
Politics and Ecology on the Korean Left

Anti-Americanism and Environmental Dystopia in *The Host*

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Environmentalism in South Korea has long been associated with political leftism and its so-called *minjung* ideology, that is, constructed as oppositional to the pro-business, pro-United States and authoritarian Right associated with the country's post-war dictatorships. The resultant conflation of anti-Americanism and environmentalism has allowed the Korean Left to mobilize powerful folk-narratives of US crime — environmental, political and otherwise — in debates over the presence of US military bases. One such narrative, loosely based on the dumping of toxic chemicals into the Han River in Seoul, is central to the South Korean science fiction blockbuster *Gwoemul* (2006), the title of which literally translates as 'monster', although the film is known internationally as *The Host*. The film's monster embodies a *minjung* vision of the ecology of dystopian politics and the politics of ecological dystopianism. Despite director Bong Joon-Ho's claims

to the contrary,¹ *The Host* is saturated with politics, embodying a South Korean leftist critique in which pollution and environmentalism are conflated with and tied to the relationship between the Korean and US governments. The monster embodies the ideological conflation of a polluted ecology with a political ecology itself 'polluted' by US influence. *The Host's* overt investment in, and attempted resuscitation of, explicitly leftist politics and specifically 'magical' thinking regarding politics, environment and nation, rooted in the historical experience of the post-war development-era dictatorships, simply cannot be ignored.

Such historical analysis is necessary to understand not only the film's treatment of monstrous catastrophe, but also its popularity and influence in Korea, as part of a reaction to the Right's long-standing techno-developmental ideology, an equally science-fictional outgrowth of dictatorship era politics. The clash between these two forms of magical thinking — leftist politico-environmentalism and rightist techno-developmentalism — has become increasingly important to South Korean politics in recent years. This essay begins with an exploration of the political 'psycho geography' of the film's setting, proceeds to an examination of its explicitly and implicitly leftist representations of Korean historical and political experience, and then to an examination of how magical thinking on the Left and Right interact. This reading seeks not only to correct earlier, often woefully decontextualized, readings of the film, but also to examine the cultural and philosophical 'ecology' into which its symbolic monster was released, explaining how and why it thrived in that particular environment.

The Psycho geography of the Hangang

The Han River, *Hangang* in Korean, is the waterway from which the film's monster emerges and where most of the film's action occurs. To understand the political ecology of *The Host*, it is crucial to consider the river's psycho geographical significance for Korea in general and Seoul in particular. Despite running through only a small fraction of the country, the river's visible prominence in the capital city has led to it being widely used as a metonym for the Korean people and nation. In May 2006, for example, during a dispute between North and South Korean military delegation

1 J.H. Bong, 'Audio Commentary', *The Host: Collector's Edition*, Region 1 DVD, New York, Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2007.

leaders over interracial marriage, a Northerner charged the South with racial defilement through mail-order marriage, to which the Southern representative responded by 'dismissing such marriages as a mere "drop of ink in the Han River"'.²

Korea's rapid and supposedly miraculous industrialization has long been referred to as *Hangangeui Gijeok*, or 'The Miracle on the Han', a 'miracle' still invoked by rightists as justification for the excesses of post-war dictatorship. Yet the Han also evokes other divisions, since it bisects the sprawling capital both spatially and in terms of class, power and privilege: very broadly speaking, the north side of the river is far less privileged than the south. The Han River both symbolizes and also constitutes a real gap between South Korea's richer and poorer classes, a gap which has continued to widen since the economic crisis of 1997. Thus the ecological terrain of *The Host* is inextricably and immediately political, as in the first scene, for example, in which a white US officer in a Seoul USFK military base morgue orders a Korean subordinate to dump formaldehyde down the drain and into the Han. The toxification by the US military, and the apparent horror as the camera pulls back to reveal a vast collection of dusty bottles of toxic chemicals ready to be dumped, is resonant with symbolic significance. What does it mean then when this specifically US toxification eventually produces a horrific mutant monster that surges from the Han to ravage the general populace?

Most non-Korean viewers fail to realize the full significance of this scene, which is based on a mixture of fact and exaggerated activist legend.³ As Hsuan L. Hsu notes, it is 'based on an incident that occurred in 2000, when Albert McFarland, the U.S. military mortician at the Yongsan camp, ordered two assistants to dump about 80 litres of formaldehyde into a sewage system that drains into the Han River'.⁴ The incident 'outraged South Koreans and has often been cited by demonstrators protesting against U.S. military presence and by environmental activists'.⁵ Environmentalism in Korea has been linked to the democracy movement, and thus to the Korean Left, since the 1980s. According to Do-wan Ku, the Left has

2 B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves — And Why It Matters*, Brooklyn, Melville House, 2010, pp. 71–2.

3 For more on this urban legend's development, see 'GI Myths: The 2000 Yongsan Water Dumping Scandal', *GI Korea*, 18 March 2008, <<http://rokdrop.com/2008/03/18/gi-myths-the-2000-yongsan-water-dumping-scandal>>, accessed 11 April 2011.

4 H.L. Hsu, 'The Dangers of Biosecurity: *The Host* and the Geopolitics of Outbreak', *Jump Cut*, no. 51, Spring 2009, p. 3.

5 Hsu, 'The Dangers of Biosecurity', p. 1.

'positioned itself as a leading force of green politics, pursuing goals positive to preservation of the environment, life, and democracy'.⁶ It thus becomes difficult to disentangle environmentalist and leftist political agendas and concerns. The shadow of the McFarland case looms disproportionately large in Korean memory, despite dozens of other, more severe cases of pollution. In 2003, for example, it was alleged that twenty-nine different Korean timber companies had collectively dumped 271 tonnes of formalin — 'toxic' and 'cancer-causing' diluted formaldehyde — into 'streams feeding the Han River, the main source of drinking water for Seoul and Kyonggi Province', to which the relevant authorities were accused of having 'turned a blind eye'.⁷ So why does McFarland's eighty litres of formaldehyde serve as *The Host's* iconic image of environmental depredation? The reasons are political rather than environmental, bound up with national identity and history and with the idea of the *political* toxification of Korea by post-war US hegemonic power. This sensibility can only be understood by examining the historical period constantly invoked by the film, the 1980s.

***Minjok, Minjung* and Korean Political Ecology**

In the film, the character Hyun-seo is abducted by the monster, yet our first glimpse of her uncle, Nam-il, is not of his grief-stricken face, but rather of the *soju* bottle in his hand. Arriving drunk at his niece's funeral, he attacks his older brother, whom he blames for her disappearance, and rants about the futility of old struggles. For Koreans, Nam-il is immediately and clearly recognizable as a former democracy activist of the '386 generation'. According to Jinhee Choi:

The term '386', referring to the speed of an Intel computer chip, has been appropriated by the South Korean media to designate a generation — in their thirties when the term began to circulate — whose members were born in the 1960s and attended college in the 1980s ... a time when the South Korean people experienced painful political turmoil and trauma.⁸

6 D. Ku, 'The Korean Environmental Movement: Green Politics through Social Movement', *Korea Journal*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2004, <www.ekoreajournal.net/upload/html/HTML44038.html>, accessed 11 April 2011.

7 'Dumping of Toxic Chemicals Into Streams' (uncredited article), *The Korea Times*, 11 March 2003.

8 J. Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2010, p. 4.

The '386 generation' denotes a 'shared cultural and political proclivity' expected of Nam-il. His history in the pro-democracy movement is made explicit not only in this rant, but throughout the film: in his meeting with a now traitorous former friend and fellow protester and in his eventual use of soju-bottle Molotov cocktails as a weapon against the monster. For Korean audiences, Nam-il is the most apparent — though not the only — entry point into the politics of *The Host*, an important link to the anti-US environmentalism surrounding the McFarland case. Nam-il invokes not only the pro-democracy protest movement but also, if indirectly, the single most traumatic moment in the pro-democracy struggle, the Kwangju Massacre of May 1980.

An ideological shift between two constructions of national identity seems to have occurred in the wake of Kwangju. An earlier conception of nationalism, *minjok*, was based on the idea of ethno-nationalist identity produced during the Japanese occupation⁹ and elaborated by Korean thinkers such as Shin Chae'ho and Yi Kwangsu.¹⁰ The debates over whether a proto-*minjok* sensibility preceded its explicit conceptual formulation are less relevant here than Gi-Wook Shin's observation that during the dictatorships of Park Chung Hee and Rhee Syngman, this form of nationalism 'was extensively mobilized as a key resource for obtaining popular consent for authoritarian politics', thus effecting a 'poverty of liberalism'.¹¹ The dictatorship was facilitated not only by fears of the North Korean menace and repressive policies, but also by the promulgation of an ethno-nationalist identity that simultaneously enabled South Korean economic development and crippled its political development. By the 1970s, a widespread pro-democracy movement/ideology had arisen, particularly among students, which challenged the South Korean authorities. Movement and ideology alike were called *minjung* — a term best translated as 'the people', although with the connotation, as defined by the Korean philosopher Sin Ch'aeho, of 'the wretched majority — exploited, beaten, starved, lulled into subservience and obedience'.¹² This movement employed public performances of such traditional artforms as

9 H.H. Em, 'Minjok as a Modern and Democratic Construct: Sin Ch'aeho's Historiography', in Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (eds), *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, Cambridge, Harvard University Asia Center, 1999, pp. 337, 343–4.

10 G.W. Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 115.

11 Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*, pp. 108, 132–4.

12 Em, 'Minjok as a Modern and Democratic Construct', p. 360.

mask dances and traditional percussion music, as well as folk music singalongs, for the purposes of consciousness-raising and publicity.¹³

Until the mid 1980s, most pro-democracy activists 'considered the United States a friendly power, an ally of their democratization movements',¹⁴ partly because of its tangible military and economic aid during and after the Korean War, partly because of ubiquitous Cold War propaganda. This resulted in what Tim Shorrock called a 'deep, and ultimately tragic, belief on the part of Korean dissidents that the United States would side with the democratic movement against the military dictators'.¹⁵ In May 1980, a pro-democracy protest-turned-armed-insurrection in the southern city of Kwangju was brutally extinguished by the dictatorial Chun administration after being labelled a 'communist' incursion. The US government's failure to intervene and prevent the massacre — and its continued close ties with Chun — led to a widespread reconsideration of the United States' geopolitical position. In the 1980s,

Korean intellectuals and activists questioned their position vis-à-vis the United States and re-evaluated previous strategies that sought American support for their democratic movements. They began to argue that Korean democratization could not be obtained without national liberation from American hegemony.¹⁶

The change was to prove permanent. By 2002, anti-US sentiment in South Korea no longer remained marginal or leftist but had become utterly mainstream: polls across Asia revealed 'more critical attitudes towards America in South Korea than in any other Asian country — including Vietnam and Indonesia'.¹⁷ Anti-Americanism has today become a South Korean norm, in ways that have coloured popular Korean politics, from the hostile reception of Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech and responses to events involving the US military,¹⁸ through to massive demonstrations in Seoul over US beef imports during the summer of 2008.¹⁹

13 Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, p. 26.

14 Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*, p. 169.

15 Quoted in J. Lee, *Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age*, trans. K.S. Seol and N. Mamas, Los Angeles, UCLA Asia-Pacific Institution, 1999, p. 155.

16 Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*, pp. 169–170.

17 Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*, p. 176.

18 Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*, p. 176.

19 G. Sellar, 'How Candle Girl and V Took on 2MB', *Clarkesworld*, no. 25, October 2008, <http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/sellar_10_08>, accessed 11 April 2011; Hsu, 'The Dangers of Biosecurity', p. 3.

The conflation of US ecological and political ‘pollution’ of Korea — and Koreans’ perception of the United States as an occupying, neo-imperialist power — explains some of the internal logic of the McFarland mythology and much of *The Host*’s plot. However, many questions remain unanswered. If Nam-il is tied to, and in a sense represents, the 386 generation and the *minjung* movement, what does the monster represent? It is not, after all, a straightforward representation of the Chun and Park dictatorships, oppressors with rather more direct analogues in the film. The inept government, kowtowing to the United States and using its bioweapons in Seoul, is a general analogue, but there is also a far more concrete visual representation of the dictatorships when the character Gang-du, with hostage in tow, breaks out of the biomedical research trailer where a doctor plans to drill into his skull. He finds himself surrounded by a peculiar group of physicians, Americans in military garb and Koreans in suits, gathered together and enjoying an incongruous barbecue. What he is witnessing, in fact, is a figurative re-enactment of the apparent political reawakening of *minjung* consciousness after Kwangju, the barbecue as a revelation of the dark alliance of those who ‘poisoned the nation’, a complex network of Korean dictators and police and US military power.

Poisoning the River: The Dark Side of *Hangangeui Gijeok*

Discussing the US giant monster films that emulated *Godzilla*, Thomas Disch noted that their giant monsters were expressive not only of visceral horror, but also of the sublimation necessitated by ‘The national consensus ... of see no evil, hear no evil, say no evil’ during the ‘years of acquiescent silence’ after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Disch argues that these monsters embodied specifically *repressed* horror, since ‘Repressed materials tend to resurface in the form of nightmares — or, at the cultural level, as pulp fiction and B movies — in short, as sci fi ...’²⁰ That such repression was (and arguably remains) a major component of modern Korean politics and history is strongly suggested by the fact that most Korean science fiction cinema deals thematically with the trauma of historical memory. Central here is the ‘glorification of Park Chung Hee [that] began in the middle of the

20 T.M. Disch, *The Dreams our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered The World*, New York, Touchstone, 1998, pp. 79–81.

1990s', in what Werner Kamppeter terms the 'Park Chung Hee Syndrome'.²¹ Park still routinely scores highly on South Korean political opinion polls, praised for his planning, programs and economic achievements.²² This exalted status both stifled open criticism and necessitated a repression of memory and horror akin to that discussed by Disch.

While today it is fashionable to praise the 'Miracle on the Han', its darker and more painful side has been driven beneath the surface of historical memory, like a giant monster lurking in the sewage tunnels. The hidden costs to Korean society of its rapid modernization included the implicit shelving of feminist concerns and women's rights reforms, with continued sexist exploitation of women and the dismissal of reparation claims by 'comfort women' during the re-normalization of relations with Japan;²³ a general militarization that transformed 'the character of the whole nation';²⁴ and the habitual misuse of the National Security Law and the Korean Central Intelligence Agency to establish an effective surveillance state in which self-censorship prevented dissent and debate.²⁵ Bruce Cumings describes how 'Korean citizens believed that the best way to deal with the KCIA surveillance was "not to talk about anything to anybody"', even the members of one's family';²⁶ a situation reminiscent of Disch's comments on mid-twentieth-century US self-censorship. In the film, and under the influence of the 'Park Chung Hee Syndrome', these darker, repressed memories of the Miracle are driven underground, where their hidden monstrosity — and unspeakable horror, sorrow, anger and fear — remain hauntingly unspoken, albeit ultimately irrepressible.

Much of *The Host* now becomes suddenly clear: from the way the Korean government covers up the monster's existence; to the way the beast is allowed to ravage the Han River, symbolizing the Korean nation, while black-suited officials party with US soldiers; to the deployment of the US biotoxin Agent Yellow against protesters, in a scene that simultaneously mocks modern protesters

21 W. Kamppeter, 'Dictatorship, Democracy and Economic Regime: Reflections on the Experience of South Korea', *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, January 2008, pp. 1–2.

22 See, for example: 'Park Chung-hee Reforms Greatest Historic Achievement: Gallup Poll', (uncredited article), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 5 March 2008, <http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2008/03/05/2008030561010.html>, accessed 11 April 2011.

23 G. Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War*, New York, Norton, 1994, pp. 171–5; Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender*, trans. B. Yamamoto, Melbourne, Trans-Pacific Press, 2004, p. 71.

24 M.J. Seth, *Education Fever*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2002, p. 223.

25 Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*, p. 166.

26 Quoted in Lee, *Kwangju Diary*, p. 21.

and invokes Kwangju, while also connoting the Cold War alliance and South Korean involvement in Vietnam.²⁷ When martial law is applied near the Han, several scenes refer unmistakably to the horrors of modern Korean history. The mass funeral to mourn Hyeon-Seo is immediately reminiscent of mass funerals held at Kwangju, where children were indeed among the dead. The monster's voracious appetite — it consumes people at a horrific rate and leaves a ruined landscape in its wake — runs parallel to the experience of modernization and urbanization, which, following the IMF crisis of 1997–1998, has again become familiar to South Korea's 'decimated economy'.²⁸ The Korean Miracle had involved a similar consumption of underprivileged, oppressed individuals and families, a kind of organized metabolization of the *minjung*, a process often depicted in modern Korean literature²⁹ and represented in the film by Gang-du and his family. The poor were also the hardest hit by the post-1997 neo-liberal reforms.

The Korean (*Minjung*) Family Under Assault

Gang-du's family are representations of Sin's idealized *minjung*, the wretched majority exploited by both past monarchs and the Park regime. The family's relative poverty is immediately apparent: Gang-du and his father are street-food vendors, who sell beer and roasted squid in an area that resembles Yeouido, the urban island in the Han River where the Korean National Assembly Building stands. While Hyeon-seo and her father watch aunt Nam-ju compete in an archery competition, Gang-du shows his daughter his savings, a pathetic cup of coins with which he hopes to buy her a new mobile phone. Despite being present during the monster's horrendous first emergence from the river, and thus among the first Seoulites to discover its existence — in a crowd that, significantly, includes several South/Southeast Asian 'migrant workers', the closest equivalent in contemporary Korea to Sin's *minjung* — Gang-du fails to protect his daughter, so that she is finally abducted by

27 'Agent Yellow' clearly recalls not only Agent Orange, but also the Korean government's sending of troops to Vietnam for political reasons as well as a 'source of foreign exchange' — approximately US\$150 million 'at the height of the Vietnam War'. Hicks, *The Comfort Women*, p. 174.

28 Hsu, 'The Dangers of Biosecurity', p. 1.

29 See, for example, S.H. Cho, *The Dwarf (Nanjangiga Ssoalin Jageun Kong)*, trans. B. and J. Fulton, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006; and K.J. Yang, *A Distant and Beautiful Place (Wonmidong Saramdeul)*, trans. S.Y. Kim and J. Pickering, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2002.

the monster. Later, a sorrowful monologue from Gang-du's father reveals a familial tradition of neglect: his young son had to resort to 'doing *seo-ri*', a culturally acceptable kind of theft among the rural poor, engaged in by homeless children elsewhere in the film. At one level, this evokes the poverty endured by most Koreans during the post-war dictatorships and the later post-IMF economic struggles. At another, these recurring images of neglectful fathers evoke the problematic status of Korea's symbolic *national* paternity, articulated in the paternalist role of the presidency as defined by Park.

This negligence is mirrored in the government's treatment of Gang-du's family, in a society represented as utterly fractured, exploitative and devoid of community feeling: Gang-du's father must bankrupt himself in order to buy weapons for the monster-hunt; a bribe paid with his life savings, his cup of coins, is necessary to approach the river; and, instead of aiding the family, the military harass and hunt them until they are forced to split up. Monstrous threat is omnipresent, not just the monster itself, but also the government and military, fellow citizens and even 'friends' like the corrupted fellow ex-protester, who betrays Nam-il for monetary reward. Gang-du's emblematically *minjung* family is besieged on all sides. Eventually split up after their father's death at the hands of the monster, itself suggestive of Park's assassination by his own bodyguard, each individual family member makes a figurative journey both into the past and towards an awakened consciousness. Betrayed, Nam-il's disillusionment results in his rediscovery of the empowering possibilities of alliance, not with those who have turned their back on the *minjung*, but rather with those who still suffer that status, like the homeless, drunken man with whom he begins to turn *soju* bottles into Molotov cocktails. By returning figuratively to Kwangju, Nam-il rediscovers and reformulates *minjung* solidarity in terms appropriate to a post-IMF world.

His sister Nam-ju is a government bureaucrat, for many poor South Koreans a stable, hard-won 'dream job' with decent pay. Yet on first encounter, she is not working in an office, but suffering from a failure of nerve during a competitive archery match. Archery is no small thing in South Korea: at the time of the film's first release in 2006, Koreans had won every Olympic gold medal in individual women's archery since 1984.³⁰ Nam-ju's hesitation

30 'For Female Archers of South Korea, Perfection is Nothing New' (uncredited article), *The New York Times*, 10 July 2008, <www.nytimes.com/2008/07/10/sports/10iht-ARCHERS.1.14388866.html>, accessed 11 April 2011.

therefore suggests a more fundamental national failure of nerve, in a sport 'closely associated with ladies' in traditional Korea, but also long considered a Korean speciality by the Chinese.³¹ During Nam-ju's ensuing journey into the past, she ventures into the tunnels where the monster nests. Once immersed, figuratively, in Korea's subterranean, subconscious trauma, she begins to find her strength, so that her final, flaming arrow plays a crucial role in the chain of events leading to the monster's death. Hsuan's interpretation of the monster's impalement as a figurative masculine response to monstrous maternity³² overlooks the more politically significant, and attentively choreographed, *collective quality* of the attack on the monster. If any genitalia are symbolized here, it is only by way of Gang-du's rediscovery of his own 'manhood', as strengthened by community and familial collective action.

Hyun-seo, the abducted child, is more than a classic endangered child/virgin: she is also dressed in a particularly *Korean* schoolgirl uniform. As one blogger credibly argues, if there is one place in South Korea where the brutal autocracy of Park Chung-Hee still survives, it is in the schools.³³ Jinhee Choi notes that these are places of 'rigid hierarchy' and 'physical punishment' reminiscent of the dictatorships, which can also 'be viewed as a microcosm of Korean society ... as a site of unfulfilled desires and wishes, rather than a place of dreams and ambitions'.³⁴ Hyun-seo is, in this sense, still trapped within the worst aspects of Park's dystopian dictatorship. Yet in reality, for a girl of her background and age, conditions were much worse during the Miracle years. In the 1970s, '[p]rostitution was often the only employment available to young women, whether in their native homes or in Seoul; peasant families would survive by a daughter's wages sent back from the traffic in female bodies'.³⁵ Throughout the dictatorships, and with their implicit approval and support, these girls and women catered sexually to Korean men, Japanese 'gisaeng tourists' and US soldiers.³⁶ While wider employment opportunities have subsequently become

31 *Sajineuro Boneun Joseon Shidae Saenghwalgwa Pungsok (Yi — Dynasty through Pictures)*, (uncredited), vol. I, Seoul, Seomoondang, 1986, pp. 118–19.

32 Hsu, 'The Dangers of Biosecurity', p. 3.

33 M. Van Volkenburg, 'Yusin Lives On — At School'. *Gusts of Popular Feeling* (weblog), 13 November 2007, <<http://populargusts.blogspot.com/2007/11/yusin-lives-on-at-school.html>>, accessed 11 April 2011.

34 Choi, *The South Korean Film Renaissance*, p. 143.

35 Cumings, quoted in Lee, *Kwangju Diary*, p. 20.

36 A topic discussed throughout K.H.S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.–Korean Relations*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997.

available, the sex trade — estimated to account for a little over 4 per cent of GDP in 2004 — remains a significant employer of South Korean women, especially among the underprivileged and under-educated, and especially in the post-IMF era.³⁷

The isolation of female Korean sex workers from their families, along with the work's inherent dangers, lends a harrowing edge to Hyeon-seo's terrifying abduction and captivity. If the monster's mouth *is* suggestive of female genitalia, as Hsuan argues,³⁸ then it suggests less *maternity* than the voraciousness with which the Korean sex trade fed on poverty, consuming innumerable young women and girls through the Miracle years and into the present. *The Host's* dystopianism richly invokes the real-life dystopian experience of South Koreans, the film's core family functioning as an emblem of Korea's most vulnerable class. The resuscitation of class consciousness, according to the neo-*minjung* logic of the film, is Korea's last, best and perhaps only hope for overcoming the recurring dystopian nightmare of political and ecological pollution by the domestic authoritarians and their US allies.

Contagion, Robot Fish and Magical Thinking

We should note that despite the peripheral nature of science fiction to Korea, the dialectics deployed in *The Host* have broken into mainstream political culture. The 2008 US beef protests are particularly illustrative of how conventional the conflation of political and ecological pollution has now become. Attacking the policies of then recently elected President Lee Myung-bak, the protests ranged beyond the immediate issue to include matters such as the privatization of water and the controversial, transpeninsular Grand Canal construction project. The demonstrations were timed for the twenty-first anniversary of those in 1987 that had forced the Chun dictatorship to concede to demands for democratization,³⁹ purposely locating contemporary concerns — ecological, political and economic — within a historico-political background, in ways that set *minjok* rightist dystopia against *minjung* leftist utopia.

37 B. Lee, 'Commercial Sex Survives Despite Crackdown', *The JoongAng Daily*, 16 March 2009, <<http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2902258>>, accessed 11 April 2011; T. Henheffer, 'South Korea Takes on Prostitution', *MacLean's*, 18 February 2010, <www2.macleans.ca/2010/02/18/south-korea-takes-on-prostitution>, accessed 11 April 2011.

38 Hsu, 'The Dangers of Biosecurity', p. 3.

39 L. Lewis, 'South Korean Government of Lee Myung Bak in Meltdown', *The Times*, 11 June 2008, <www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4106831.ece>, accessed 11 April 2011.

The primary mythology of the demonstrations centred on the image of a specifically US contagion, a variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, or Mad Cow Disease, delivered to South Korea as prions hidden in imported beef.⁴⁰ This image of biological contamination tied to the political contamination of complicity between the Korean Right and the United States⁴¹ is an example of what Roger Luckhurst calls 'magical thinking' and is connected, deeply and elementally, to grief. He writes that although 'modernity has defined its rationality through the suppression of magical thought', which is 'aligned to the primitive and the child', critical theorists have been constantly 'perplexed by the brute persistence of magical thinking into the heart of modernity'.⁴² Luckhurst notes Giddens's observation of the 'sequestration of experience', which forms a protective, yet fragile, cocoon around modern people, but also leaves them especially susceptible, since they lack 'the psychic and social resources to cope' with death or other trauma. Charles Taylor argues that by puncturing this 'protective sphere', such traumas 'return us instantly to the pre-modern self which is "porous", and thus open to all kinds of belief in occult transmissions and sympathetic magic', finally suggesting that bereavement, rape, war and family abuse can all open us up to magical thinking.⁴³ This is pertinent for two reasons: first, because of the cognitive dissonance between post-war Korea's historical trauma and the 'Park Chung-Hee Syndrome' which represses it; second, because this particular form of magical thinking seems to pervade South Korean mainstream public political discourse. Thus it is hardly surprising that the anti-dystopian *minjung* movement, 'a nativist reaction to the rapid change brought about by industrialization and integration of South Korea into the world economy', subsequently 'looked to Korean folk traditions such as shamanism for inspiration',⁴⁴ just as the modern Korean Left has 'magically' intertwined narratives of pathogenic or ecological bio-contamination (and dystopian predictions of devastation) with its preferred political narratives.

The controversial Four Rivers Restoration Project, a large-scale dredging and construction plan to harness the country's major

40 Sellar, 'How Candle Girl and V Took on 2MB'.

41 Demonstration participants considered the Korean 'race' especially vulnerable to this contagion, a conception that makes more sense within Korean racial-nationalist ideology. See Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*, pp. 36–7 and Seth, *Education Fever*, pp. 55–9.

42 R. Luckhurst, 'Reflections on Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*', *New Formations*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2009, p. 96.

43 R. Luckhurst, 'Reflections on Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*', p. 98–9.

44 Seth, *Education Fever*, p. 226.

rivers with dams and reservoirs, is widely considered by the public and at least one expert as a rebranding of the earlier Grand Canal Project plan.⁴⁵ The project was opposed by environmentalists both in Korea and abroad,⁴⁶ and Lee announced its cancellation in response to protests.⁴⁷ Yet by late 2008, his administration was promoting a second Four Rivers project, alternately characterized as 'maintenance' or 'saving' the rivers, before the terms 'restoration' and 'improvement' were finally settled upon. The resulting environmentalist debate, repeatedly referring to earlier environmentally damaging construction projects, has framed the issue in terms eerily reminiscent of *The Host's* neo-*minjung* dystopian environmentalism, thus emphasizing the dichotomy between a utopian vision of the preservation of the eco-cultural past and a horrific alternative future of ecological depredation through modern technocratic construction. The Lee administration's response, which initially focused on how the project 'would boost the economy' and create jobs,⁴⁸ had shifted by June 2009 to emphasize preparation for climate change, sponsorship of green growth and harmonious balance between humans and the environment.⁴⁹ The project was thus recontextualized as part of a 'Green New Deal', despite claims by environmentalists and river restoration experts that ongoing construction projects bore no resemblance to river restoration,⁵⁰ and subsequent accusations of 'greenwashing'.⁵¹

More interesting is the poetic status given to technology in the Right's new rhetoric of green development. In September 2009, President Lee responded to fears of environmental pollution in the affected waterways by suggesting the use of robotic fish to monitor water quality, spurring a major research and development project worth six billion won.⁵² The suggestion is by no means completely

45 J.S. Bae, 'Whistleblower Criticizes Canal Project', *The Korea Times*, 25 May 2008.

46 J.S. Bae, 'Int'l Group Campaign against Canal Project', *The Korea Times*, 7 March 2008.

47 J. Card, 'Korea's Four Rivers Project: Economic Boost or Boondoggle?', *Environment* 360, 21 September 2009, <<http://e360.yale.edu/content/feature.msp?id=2188>>, accessed 11 April 2011.

48 Bae, 'Whistleblower Criticizes Canal Project'.

49 'Gov't Releases Master Plan for Four Rivers Project' (uncredited article), *Korea IT Times*, 9 June 2009, <<http://www.koreaitimes.com/story/3775/gov't-releases-master-plan-four-rivers-project>>, accessed 11 April 2011.

50 J. Card, 'Korea's Four Rivers Project'; Joo-hee Park, 'Japanese Experts Say Four Rivers Sites Resemble Canal Construction', *The Hankyoreh*, 10 July 2010, <http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/429771.html>.

51 M. McNally, 'Korea's Grand Plan: Dams and Canals to Restore Ecosystems', *International Rivers* (website), 18 September 2009, <<http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/4636>>, accessed 11 April 2011.

52 'S. Korea to Develop Robot Fish to Monitor River Conditions' (uncredited article), *Yonhap News Agency*, 24 June 2010, <<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/techscience/2010/06/24/49/0610100000AEN20100624007300320F.html>>, accessed 11 April 2011; 'Korean Researchers



'Corruption Detector Malfunction'
(uncredited), *The Hankyoreh*,
8 December 2009



'Robocop in Sejong city?'
(uncredited), *The Hankyoreh*,
1 December 2009

far-fetched — several major research projects exist worldwide, including at MIT and the University of Essex⁵³ — but caricaturists at the leftist *Hankyoreh* newspaper were quick to satirize the idea with automated fish failing to detect *political* corruption, or being used alongside Robocop to patrol the controversial Sejong City special administrative district.⁵⁴ We might note here that the South Korean government has a bizarre track record in the planning and implementation of robotics. Consider, for example, the widespread failure of English-teaching robots intended to alleviate a shortage of English teachers and tested in schools in 2010⁵⁵ or, still more spectacular, the Ministry of Information and Communication's dubious projection that 'every South Korean household will have a robot by between 2015 and 2020'.⁵⁶ More important than the literal intentions of these technotopian fantasies is the mythopoeic resonance of robotics in rightist Korean techno-developmental nationalism, a

Develop Robot Fish' (uncredited article), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 3 September 2009, <http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/09/03/2009090300920.html>, accessed 11 April 2011.

- 53 A. Trafton, 'Fish and Chips', *MIT News*, 24 August 2009, <<http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice/2009/robo-fish-0824.html>>, accessed 11 April 2011; S. Knapton, 'Robotic Fish Are Latest Weapon in Fight against Water Pollution', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 March 2009, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/5012345/Robotic-fish-are-latest-weapon-in-fight-against-water-pollution.html>>, accessed 11 April 2011.
- 54 'Corruption Detector Malfunction', *The Hankyoreh*, 8 December 2009, <http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_entertainment/392118.html>, accessed 11 April 2011; 'Robocop in Sejong City?', *The Hankyoreh*, 1 December 2009, <http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_entertainment/390778.html>, accessed 11 April 2011.
- 55 S.H. Choe, 'Teaching Machine Sticks to Script in South Korea', *The New York Times*, 9 July 2010, <www.nytimes.com/2010/07/11/science/11robotside.html>, accessed 11 April 2011.
- 56 'Robotic Age Poses Ethical Dilemma' (uncredited article), *BBC News*, 7 March 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6425927.stm>>, accessed 11 April 2011.

fetish with a history stretching back at least to the 1980s *Robo-Taekwon V* film series.⁵⁷ The significance of this robofetishism is not so much a matter of its possible implementation as of its role as a trope within the Right's conceptions of development. These are still rooted in the propaganda and agenda of the Park dictatorship, when technological and economic development were constituted as the central and unquestionable 'historic mission' defining every individual citizen's 'duty'.⁵⁸

One apparent danger is that, as with US-Korean relations, the Left will move beyond neo-pastoral utopianism to decry technological development itself as inherently dystopian, just as the Right has long decried environmentalism as inherently leftist, or even communist. In this context, magical thinking will serve only to muddy the waters, making straightforward bipartisan discussion of the country's environmental concerns, political history and technological and economic prospects much more difficult. Whatever poisons have saturated the South Korean political ecology, they have given rise to a much more dangerous monster than that represented in *The Host*, a two-headed beast cursed with clouded vision and unable to see where it is going.

57 A.H.J. Magnan-Park, 'Our Toys, Our Selves: Robo Taekwon V and South Korean Identity' (lecture), *The Korea Society*, 7 February 2008, MP3 available online, <www.koreasociety.org/dmdocuments/2008-3-25-park-taekwonv.mp3>, accessed 11 April 2011.

58 Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*, p. 106.