’ racism for the slaughter of its cosmopolitan community.

**Origins of K-Pop**

The film does not end on this scene of murder, however. Instead, the final scene takes place in 2018 and depicts the return of a now-elderly Jackson to the Historic Park of Kŏje POW Camp—South Korea’s official historical memory site of the camp. While Jackson walks through the visitor center, the South Korean tour guide narrates the night of the dance performance as a terrorist attack on the camp commander. Jackson turns away from this version of historical memory, which reaffirms the division system by recasting the cosmopolitan community as agents of partisan violence, and walks into the still-standing Freedom Hall. As he touches the stage, he hears an amused voice call out “Hey, Jackson!”, and as he turns around the young Gisu rises up into the frame. A reverse shot reveals the young Jackson and the scene becomes a flashback in which he re-lives his experience of dancing alone with Gisu during one of their lessons.

This last musical number is a challenge dance, a key component of the tap repertoire that embodies the dynamics of exchange. Jackson and Gisu initially dance solo, facing off against each other from opposite sides of the frame, each one showing off his moves and challenging the other to best them. As the scene progresses, their rivalry turns into an embodied conversation, as they dance their different moves together. By the end of the number, as the camera circles fluidly around them, they are dancing in unison, their bodies perfectly synchronized as they tap their feet and clap
their hands, creating music and dance simultaneously. They smile at each other in paired close-ups as they delight in the complex beauty of what they are making together. As their rapid-fire tapping builds to a crescendo, the camera pulls back to a long shot and they raise their arms and leap into the air, expressing a shared feeling of aesthetic and embodied ecstasy. An abrupt cut to the title credit brings the film to an end.

This number stands as the film’s most complete expression of Jackson and Gisu’s couple-ness. It is the only scene that depicts them dancing together at their best: they are not student and teacher, friends goofing around, or members of a larger team. Here they are a perfectly matched pair, an African American and a North Korean sharing an experience of unalloyed creative joyfulness. The form of the dance expresses the film’s utopian, alternate history of what might have happened in the Kŏjedo camp: a confrontational situation that turns into a harmonious encounter, out of which something new is created.

What exactly is that new thing? The film’s casting can help answer that question: Do Kyung-soo, the actor who plays Gisu, is better known as D.O., who is a member of EXO, one of the biggest K-pop idol groups. EXO exemplifies the cosmopolitan capitalist dimension of K-pop, which seeks to move profitably beyond the historical animosities of the Cold War. SM Entertainment created EXO as a multinational group with South Korean and Chinese members, and debuted them in 2012 as a single band composed of two sub-groups, each of which targeted a different national market. EXO-K sang in Korean and toured capitalist South Korea, while EXO-M sang in Mandarin and toured communist China. They have targeted the Japanese market as well, with Japanese-language recordings and performances, and nurtured a global fanbase by touring across Southeast Asia and North America. Beyond their profit-seeking ambitions, EXO, like other K-pop groups, are an outgrowth of the South Korean government’s efforts to export their cultural products globally as a form of soft power in the service of its sub-imperial ambitions.9

One country that has not welcomed K-pop cosmopolitanism is North Korea, whose leadership has attacked it as a form of cultural pollution. Kim Jong-un, recognizing the soft-power dimension of K-pop and fearful of losing ideological control over a younger generation enamored of foreign culture, has condemned K-pop as a “vicious cancer” that could cause the communist state to “crumble.”10

EXO’s cosmopolitanism extends into the culturally hybrid style of its music and dance, which, like that of other K-pop performers, draws heavily on black American culture. K-pop’s creators have acknowledged these borrowings: Lee Soo-man, founder of SM Entertainment, EXO’s agency, has admitted that “we made K-pop based on black music.” While some fans and scholars have characterized this relationship as a respectful and respectable “citational practice,” others have charged K-pop stars with cultural appropriation and outright racism. K-pop’s relationship with black American culture is fraught.

Swing Kids, by narrating the Korean War through the framework of tap dance, crafts an alternate history of K-pop’s relationship to black American culture. The film traces K-pop’s origins back to the institutional practices of the US military and the 8th Army Shows it created during and after the Korean War, and to a process of teaching and learning within a multiracial, multinational community. The coupling of Gisu and Jackson can be seen as an allegory of the origins of K-pop, by showing how tap dance, as a metonym for black music and dance more generally, became Korean. In this telling, Koreans didn’t steal black culture—it was gifted to them by a black American soldier. K-pop, refigured as a symbolic heir to tap, can now be seen as a product of the cosmopolitan emotional intimacy that the Korean War fostered.

With its final flashback dance number, Swing Kids rejects the official historical memory of the Kŏjedo camp and substitutes in its place a cosmopolitan K-pop genealogical narrative. Kŏjedo, and by extension the Korean War, is re-signified as a site where Koreans encountered and embraced black culture. The film reimagines the Korean War not as an unnatural severing of a unified nation but as an incubator of South Korea’s cultural power. This reading softens the film’s tragic ending. The cosmopolitanism cut short by the murder of the Swing Kids has been achieved today by K-pop bands like EXO, which embody South Korea’s new role as a global cultural powerhouse that indigenizes foreign culture and re-exports it across the world. While Gisu couldn’t tour America and perform before thousands of cheering admirers, D.O. certainly did.

Bibliography


About the Author

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