

## Once Upon a Time in Manchuria

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### Abstract

As the air of fresh sensibilities and daring attitudes that reshaped the Korean cinema in the late 1950's and the early 1960's gradually yielded to the interventions of the oppressive totalitarian government, the independence movement against the Japanese occupation became a popular (and easy) plot motif, giving birth to one of the most peculiar or unlikely genres in the history of Korean cinema: Manchurian western. Set in the wild Manchuria as the historical background for militant resistance, these action films featured protagonists with revolvers, horses, and cowboy hats if not complete "western" outfit, as well as corresponding manners, striving to wage lonesome wars for a patriotic cause without full success. The iconic fallen patriarchs or failing heroes that populated the South Korean films under the military dictatorship, ie. from 1950's through 1980's, manifest themselves in the form of imaginary warriors that defy historical accuracy, falling short of their double prospects to restore the national community and to reinstate masculinity. Their melancholic embrace of the lack, a shady variation of the conventional solitude of the benevolent Hollywood gunmen that had gained popularity through television and cinema, convey the mental desolation under the post-war political oppression, barely completing the pro-American (or pseudo-American) nationalist fantasy as an alternate history. Are these wild imaginations on celluloid potent signs for the attempted (re-)emergence of nationalist self-awareness in the 20th century?



## Biography



Hyun-Suk Seo investigates how senses are restructured by various apparatuses in his writings, films, and performance pieces. His performance projects unfold in actual places as site-specific work, often involving virtual reality, to question and challenge the very boundaries of “artistic experience.” His film projects include a documentary series that interrogates how modernist architecture contributed to the emergence of nation in Asia. His books include *Horror to the Extreme*(chapter, University of Hong Kong Press, 2009), *Art of the Future*(co-author, Spectre Press, 2016), and *The Impossible Dance*(chapter, Spectre Press, 2020). He is also the editor-in-chief of *Ob.scene*, a magazine that deals with art “out of the scene.” He currently teaches cinema at the Graduate School of Communication and Arts at Yonsei University.