



False Redemption—The Narrative Pattern of Korean Art Cinema

Song Xu Bai*

Pan Tianshou College of Architecture, Art and Design, Ningbo University, Ningbo, China

Korean art cinema has an undeniable *han* favor, which is considered scholarly as the most characteristic aesthetic category of Korea. The iconic auteurs who pushed Korean brands to the international stages, such as Park Chan-wook, Kim Ki-duk, and Lee Chang Dong, did not only gain their fame with their *han* films, but also prompted the dominated style, which is the *han* motif. This article extracted the common narrative pattern of the internationally acclaimed Korean art films by comparing and reading the films under the assumed pattern of false redemption. The parallel Christian redemption is a good supplement for the better understanding of false redemption. The false redemption is the most popular and effective pattern for expressing the *han* motif.

Keywords: Korean art cinema, *han*, false redemption, art film, Lee Chang Dong, Kim Ki-duk, Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho

INTRODUCTION

Korean art cinema has reached an unprecedented level of success. The dominance of Korean film in its own domestic market is an extraordinary cultural triumph, one shared with few other national cinemas—namely China, France, India, Japan, and the United States (Yecies and Shim, 2011). Once this domestic mainstream becomes more dominant, the notion of a Korean art cinema starts to become more viable (Raymond, 2018). The art film auteurs have more influence and market success both domestically and internationally than do mainstream directors. A noteworthy feature of Korean art cinema is a strong awareness of *han*, which can be defined as mixed feelings of sorrow, resentment, pain, and anger. Works by prominent figures, such as Park Chan-wook and Kim Ki-duk portray the unique Korean concept of *han* skillfully. As a Nietzschean cinema of resentment, Kim's films derive their vitality and momentum from raw emotions, such as angst, frustration, envy, and resentment—emotions felt and exhibited by disenfranchised individuals ill-equipped to survive in an ultra-competitive society where exclusive college connections or family networks are prerequisites for upward mobility (Chung, 2010). For example, the graphic and brutal mutilation of the flesh of female characters, which is often criticized by Korean feminists, is a unique motif that Kim Ki-duk uses to give a voice to the oppressed by using strong *han* emotions. When viewing the play *The Trojan Women: An Asian Story* (2007), Elizabeth W. Son immediately recognized that the knots that strangled the female pansori (Korean traditional opera) performers' necks signified *han*: A knotted feeling of resentment, sorrow, anger, and injustice accumulated over time from experiences of hardship and oppression. . . The braided white cloth signified to me the accumulation of *han* (Son, 2016).

According to Jung-Soon Shim, *han* is an aesthetic principle that is widely used in the Korean narrative.

Han is considered the most remarkable emotion and aesthetic category of the Korean nation, but was mentioned for the first time in Kim Dong-ri's article published in 1948. It is very difficult to translate *han* with one word. *Han* is a difficult-to-translate yet

OPEN ACCESS

Edited by:

Diyako Rahmani,
Massey University, New Zealand

Reviewed by:

Luming Zhao,
Peking University, China
Murat Akser,
Ulster University, United Kingdom

*Correspondence:

Song Xu Bai
baisongxu@nbu.edu.cn

Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Culture and Communication,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Communication

Received: 27 August 2021

Accepted: 28 January 2022

Published: 09 March 2022

Citation:

Bai SX (2022) False Redemption—The
Narrative Pattern of Korean Art
Cinema. *Front. Commun.* 7:753933.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2022.753933

crucial psychocultural concept in the Korean history and culture (Boman, 2020). It is believed to be a sense of multiple feelings (e.g., resentment, pain, grief, and anger) generated from various aspects of the Korean history and culture. *Han* is an essentialist Korean sociocultural concept that is popularly understood as a uniquely Korean collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief, and anger. One of the most famous Korean novelist Park Kyong-ni addressed that *han* is often described as running in the blood of all Koreans, and the quality of Korean sorrow as being different from anything Westerners have experienced or can understand (Kim, 2017). Elaine Kim holds the same understanding of *han*. *Han* is a Korean word that means, loosely translated, the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression (Kim, 1993). Shim states that *han* is part of Korea's national ethos, which is traditionally associated with negative emotions, such as frustrated desire, resentment, regret, and a sense of loss and sorrow (Shim, 2009).

Fu Tian Jiao from Yanbian University comprehensively explained the vital position of *han* culture in Korea in her doctoral dissertation. The Korean people had deeper and more intense resentment in their minds, but they also have the wisdom to dissolve resentment... Cheon I-du's *Korean Literature and Han* is one of the representative works of early studies on *han*... First, the author confirmed that *han* is the most characteristic aesthetic category of Korea...through the interpretation of *han*, we can reflect on the problem of "what is the bottom homogeneity of our literature." (Fu, 2013).

In many film genres, a sense of resentment or sorrow is not uncommon. For example, in patriotic war films, a sense of resentment is an impetus for praise and hope. In superhero films, a sense of grief and resentment rationalizes a character's final act of revenge. An awareness of *han* is highly prevalent in the Korean cinema, such as in the themes of art films. *Han* is the motif of *The Vengeance Trilogy*¹ by Park Chan-wook. It is prevalent in the realism of Lee Chang Dong and is embodied by the distorted souls in the work of Kim Ki-duk. This motif has helped Korean auteurs achieve domestic success and has brought their works to the international stage.

South Korea is like a golden mine of subjects with the capability to carry the sophisticated sense of sorrow, repression, and desire. Struggling figures in Korean films, such as laborers, sex workers, unemployed people, drug addicts, gangsters, and people in debt, are common in the Korean society. Lee Chang Dong excels at creating sentimental stories involving bitter characters. Choo Sun-hee, the former editor of *Cine21* concluded, "although Lee Chang Dong has made only six films in his 20-year film career, the characters in his films have formed a collective image of men, women, and children in South Korean society for nearly half a century" (Fan, 2018). Kim Ki-duk's characters are even surrealistic: Kim's films are propelled by underdog protagonists—socially marginalized and oppressed subalterns, such as homeless people, thugs, prostitutes, camptown residents, Amerasians, the disabled, inmates, and so on, whose only means of communicating their resentment is a shared sense

of corporeal pain resulting from sadistic or masochistic acts of violence (Chung, 2010). Undoubtedly, the *han* motif conveyed by such realistic characters is attractive to cinephiles.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study examined two concepts. The first is the pattern of false redemption, which is external to *han*; therefore, any exploration thereof should focus on *han*. The second concept is the structure, which is combined with elements and processes related to the pattern of false redemption. False redemption is related to Christian redemption. As the purpose of these two types of redemption are only different, the pattern of false redemption can be explored by referring to the Christian redemption.

Once the pattern of false redemption and the structure are confirmed, the method for the study is to import the pattern and the structure into the selected films for reinterpretation. The entire reinterpretation process validated aesthetic expectations of *han*.

The Concept of False Redemption

The use of the word "redemption" in this article must be explained. Three words with similar meanings were considered: "redemption," "atonement," and "salvation." These words are widely used in Christian contexts, and because Christian concepts are widely applied in Korean films, the Christian interpretation of these words aids our understanding of false redemption in this research context. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word redeem, which is the act of redemption, has the meaning of "buying back" and "freeing from harms or debts." Similarly, in this article, this paper focuses on retrieving and restoring an ideal status or destination through various means. In the Bible, redemption relates to retrieve lives or property through certain methods. People can retrieve freedom through financial means: they retain the right of redemption after they have sold themselves. One of their relatives may redeem them (Leviticus: 25, Leviticus: 25:48). Redemption is provided by the almighty power. He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever-holy and awesome is his name (Psalms: 111, Psalms: 111:9). Jesus is the ransom the almighty God offered to his people for retrieving righteousness. I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John: 14, John: 14:6).

In this context, redemption is offered by a higher power. Atonement is commonly understood as payment or compensation for sins or damages; in the Bible, the act of atonement is generally related to offerings: You have to lay your hands on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you (Leviticus: 1, Leviticus: 1:4). Atonement is an act performed by people in debt, not by a higher power. Salvation provides relief from debt, sins, or troubles; it is the purpose of redemption and atonement.

False redemption is ostensibly the opposite of redemption in Christian contexts. Lee Chang Dong's films can be examined to understand these two different perspectives of redemption. It is widely known that the result of Christian redemption is reconciliation with God and victory over the Devil. Another

¹*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (*Boksuneun Naui Geot*, 2002), *Oldboy* (*Oldeuboi*, 2003), and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (*Chinjeolhan Geumjassi*, 2005).

outcome is a believer being saved from a sinful world. Christianity has been portrayed in a negative light in all of Lee's films, from the adulterous priests in *Green Fish* (Chorok Mulkogi, 1997) and *Secret Sunshine* (Milyang, 2007) to the mechanical prayers in *Oasis* (Oasiseu, 2002) and *Poet* (Shi, 2010), the hypocritical religious wife in *Peppermint Candy* (Bakha Satang, 1999), and the Catholic mass that the upper-class criminal attended in *Burning* (Beoning, 2018).

According to Lee, neither he nor the Christian community in Korea consider his films anti-Christian; Christianity is simply a tool that helped Lee build his characters and their situations: "Many priests told their congregation to go watch this movie (*Secret Sunshine*), and many discussed it in their sermons. One priest even wrote a book about *Secret Sunshine*. Many Christians do not consider the film to be anti-Christian. Me, I believe it is not about Christianity but about human beings" (Vijin, 2011).

Lee Chang Dong is repulsed by fundamentalism, which he claimed was the main movement among Korean Christian communities because of the influence of American evangelists. This explains the negative images of Christianity in his films.

Elements related to the pattern of false redemption are vital for examining the expression of the *han* motif in Lee's films. The purpose of Christian redemption is to win, whereas the purpose of redemption in the Korean cinema is to lure believers to fall. The first element of redemption is its context, which is one of suffering and wickedness. After Adam and Eve were deceived by the Devil, the land was cursed, and their sinful minds were passed on to their descendants. As indicated in the Book of Genesis: Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways (Genesis 6:11-12). The second element of redemption is the will of the ruler; in the context of Christianity, God loves humans and wishes to redeem them from suffering and death. The third element is the method of redemption; unlike in other religions, in a Christian context, redemption is achieved through a single solemn declaration of acceptance of the grace. Sacrifices take the form of atonement offerings in the Old Testament and the ultimate offering of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The final element of redemption is the destination or result; whoever believes the gospel of Christ is promised to avoid the lake of fire and live eternally in heaven. In their life on earth, believers who have redemption are more likely to overcome challenges because of the spiritual hope in their hearts: may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans: 15, Romans: 15:13).

These four elements are relevant to false redemption in the Korean art cinema, especially in the context of the *han* motif. In the context of false redemption, a ruler must be defined in contrast to God in Christianity. Thus, the will of the ruler can be easily understood and used to interpret Korean art films. Kim Chiba focuses on the deep negativity of *han*, even describing it as "a people-eating monster." For Kim, *han* is a "ghostly creature" that "appears as a concrete substance with enormous ugly and evil energy." (Kim, 2017) The will of the ruler can be considered as an aesthetic ideology in Korean art films with the *han* motif; the will of the ruler is the invisible hand that drives these characters and leads these films' plots. This will is optimally interpreted in

Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring (Bom Yeoreum Gaeul Gyeoul Geurigo Bom, 2003). As Francisca asserted, Kim Ki-duk's oppressed characters are forced to remain mute but are eager to express their anger silently. Im's (Im Kwontae) Buddhism privileges the Korean national identity above all else. The sorrows depicted in *Spring* (*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring*), in contrast, are insistently generic, as depicted by characters who lack even distinguishing names and who persist in a broader universe of inexorable patterns (Cho, 2014).

Kim Ki-duk delicately explained the worldview of the *han* motif in a Buddhist context. The mountain-top perspective of the statue of Bodhisattva Guanyin in *Spring*, as explained by Cho Francisca, has the same aesthetic tendency as Chinese landscape paintings; humans are positioned on a small scale by contrast with the natural world and universe as a whole. The cycles of seasons and lives in the film relate to the pattern of false redemption; the motif of *han* is thus illustrated. The first component of this worldview, which is delivered through the above-mentioned cycles, is the cruelty of the world. The second is an appreciative attitude toward the world; the monk eventually finds peace through the unconditional acceptance of his position in the ever-monstrous world. The third component is the will of the ruler; in the image of Bodhisattva Guanyin, the ruler offers no salvation or sympathy but looks down upon the suffering of people. As Cho explained in her article, Bodhisattva Guanyin is "the one who looks down upon the cries of the world... This is precisely what Guanyin does in the film's final shot, signifying that everything below is encompassed within the bodhisattva's vision" (Cho, 2014). Kim not only depicts the merciless ruler but also conveys the nature of the will of the ruler through the attitudes of the film's leading characters. Such a ruler, who is the opposite of a God of great love and mercy, expresses the *han* motif consistently in Korean art films.

Lee Chang Dong's Christian theme is powerfully demonstrated in *Secret Sunshine*, where the ruling arbiter of the world is a cruel one, unlike the compassionate Christian God. Lee Shine Ae desires a rebirth so that she can avoid the Confucian coercion of women. The will of the ruler was to force Lee Shine Ae to adopt the mercilessness of her world. Lee was most relentless in forging false redeeming ways; the benign villagers, the vanity of the lies about her wealth, and the highest redemption from Jesus deceived her into believing in and pursuing a salvation that did not exist. The fall of a freshly cleansed soul is a spectacle for cinephiles. Numerous auteurs have eulogized depravity by shattering the idea of Christian redemption. As Wang Wan Yao asserted, the absence of God is common in Korean films. Although these films present Christian images on the screen (images of God, Jesus Christ, priests, Christians, and churches frequently appear in these films), the main motif of those films is always related to the Confucian ethics of the modern world; God is nowhere to be found (Wang, 2012).

When viewers have an in-depth understanding of the will of the ruler and aesthetic expectations, the pattern of false redemption is more dominant in interpretations of Korean art films. The pattern's function was analyzed in the context of selected award-winning films from Kim Ki-duk, Lee

Chang Dong, Park Chan-wook, and Bong Joon Ho. *Address Unknown* (Suchwiin Bulmyeong, Kim Ki-duk, 2001) is a valuable foundation for understanding the *han* motif because of the film's implicit expression of the anger and agony of disenfranchised people through cruel corporal mutilation, the characters in those films cut their own flesh in various forms. In Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*, self-righteous characters illustrate false redemption through their perseverance in felling their adversaries. The struggling characters in realist works, such as *Burning* and *Secret Sunshine* let the audience bear witness to inevitable obliteration in the context of hegemonic coercion and false redemption; no glimmer of hope is evident. In Bong Joon Ho's Oscar-winning *Mother* (Madeo, 2009), the *han* motif runs through an intense plot involving the pursuit of false redemption. In the context of the neo-Confucianism of East Asia, the film's narrative is valuable source material for an in-depth study of the ideological provenance of a preference toward *han*. The controversial ending of *Parasite* (Gisaengchung, Bong Joon Ho, 2019) and the unusual motif of *Jesus Hospital* (Ming Keu Ko Teu, Lee Sang Cheol, and Shin Ah Ga, 2011) have led some scholars to propose hypotheses related to a new aesthetic tendency in the Korean art cinema.

PROCEDURE

Interpretation of Selected Films Through the Pattern of False Redemption Kim Ki-duk's Humanistic Worldview

The most remarkable features of *Address Unknown* are its strong allegorical characters and symbols, the wooden gun made from the US army ammunition box, and the cries of the characters, are representatives of the agony of the deprivation of national sovereignty and dignity. As M. J. Bowles argues, "Ressentiment in fact marks the potentiality of a tremendous energy source... To exploit human ressentiment is something of an art" (Bowles, 2003).

The film has three main characters. Chang-guk represents the direct victims of the Korean War. The era's chauvinism lead Eun-ok, a woman, to be manipulated, humiliated, and bullied by characters from Korea and the United States. Ji-hum suffers from the similar fate of being bullied by the thugs from both sides, despite his relatively high social status.

On the basis of the concept of national inferiority, false redemption provokes these three characters to resist their positions, but paralyzes others in the same environment. Chang-guk was disappointed with his marginal status as an Amerasian individual. He was sick of his mother (a delirious G.I. sex worker) and his dark skin. He resented being bullied by his butcher boss, and he longed for a father figure. Eun-ok was accidentally blinded in one eye by her brother when she was young, and the tragedy deprived her of the most important value, beauty, in a society that objectifies women. She was abandoned and became the prey of molesters, the American soldier, Chang-guk, and Ji-hum. Ji-hum's privileged status does not spare him the misery of the world; he had to face the cruel fact that Eun-ok, a girl for whom he has unrequited love, was defiled by the Korean hooligans and a

repulsive soldier James. The will of the ruler was to obliterate the three main characters, Chang-guk, Eun-ok and Ji-hum. Although all characters have positives in life, the lord of *han* can always helm them on the course to misery. The chosen poor souls express their rage and resentment in different forms on their journey toward false redemption, in a form of *banzai*² act, which is a concept that combines acknowledging failure and refusing to tolerate it. Due to Chang-guk's dark skin, Eun-ok's blindness in one eye, and Ji-hum's cowardliness, each of them was bullied by fellow workers, children, and thugs. *Banzai* was the answer to their suffering that the ruler offered. Brutal mutilation brought false redemption to its destructive climax. Chang-guk resisted his boss for the last time and killed him in an approach he used to slaughter dogs. Then, he ended his own life by plunging himself into farmland, with his upper body buried in the mud declaring his resentfulness of his identity. Eun-ok cut her healed eye for refusing the favor from the US soldier, even after she offered her body. She completed the portrayal of passive female suffering. Ji-hum's last moment of masculinity was a trap that lured him to inevitable catastrophe. He shot the Korean thugs who raped Eun-ok and the James with arrows and plotted to strangle one of the rapists in the cell. Though Ji-hum's brave acts only had bars between him and the already ruined Eun-ok. The self-inflicted flesh mutilation similar to that of Eun-ok, is Kim Ki-duk's typical demonstration of the anger from the oppressed figures. Eun-ok's eye-knifing is a symbolic act of "speaking back" to the cruelty of the physical and mental violence committed by US military personnel against countless Korean women during and after the Korean War (Chung, 2010).

The other villagers excluded from false redemption had no aversion to the same environment; nevertheless, each had their own troubles. The Korean thugs enjoyed the United States adult magazines and bullying others. Eun-ok's lazy brother never felt embarrassed for depending on his mother. The elders in the village, especially Ji-hum's honorable veteran father, had no disappointment over the shameful situation of their country, and they pursued a life of archery and bragging. The three above-mentioned characters had bright sides to their lives; the factory boss was a warmhearted person who did not discriminate against Chang-guk and appreciated his work. Eun-ok was loved by Ji-hum unconditionally, and Ji-hum would have had a promising life had he been able to ignore the thugs and the love to Eun-ok. In general, the film's allegorical nature as well as its portrayal of hegemony, misogyny, and masochism, further the theme of false redemption under a formidable ruler.

Lee Chang Dong's Realistic Struggle

The latest film of Lee Chang Dong—*Burning*, is the highest rated film in the history of Screen International's Cannes jury grid, alongside the numerous other accolades around the world. It also focuses on three characters with different social statuses. *Burning* presents the same sick and merciless world as that in Kim Ki-duk's cycle of seasons in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring*. As always, Lee's characters have realistic

²Meaning a Japanese cheer or war cry in the dictionary, but *Banzai* also means the will of self-destruction as a form of demonstration or petition.

attributes; all three characters are the victims of different forms of burning, it is because they unanimously acknowledged the twisted values of the post-IMF era³. According to Wagner's study, Korea's middle and working classes who are known for their conspicuous consumption and mounting debt to follow the trends of an upper-class (Wagner, 2016). Admiration of the upper class created a situation of false redemption for all three characters, Jeong Su, Hae-mi, and Ben⁴. Jeong Su's feelings of being threatened by Ben's undeserved wealthy life were due to his admiration of financial riches. For the same reason, Hae-mi has credit card debt she cannot pay, and her mother cares only about this debt. The elite Ben is obsessed with the cruel interests of the upper-class; he holds delusions about the privilege of overriding the rights and financial status of lower classes.

The will of the ruler attracts all these characters to the furnace. For Jeong Su, false redemption manifests in his irritation toward the conflict between his menial life and the arrogance of the rich. Economic hardship creates resentment, especially among Korean audiences; as Wagner pointed out, sorrow is often linked to lost opportunities for financial success and affluent partners in the neoliberal era rather than earlier forms of cinema from Korea's developmental era that allegorized, in oblique ways, the sacrifice of democracy and human rights to uphold the second phase of Korean capitalism (Wagner, 2016).

Boman stated that Jeong Su can transcend their resentment if the main character kills their adversary (Boman, 2020). The method of the crescendo agony and rancor worked perfectly in stimulating Jeong Su to believe that killing Ben is the cure for his pain. Ben holds the delusional belief that his interests are legitimate. The money-worshipping society tricks neoliberal royals⁴, such as Ben into believing in their dominant position in the world. Such faith brings wicked joys from abusing the lower classes; Ben was addicted to meting out such abuse. Fatal risks arise when the institution of class is burned by the oppressed, which are represented by Jeong Su in this film. Hae-mi is a character similar to Kim Yong Ho in *Peppermint Candy*; both have fallen from having once-vigorous lives. Viewers see the tortured and withered Hae-mi and Kim, both of whom acknowledge their doomed fates but occasionally express sadness.

Guided by the *han* motif, these three characters' arcs converge through different forms of burning. Ben was stabbed and burned in his Porsche, Jeong Su committed murder and burned his clothes as a manifestation of throwing away his future at a young age, and Hae-mi represented the feeblest members of society. As depicted in *American Psycho* (Harron, 2000), which depicts a superficial society where no one cares about anyone else, lives

can be easily forgotten or neglected. Hae-mi disappeared without a trace. As Boman concluded, the manifestations of the *han* element in *Burning* are associated with Jong-su's resentment and rancor toward Ben and the beautiful sorrow of Hae-mi (Boman, 2020).

Park Chan-wook's Self-Righteous Traps

A Grand Prix winner at Cannes Film Festival, *Oldboy* (*Oldeuboi*, 2003) is the most critically acclaimed film in Park Chan-wook's Vengeance Trilogy. It expresses the power of *han* through unrealistic and sarcastic characters. Park's *han* is stronger and more authentic than that expressed in Spike Lee's remake. Spike's portrayal of the film's incestuous relationship did not have the *han* element that motivated Park's portrayal of incest. *Oldboy*'s characters were motivated by tremendous trauma (e.g., Lee Woo-jin's loss of a lover and the deprived life of Oh Dae-su).

The will of the ruler decided the destiny of both hurt men; Lee Woo-jin's life was filled with the fire powder of *han*, and Oh Dae-su's desire for revenge pushed him to the edge of life. Lee Woo-jin accepted false redemption by strengthening his resentment such that his perception of the meaning of life was replaced by a lust for with vengeance. Oh Dae-su, with his bestial nature, had his irresponsible and mischievous personality erased when he was searching for the reason for his imprisonment; however, such buried personality traits ruined his last chance of redemption. Oh Dae-su had to hypnotize away his memory of the truth to lead a miserable life, which matches his monolog: "Even though I'm no better than a best, don't I have the right to live?"

The results are extreme for these characters, the ruler of *han* demolished the meaning of their lives completely and sealed their ending. False redemption perfectly manifested in the arc of Lee Woo-jin; his revenge on Oh was so successful that he had to try his best to restrain his joy as he looked at Oh begging for mercy at his feet. Ironically, Oh Dae-su's self-righteous endeavor only placed himself on the sacrificial altar set up by Lee Woo-jin, who removed the possibility of further liberation for Oh by killing himself. The extreme *han* motif here may only be fully appreciated by Korean cinephiles. Spike Lee changed the ending; instead of keeping the incestuous relationship, the character that plays Oh Dae-su in the Hollywood version of *Oldboy* offered to use self-imprisonment as atonement for his sins, leaving his daughter to pursue a new life of liberation.

The three leading characters in *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (*Boksuneun Naui Geot*, 2002) were more realistic than those in *Oldboy*. Park Dong-jin's daughter died during a kidnapping. Cha Yeong-mi was the conspirator in the kidnapping. Ryu's situation was more complicated; his beloved sister with cancer died by suicide, because she cannot bear the shame after she found out that Ryu's kidnapping plan was for the money to treat her illness. Ryu was duped by the organ traffickers in a deal to purchase a kidney; he was cheated out of his only savings and the chance to save his sister's life. He had remorse for indirectly causing the death of the kidnapped girl. His situation was further complicated by his lover Cha Yeong-mi's death.

In accordance with the will of the ruler, every character ruminated over the unfairness of their lives. Park Dong-jin's means of false redemption was his incorrigible sense

³During the economic crisis in 1997, the Korean government had to agree on a series of macroeconomic policies with the International Monetary Fund to obtain the 3 billion-dollar aid. Since then, the economic attitude of South Korean people, especially the economic attitude reflected in the films and TV shows, gradually tended to worship the upper class.

⁴The name created in the article "Endorsing upper-class refinement or critiquing extravagance and debt? The rise of neoliberal genre modification in contemporary South Korean cinema." by Wagner Keith B., meaning the super wealthy class, as was described in the article: "with its own concentration of wealth, rumored to control nearly 40 percent of the entire economy's gross national product (GNP), is Korea's neoliberal royalty".

of being aggrieved. His social status as an entrepreneur caused the annihilation of others; it strengthened his belief in his own misfortune and the legitimacy of his wish to seek vengeance without mercy. Ryu's source of false redemption was the constant wicked provocation from his cynical girlfriend and his marginalized identity. His girlfriend, Cha Yeong-mi, who was furious with the country's class system, persuaded him to put her distorted theories into practice. Ryu accepted being fired and mocked, and he did not even consider pursuing the organ traffickers. However, when he had nothing left to lose, he unleashed his wrath by literally swallowing the kidneys of the organ traffickers. Cha Yeong-mi's method of seeking false redemption is believing and criticizing the idolization of the upper class, this attitude is intended to pardon her atrocities against the capitalists, such as Park Dong-jin.

Park was executed by Yeong-mi's anarchist associates; his confusion over the fact of his death and his delusional innocence turned to seething resentment, which filled his final moments. Ryu's revenge on the traffickers was accomplished, but his anger pushed him to pursue another act of revenge, which cost him his life. Yeong-mi was the victim of a morbid ideology; her threatening of the kidnapped girl's father culminated in her electrocution.

The final part of the Vengeance Trilogy did not gain as much recognition as the first two parts, but *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (Chinjeolhan Geumjassi, 2005) vividly presented the humanism behind false redemption.

The protagonist, Lee Geum-ja, was forced to take the blame for the murder of a 5-year old child and spent 13 years in prison. Her daughter, once used by the real murderer as a hostage during the trial, was sent to a foster family. The situation deprived her of the possibility of a normal life; her attitude, once marked by vitality and infinite expectations for life, was overcome by vengeance. Lee Geum-ja asked for forgiveness from the dead boy's parents, fought to meet her now-fostered daughter, and refused her daughter's request to come with her to Korea. These acts indicated that long ago, she had made revenge her only purpose in life; she did have any other expectations for the future. The will of the ruler was to ensure that Lee Geum-ja lost her real redemption and fell into everlasting pain and regret. As Lee Woo-jin stated in *Oldboy*, "What would happen when the revenge is finished? Maybe the hidden pain will return again." Lee Woo-jin knew that the temporary joy of revenge would be followed by the inevitable return of endless pain; therefore, he stopped himself from being haunted by sorrow and took his own life after the thrill of his revenge. Lee Geum-ja's success and survival invited the wrath of the ruler. Her fall was intertwined with surrealistic mythology; the preacher's perseverant prayer and encouragement strengthened her faith in vengeance, for which she was willing to bear all burdens while disguising herself as a faithful Christian. This false redemption was reflected in Lee's weeping while burying her face in the cake. The narrator then stated, "she didn't get the redemption she wanted." However, her revenge was far better than she expected.

Bong Joon Ho's Empathy

The Oscar winning director Bong Joon Ho used the pattern of false redemption under the theme of motherhood. As one of the three representative auteurs⁵ portraying extreme ideals of motherhood through thrillers, in *Mother*, Bong delicately extended the neo-Confucian sentimental maternal figure. This figure, portrayed by actress Kim Hye Ja, combines extreme motherhood with contained dignity and cruelty. Bong values Asian motherhood to such an extent that he titled this film about contentious maternal love with the Korean transliteration of the English word "mother." Like Park Chul-soo's use of the word "emi," it is as though Bong purposefully avoids using the Korean word "eomeoni," all too aware that the sentimental ideas associated with this word, such as honor and dignity, cannot be tainted with his contentious portrayal of motherhood (An, 2019).

The mother in this film impoverished and her son with an intellectual disability was on trial. The mother contemplated suicide and left her 5-year-old with an intellectual disability following an attempted poisoning. Yoon Do-joon was accused of murdering a schoolgirl. The ruler, who established false redemption, used extreme maternal love to encourage the mother to panic. The method of seduction was gradual. The first stage was the mother's unwavering conviction of the innocence of Yoon Do-joon. Bong Joon Ho combined the sympathetic mother figure with classic ideals of motherhood. The humble mother abased herself to an officer, flattered a lawyer, and stood her ground before the people who hated her. The faith of the mother was so strong, she never hesitated in offering wads of cash for help, the expensive ginseng to bribe the police, although she had her meager income from the toilful herb cutting and acupuncture. The more savings and courage the mother employed, the stronger was her maternal love. The mother, in her excessive maternal love, had to kill the witness, be silent about the truth, and accept the scapegoat for her son's crime of murder. In the end, Yoon was acquitted not because the mother had proved his innocence, but because of the scapegoat, meaning the mother's efforts were futile. The mother's choice of accepting the poor Japanese young man, the redeemer who cleared up the legal troubles of the mother and son, initiated the ripping of her appointment, and sent her back to the original haunted situation. In the context of neo-Confucian ethics, Bong's motherhood was "understandable yet excessive," opined An Ji Yoon. If a Christian couple raise children to glorify God, then to neo-Confucian parents, the children are Gods themselves. As Schlegel stated, the plays of different nations reveal different customs and rules. A play is created by this nation (Yu, 2012).

Among the various types of motherhood, Koreans always prefer sentimental motherhood. In the Korean cinema, the mother character has been historically found mainly in family films. Sentimental productions about the mother have always proven popular, from numerous melodramas of the golden 1960s... While the tenacious popularity of these sentimental narratives is a fascinating topic (An, 2019).

⁵The other two are Park Chan-wook, who directed *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (*Boksuneun Naui Geot*, 2002) and Won Shin-yeon, for his *Seven Days* (*Sebeun deijeu*, 2007).

The preference for excessive maternal love is an example of cinephiles' aesthetic appreciation of *han*. The preceding analysis illustrated the pattern of false redemption, which has been used for the dramatic expression of the *han* motif. Catering to a preference for *han* reinforces the supremacy of the motif. Auteurs, such as Park Chan-wook and Lee Chang Dong presented Korean cinema to the world but limited the possible perspectives. Younger Korean filmmakers and directors must follow in the footsteps of their idols or risk their careers by using new ideas.

THE AUDACITY OF OTHER MOTIFS

Jesus Hospital, directed by Lee Sang Cheol and Shin Ah Ga, disguised itself as a *han*-oriented film and expressed a hope motif through true redemption under common symbols of Christian hypocrisy and depravity, which are usually noted in Lee Chang Dong's films. The directors neglecting cinephiles' preferences and thereby risking investors' money and their own reputations were expected. The recognition of *Jesus Hospital* demonstrates the power of *han* and the potential aesthetic tendency of the hope motif in the Korean art cinema. This film wisely used false redemption to express the hope motif.

The backdrop of *Jesus Hospital* is the hypocrisy of a Christian family. The conflict between the wickedness and righteousness, prevalently represented by money and religiosity, is a common material for sarcastic plots. Korean cinephiles are well-acquainted with upper-class refinement and sanctimonious Christian figures. This film does not differ substantially from other films in its use of the *han* motif, and false redemption features prominently. The three siblings have an arrogant attitude centered on their financial status and righteousness. They reveal their secular attitudes toward money by providing offerings to the church in the first act of the film. Then, the conflict surrounding the euthanasia of their mother, who had been in a coma for months, accelerated the peeling away of the masks of the wealthy, respectable churchgoers, and the heretical apostate in the family. The wealthy older sister, Myung Soon, and the younger brother, Joon Ho, who had been paying the hospital bills, wanted to end treatment and stop the related medical expenses. The main character, Hyun Soon, who is the heretical apostate, was against her mother's euthanasia owing to her unconditional love for her mother; however, she did not pay any medical expenses because of her financial condition. The will of the *han* ruler was to seduce the family into maintaining their obstinate arrogance until the collapse of their faith and dignity. Myung Soon and Joon Ho sneered at lower-class individuals, exuding a sense of superiority. Myung Soon even marginalized Hyun Soon and her daughter, similarly to how the Pharisees marginalized their fellow Israelites in the Bible. The sympathetic Hyun Soon has a strong pride, since she is not as wealthy as her siblings, for the two siblings inherited all the possessions of their passed father. She left the legitimate church and joined the heretic believers, in the purpose of winning over the self-righteous siblings with faith. As a result, her older sister lost faith; she even requested consultation with a false prophet. The once honorable deacon Joon Ho embezzled money

from the church to pay for his mother's treatment. Hyun Soon despaired after becoming the nemesis of a malevolent arbiter; her dying mother was the only person with the type of blood required by her hospitalized pregnant daughter.

All three characters succumbed to false redemption, then, the film overturned aesthetic expectations. The true ruler paved a path to true redemption that saved all these desperate characters from their predicament. The families repented, and the benevolent old mother sacrificed herself as a redeemer in a surrealistic manner; she saved her grandchild with her blood and ended the conflict among her children through her demise. The cloud of hopelessness cleared in the last 2 min of the film; the supposed *han* motif turned out to be a motif of hope. *Jesus Hospital*, which premiered at the 16th Busan International Film Festival, won the Citizen Reviewers' Award, and the DGK Best Actress Award was given to an actress for her role in the film.

A reading of *Parasite* helps explain the aesthetic of its ending, which revealed an implicit sense of hope. The elaborate and sarcastic commentary on class hierarchy provides amusement when the poor family executes their deceptive plan. *Parasite*, by juxtaposing the poor, cunning, and dishonest Kim family with the wealthy, gullible, and straightforward Parks, gives the audience an opportunity to live in a world in which the lies about capitalism are laid bare (Ridgeway-Diaz et al., 2020). A thematic tilt occurs after the devastation of the family of Ki Taek. Ki Woo's 7 min of narration can be interpreted as an irresistible and pathetic fantasy of a lower class family whose only meaning in life was an obsession with chasing an upper-class life. Despite the fact that the Kims had an overly ambitious dream and that the son was still living in poverty, the audience could not deny the surge of hope. Yoshiko Iwai stated, "Parasite opens many veins of insight around human decency, social suffering, and class without wrapping everything up in a conclusive bow at the end" (Iwai, 2020).

RESULTS

False redemption is not the only pattern in Korean art cinema but is an effective means of expressing the *han* motif, which has become the most widely discussed aesthetic feature of the Korean art cinema. Auteurs, such as Im Kwon-taek and Park Chan-wook have won various awards and strengthened the Korean cinema by using *han*. False redemption, which parallels Christian redemption, operates in each of these films (Table 1). Although *Jesus Hospital* has a contrasting motif, hope, it is expressed as a completed form of false redemption. Whether emerging visions will create new cinema trends cannot be predicted, but one certainty is that the Korean art cinema strongly portrays the *han* motif and that false redemption remains an effective vehicle for *han* narration.

DISCUSSION

Korean art cinema is led by a select group of almost exclusively older male auteurs. These auteurs skew the direction (perspective) of younger filmmakers, who may imitate their style

TABLE 1 | Analysis of the selected films through the pattern of false redemption.

	Kim Ki-duk <i>Address Unknown</i>	Lee Chang Dong <i>Burning</i>	Park Chan-wook <i>The Vengeance Trilogy</i>	Bong Joon Ho <i>Mother</i>
Situation	Provoke them to resist their position	Upper-class endorsing value	Trauma caused by others	Poverty and trial
The will of the ruler	Obliterating the chosen three	Attract them all to burn	Terminating the thought of equality of their lives	Lure the mother to enter endless panic
Method	Stimulating them to express their rage and resentment	The paradoxical perception of the legitimacy of the unlimited power of the rich	The illusion of the legitimacy to judge and revenge	The belief of the innocence of the son and the use of the extreme maternal love
Result	Died, cut and imprisoned	Burned into ashes	Haunted by everlasting pain	Mother sent to the unquenchable horror

(Raymond, 2018). Films motivated by *han* are prevalent on lists of many organizations. It is no accident that one of the main canons of western art cinema, The Criterion Collection, selected Lee's *Mi-ryang* (*Secret Sunshine*) as the first Korean film to enter the collection (Raymond, 2018). The study by Jeong Seung-hoon on Seoul Film Collective, indicated that the works of the auteurs, such as Lee Chang Dong and Park Chan-wook, are the new mainstream cinema in Korea. The late 1990s ushered in a new mainstream cinema featuring new sensibilities and techniques in the works of next generation auteurs, such as Hong Sang-soo, Kim Ki-duk, Lee Chang-dong, Park Chan-wook, and Bong Joon-ho. The more effectively this latest boom changed the landscape of Korean cinema, the more quickly the Collective's influence faded away from both the film production and critical reception and theory (Jeong, 2017). In addition, extreme violence is a common manifestation of *han* in the films interpreted in this article. From large-scale blockbusters to critically acclaimed art-house films, the Korean cinema is often associated with violence, or rather, extreme violence. This association has been reinforced partly by a group of Korean auteur filmmakers whose work garners much attention at international film festivals or overseas box offices: noted examples include Park Chan-wook, Kim Ji-woon, Na Hong-jin, and Kim Ki-duk (Chung, 2019). Apparently, little room is left for other motifs under the enormous shadow of *han* and false redemption. The auteurs have earned international fame with their false redemption narratives and unique styles. The dramatic vengeance of Park Chan-wook, the flesh mutilation and silence of Kim Ki-duk, the ironic metaphors of Bong Joon Ho, and the miserable mortals of Lee Chang Dong have garnered international attention.

Although the expression of *han* under the model of false redemption has prompted young new filmmakers to follow in the footsteps of those big auteurs, brave explorations from Lee Sang Cheol, Shin Ah Ga, and Bong Joon Ho created hope for new aesthetic forms in the Korean art cinema. The hope motif

might be a new trend that competes with the *han* motif, and the narrative pattern opposite the false redemption pattern could be a potent formula for new generations of directors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

FUNDING

This article was funded by Ningbo University, and is a stage achievement of the teaching research project of Ningbo University—The Research on Building and Practicing Virtual Teaching and Research Room—Taking Course of Interactive Media Design as an Example, the project number: JYXMXZD2022018. This article is also a stage achievement of Zhejiang Provincial Planning Project of Philosophy and Social Science—The Study on the False Redemption Narrative Pattern of Korean Art Cinema.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is an extended study of the relationship between the aesthetic expectation and ideology that I have been committed to, especially for my doctoral dissertation. My sincere gratitude and memory are with my late Prof. Fu Li Ming, who had supported me so much on my doctoral dissertation when he was already under the chemotherapy. It was Prof. Fu who have trusted me and encouraged me to keep my direction.

REFERENCES

An, J. Y. (2019). The Korean mother in contemporary thriller films: a Monster or just modern?, *J. Jpn. Korean*

Cinema 11, 154–169. doi: 10.1080/17564905.2019.1661655

Boman, B. (2020). From Oldboy to Burning: Han in South Korean films. *Cult. Psychol.* 26, 919–932. doi: 10.1177/1354067X20922146

- Bowles, M. J. (2003). The practice of meaning in Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. *J. Nietzsche Stud.* 26, 12–24. doi: 10.1353/nie.2003.0019
- Cho, F. (2014). The Transnational Buddhism of Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring. *Contemp. Buddh.* 15, 111. doi: 10.1080/14639947.2014.890347
- Chung, H. J. (2019). An economy of bodily violence: fragmented bodies and porous borders in Korean Cinema. *J. Popular Film Telev.* 47, 30–38. doi: 10.1080/01956051.2019.1565758
- Chung, H. S. (2010). Beyond “Extreme”: Rereading Kim Ki-duk’s cinema of resentment. *J. Film Video* 62, 96–111. doi: 10.5406/jfilmvideo.62.1-2.0096
- Fan, X. Q. (2018). Korean Film Author Chang-dong Lee: Chang-dong Lee and Characters in His Film. *Temp. Cinema* 6, 33–38.
- Fu, T. J. (2013). *A study on the Korean aesthetic emotion “han”- and the comparison with the “han” and “Sorrow” from the perspective of East Asian aesthetics* (Dissertation). Yanbian: Yanbian University. *Genesis*: 6, *Holy Bible. New International Version*. Available online at: biblica.in (accessed January 25, 2022).
- Iwai, Y. (2020). narrative humility and parasite, directed by Bong Joon Ho, 2019. *J. Med. Hum.* 38, 353–360. doi: 10.1007/s10912-020-09643-5
- Jeong, S. H. (2017). The Seoul film collective: leftist strife, open cinema, and the last chapter of Korean film theory. *Quart. Rev. Film Video* 34, 348–360. doi: 10.1080/10509208.2016.1241617
- John: 14, Holy Bible. New International Version. Available online at: my.bible.com (accessed January 25, 2022).
- Kim, E. H. (1993). Home is where the han is: a Korean American perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals. *ial Justice* 20, 1–21.
- Kim, S. S. H. C. (2017). Korean Han and the postcolonial afterlives of “The Beauty of Sorrow”. *Korean Stud.* 41, 253–279. doi: 10.1353/ks.2017.0003
- Leviticus: 1, Holy Bible. New International Version. Available online at: my.bible.com (accessed January 25, 2022).
- Leviticus: 25, Holy Bible. New International Version. Available online at: my.bible.com (accessed January 25, 2022).
- Psalms: 111, Holy Bible. New International Version. Available online at: my.bible.com (accessed January 25, 2022).
- Raymond, M. (2018). From old boys to quiet dreams: mapping Korean art cinema today. *Film Critic.* 42, 14–31. doi: 10.3998/fc.13761232.0042.104
- Ridgeway-Diaz, J., Thanh, T. T., and Gabbard, G. O. (2020). Return of the repressed: Bong Joon-Ho’s parasite. *Acad. Psychiatry* 44, 792–794. doi: 10.1007/s40596-020-01309-7
- Romans: 15, Holy Bible. New International Version. Available at my.bible.com (Accessed: 25 January 2022)
- Shim, J. S. (2009). Female trance in Han Tae-Sook’s production of Lady Macbeth. *New Theatre Quart.* 25, 63–71. doi: 10.1017/S0266464X09000062
- Son, E. W. (2016). Korean Trojan women: performing wartime sexual violence. *Asian Theatre J.* 33, 369–394. doi: 10.1353/atj.2016.0041
- Vijin, A. (2011). *IFFR 2011: An Interview With LEE CHANG-DONG*. Available online at: <https://screenanarchy.com/2011/08/iffir-2011-an-interview-with-lee-chang-dong.html> (accessed January 24, 2022).
- Wagner, K. B. (2016). Endorsing upper-class refinement or critiquing extravagance and debt? The rise of neoliberal genre modification in contemporary South Korean cinema. *Crit. Arts* 30, 117–138. doi: 10.1080/02560046.2016.1164389
- Wang, W. Y. (2012). On the Christian phenomenon and features in the South Korean films. *J. Beijing Film Acad.* 108, 11–14. doi: 10.3969/j.issn.1002-6142.2012.05.003
- Yecies, B., and Shim, A. G. (2011). Contemporary Korean cinema: challenges and the transformation of “Planet Hallyuwood”. *Acta Koreana* 14, 1–15. doi: 10.18399/acta.2011.14.1.001
- Yu, Q. Y. (2012). *Audience Psychological Aesthetic*. Beijing: China Publishing Group Modern Press.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher’s Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

Copyright © 2022 Bai. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.