

CHAPTER 5

OPPOSITIONAL READINGS: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AS CULTURAL VIEWERS

The film was produced by a director, a screenwriter and a cinematographer who belong to the older generation. This means that they depict contemporary society in film through their eyes. I do not agree with filmmakers in many respects, but I am especially annoyed by their description of the gender relationship in the film, which is very important because it tells much about other related issues such as family, marriage, sexuality, cultural values, morality and religion. The filmmakers portray patriarchy and unequal gender relationships as natural and even desirable phenomena. To make matters worse, female characters in the film are intentionally depicted as extraordinarily passive and submissive, which, I argue, must result from the old-fashioned educational and cultural backgrounds of the filmmakers. I realized through viewing the film that a generational gap exists between the filmmakers and me. I do not blame them for their cultural differences at all. What I am trying to say is that the world has changed a lot and people have made efforts to build an equal gender society, which, of course, still leaves much to be desired. It sets back the clock for them to make such a film that

tends to advertise and instill an old ideology of unequal gender. Therefore, I cannot share the same opinion with the filmmaker at all. (Student 1; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Chapter 5 deals with reception of the film by the university students as an "interpretive community." Drawing on Stuart Hall's idea of "oppositional reading," it will elaborate on the students' resistance to the film as a cultural text in terms of the generation gap between the younger students and the older filmmakers. It will do so by presenting three categories of oppositional readings of the film: "prostitution," "preference for male offspring and the image of women," and "family and marriage."

Ethnography of Reception

The first part of this chapter will be devoted to showing the detailed cultural environment of the university classes where the reception study was performed. In particular, it will focus on the process of research, the research strategy, the nature of the class and the methodology of the analysis.

As stated briefly in Chapter 2, the reception research on *Chimhyang* was done in the Spring semester of 1999 in two

sections of an undergraduate course which I taught on two campuses of the same university. One campus was in Seoul and the other was near Seoul. The title of the course was "Visual Media and Culture." The semester was composed of sixteen weeks. We met once a week for two hours every week. The total number of students in each class exceeded a little more than one hundred. About 20 students in each class were female students. The age of students spanned from 19 to 22 (in Class A, there were 40 freshmen, 25 seniors and other sophomores and juniors; in Class B, there were 3 freshmen, 22 sophomore and other juniors and seniors), but a few male students were 2 or 3 years older than other students due to the military service requirement. In the study, I did not attempt to conduct research on the socio-economic disposition of the students, and I treated them as if they were a culturally homogeneous group in order to highlight cultural values and beliefs shared by them as an "interpretive community."

The purpose of the class was to give students opportunities to experience symbolic worlds through various kinds of films and thereby to foster their anthropological thinking in terms of visual media. Three major forms of films (feature films, documentary films and ethnographic films) were shown and discussed in the class.

Interestingly enough, feature films turned out to be more successful and promising as teaching aids than the other two genres of films (documentary films and ethnographic films) for the following reasons. First of all, feature films, in Korea, were cheap to rent and easily accessible while the other two genres were very expensive to purchase and almost impossible to rent. Secondly, feature films were easy for students to understand with the help of subtitles, while they did not seem to fully comprehend the contents of the other genres because of the language barrier.

Among the feature films, I selected *Tampopo*, a Japanese film, and *The Mission*. I also provided students with sample works of cultural analysis of two films (Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's work on *Tampopo* and mine on *The Mission*) in order to give them a guideline by which to write a paper on *Chimhyang*. The two films served successfully as study guides, as I had expected, and proved to help students get concrete ideas for formulating their thinking into a paper.

First, I chose *Tampopo* because *Tampopo*, as a "cultural document", abounds in cultural symbols and meanings as I mentioned earlier in Chapter Two. Moreover, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, an anthropologist of Japanese culture, had written an excellent cultural analysis of the film. (Ohnuki-Tierney

1990) All of the students saw the film, subtitled in English, in class. In addition, they read Ohnuki-Tierney's article on the film, "The Ambivalent Self of the Contemporary Japanese." Students were very excited to view a Japanese film for they had had little chance to watch one before since they had previously been banned in Korea. The students were also interested in the cultural analysis of a fiction film. The phrase that "a fiction film can be a "cultural document"" was strange to them. For that reason it stimulated their curiosity, since they had been mainly informed of the idea that a fiction film is a medium of entertainment or a form of popular art rather than a cultural product.

Another film, *The Mission*, was selected for a somewhat different purpose. The aim of presenting *The Mission* was to teach students how to explore ideologies and power relationships hidden in the film. I handed out my term paper on *The Mission*, which I had written in 1991 for the "Anthropology and Mass Media" class at Temple University. It was a film study guide for high school students and undergraduate university students who did not possess much previous knowledge of anthropology. The paper was very relevant to what the class was concerned with because the aim of the paper was pedagogical. Relevant to this point

are the following remarks from my paper. They are lengthy but worthy of quoting:

The Mission: A Film Study for Students of Anthropology

As anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker has argued, "Movies have a number of functions . . . They are entertainment, which of course, in any form, is never 'pure,' but always has hidden or open psychological and educational subfunctions." (Powdermaker: 81) It is this "educational subfunction" that concerns the instructor of anthropology-especially in films that convey instructional information of non-western cultural groups. In order for the anthropologist's message to compete with the almost unlimited visual imagery of film, he or she must encourage his or her students to begin a lifetime practice of analytical viewing; this analytical viewing will help the student filter out the plethora of flawed and potentially harmful messages contained in film. But feature films also provide the educator with an interesting tool for introducing anthropological topics in introductory-level courses. Because the subject matter of *The Mission* relates directly to the issues traditionally studied by anthropology, the film can be used profitably as both a means of teaching analytical viewing skills and as a vehicle for introducing specific topics that concern anthropology and anthropologists.

Anthropological Issues Raised by *The Mission*

- 1) Ethnography: Guarani Indians in Paraguay
- 2) Colonialism, Encounters between Europeans and Cultural Others, Acculturation, Cultural Synthesis
- 3) The Colonial Role of the Missionary
- 4) Ethical Questions Relating Missionaries and Anthropologists
- 5) Western Rituals Displayed in the Film
- 6) Film As an Educational Medium, Stereotyping of Cultural Others, Film As a Reflection of Anglo-American Values

(Quoted from "**The Mission: A Film Study For**

Students of Anthropology" written in 1991 by the author)

Two feature films and two papers served as frameworks for the students' papers on *Chimhyang*.

However, during the semester, I deliberately did not inform students that the film they were to write on would be *Chimhyang* or that I was personally involved as a researcher in the making of *Chimhyang*. My reason for this decision was so that students might not be biased by the facts. I did notify students that 50% of their grade would be based on the final paper on the film and that it was very important to turn in a well-organized paper for the final. Actually, I planned to collect three different formats of papers on the same film in order for students to get on the right track during the semester. The first format of the students' paper would be a very brief summary of the film, and the second one would be a critical essay on the film in the form of a mid-term paper. The third one would be a more organized and formal final term paper. This was done with the assumption that the film would be released and shown to audiences as scheduled in March, 1999. However, contrary to my expectation, the film failed to be distributed as planned, which made it impossible for students to see the film at movie theaters by the end of

the semester. As the end of the semester approached, I could not help changing the original plan and scheduling a special screening for students. However, I soon met with difficulty because the director expressed a negative reaction to the idea of a special screening for students before the public exhibition. Actually, even if he had agreed with my idea, he was not in a position to make a decision on the matter because he did not possess the copyright to the film. To make matters worse, he was on bad terms with the distributor because of the delayed exhibition. However, fortunately, I was helped by a public relations section chief who was the one and only good informant during the fieldwork, in an anthropological sense. She told me that the screenwriter could hopefully help me to get permission for the screening from the distributor. Thanks to his successful mediation, I managed to set up the screening schedule just before the semester ended. During several weeks of hassles surrounding the special screening of the film, I gave students the chance to read the scenario of the film and to write a brief summary of their plan for the term paper.

I set up a special screening of the film for my students in an official screening room at the Korean Film Commission which had high quality facilities. This enabled

the students to experience the film in a theatrical environment. The director, witty and political, took advantage of the special screening to invite a chairman and vice chairman of the Commission, as well as several other acquaintances including film critics and professors from the film department of various universities. The director himself introduced his film to the students and gave a brief explanation of the film before the screening. By then, students were very excited because it was the first time they had had the chance to view a film in the screening room at the Korean Film Commission before the première. Not only that, but they also received an introduction by a well-known director while sitting with critics and movie-related persons.

After viewing *Chimhyang*, the students expressed their thanks to me for the specially prepared screening of the film because they knew how hard I had tried to get permission for the screening and because they had not known about my involvement in the film and research.

I scheduled another screening session in the classroom during the semester for those who could not attend the special screening, but this time students had to watch the film in the video form (I had videotaped the film at the

special screening with a 6 mm digital camera and transferred it into VHS format).

After viewing the film, I asked students to write a term paper of a length of approximately 10 pages which would explore cultural meanings in the film. I reminded students that their papers should be anthropological analyses, not journalistic reviews of the film. In other words, I encouraged students to become anthropologists in their own culture when they attempted to examine the film. I also prepared a brief research guideline and sample questions for them as follows, in addition to the two papers on *Tampopo* and *The Mission*, so that they could organize their thoughts and expand them in the paper:

- (1) How does the film portray contemporary Korean society?
- (2) How would do you describe the filmmakers' ideology? How about their cultural values? And how are they represented in the film?
- (3) What messages do the filmmakers intend to transmit to audiences?
- (4) Describe your reactions to the film as a young

audience.

- (5) Use anthropological concepts.
- (6) Try to find cultural symbols and meanings in the film.
- (7) What are the basic themes or ideas of the film?
- (8) Discuss characterizations of individuals in the film in relation to the storyline; their social relationships, patterns of behaviors, conflicts or resolution, etc.
- (9) Identify the social structures and cultural institutions in the film.
- (10) Find social problems depicted in the film.

There were two purposes for this assignment. One was for the students, and the other was for my research. First of all, the primary goal of the assignment was to cultivate students' anthropological imagination and to enhance their

abilities to examine critically a fictionalized depiction of contemporary Korean society in the film. In general, the utilization of a feature film for instructional purposes has been largely neglected in the anthropological area, but, in the field of sociology, the pedagogical advantages of using commercial films to stimulate students' critical thinking are well recognized (Burton 1988; Demerath 1981; Dressel 1990; Fails 1988; Groce 1992; Hannon and Marullo 1988; Loewen 1991; Maynard 1971; Pescosolido 1990; Prendergast 1986; Smith 1973). Demerath maintains that commercial films

can provide narrative documents of the reality at issue. They serve as a bridge between the world of lectures, research, and textbooks, and the world that really matters. More than just illustration, a good film can provide emotional immediacy and probing insight. (Demerath 1981: 71)

Overall, the students' papers showed that they seemed to understand how a feature film can be a "cultural document" and how the discipline of anthropology helps them to organize their thoughts.

The second aim of the paper was concerned with my own intention of eliciting students' reactions to the film and thereby using their papers for texts of the reception research. The experiment turned out to be successful, and their papers were satisfactory enough to be used as texts

for interpreting young audiences' interpretation of the film.

I selected 60 out of 110 students' papers from A class and 58 out of 93 students' papers from B class according to the quality of papers, and I used them for the analysis of the film. When selecting (grading) the students' papers, I placed relative importance (a higher score) on the papers which showed critical interpretations and criticisms of the film rather than on those containing just summaries or descriptions of the story of the film with no evidence of critical thinking.

I ignored the difference of readings between the two classes, and I also chose not to take gender or age differences into consideration because I could not find crucial differences between them, if any. A few remarks on artistic aspects such as camera movements, editing or acting were also neglected in the analysis.

When analyzing students' papers, I have reconsidered Ien Ang's remark on the reading of audiences' reactions. In her research on viewers' letters on *Dallas*, Ang argues that "the letters must be regarded as texts, as discourses people produce when they want to express or have to account for their own preferences for, or aversion to, a highly controversial piece of popular culture like *Dallas*" (Ang

1985: 11). This means that we should read informants' responses "symptomatically" and try to find out the "presuppositions and attitudes concealed behind the explicitly written" (Ang 1985: 11). A researcher, Ang argues, needs to "call on socially available ideologies and images" in the responses and explicate "what textual characteristics of *Dallas* organize" viewer's experiencing text and "in which ideological context it acquires social and cultural meanings" (Ang 1985: 11).

I found that the most frequent words students used in their papers were "unrealistic," "cannot understand" or "not interesting." They used these terms to express generational differences between filmmakers and themselves and to criticize filmmakers' depiction of a contemporary Korean society through cultural symbols, characters, social relationships and social events in the film.

In general, the students seemed to understand the filmmakers' message in the film. However, they strongly resisted and were opposed to the filmmakers' ideologies which were hidden in the overt message. Especially, they read the filmmakers' description of sexuality, family, marriage and patriarchy in an oppositional way, which will be explored in more detail in the latter part of this chapter.

Transformation of the Society and Generational Conflicts in Korea

Scholars generally agree that Korea has been experiencing turmoil with the rapid and radical transformation of society for the last decades. People in the country have been living in a world composed of more than one interpretation of social reality due to the unbearable speed and magnitude of social change. It is also contended at large that Korean society has been undergoing a rapid breakdown of traditional values, a contention between traditional beliefs and emergent life experiences, and a transition in its social and cultural structures.⁴

Among the areas of tensions and conflicts in society, an intergenerational friction or gap will be one because the old and the young possess conflicting norms since, as Prasad demonstrates in his analysis of the generation gap in India, social change has given them a different social content (Prasad 1992: 10).

Margaret Mead, in her study on generation, distinguishes and categorizes cultural types of generation into "postfigurative," "cofigurative" and "prefigurative":

To distinguish these three cultural styles I am using

the words postfigurative, when the future repeats the past, cfigurative, in which the present is the guide to future expectations, and prefigurative for the kind of culture in which the elders have to learn from the children about the experiences which they have never had. (Margaret Mead 1978: 13)

Simply speaking, using Mead's terminology, Korean society has been transformed in a rapid and radical way from a long period of "postfigurative" society through a very short period of "cfigurative" society to "prefigurative" society during the last century.

Eun-Yeong Na and Jae-Ho Cha, in their recent report on the generation gap in Korea, argued that

In a society where changes take place slowly, the differences in values between the generations are small; on the other hand, in a society where such changes are quite rapid, a wide generational gap results as the values of the younger generation undergo more rapid changes compared to that of the elder generation. This invariably results in more serious inter-generational conflicts. (Na and Cha 2000: 2)

Inglehart (1997), in his *Modernism and Postmodernism*, argued that Korean society is reaching a turning point away from modernization toward postmodernization. He demonstrated that Korean society has the widest generation gap among the 43 industrialized countries he has investigated. According to Inglehart, the most advanced nations and the most underdeveloped countries showed a minimal generation gap. This is because people in the most

advanced countries tend to have high "postmaterialist" values (emphasizing individual self-expression and quality of life concerns) regardless of the year of birth, and people in the underdeveloped nations tend to possess "materialist" values (emphasizing economic and physical security) regardless of the year of birth. Meanwhile, in Korea, where society has changed at a rapid rate, the conflict and gap between different generations widens as the older generation holds on to their materialistic values while the younger generation more readily accept the changes toward emerging post-materialistic values (Inglehart 1997).

According to Jaehong Bak,

If we understand the concept of generation in relation to historical and cultural experiences that are shared by social members who were born in a similar period, the issue of generation takes on more serious shape in a rapidly changing society like Korea due to frequent generational shifts in a short period of time and consequently a generational gulf and conflicts. (Bak 1992: 11; author's translation from Korean citation)

Hyjeong Jo also points out the seriousness of generational conflicts in Korea as follows:

The generational conflicts, in addition to gender conflicts, have impoverished our lives and become a serious social problem due to the rapid social transformation. For the people of South Korea, the speed of the industrialization was a telling trauma. The society has been transformed from production-oriented capitalism to consumption-oriented

capitalism only after a change of one generation, which has created two different 'races'. (Jo 1998: 28; author's translation from Korean citation)

She continues to note that

Due to a very rapid process of modernization, each generation in Korea has undergone different experiences. Furthermore, the lack of mutual respect of different experiences has broadened the generational gap, which has rendered mutual understanding a very difficult problem to be solved. (Jo 1998: 184; author's translation from Korean citation)

As Pinder explains in his study on generation, people in Korean society are experiencing "the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous" (quoted from Mannheim, 1952: 283). It is also asserted that intergenerational conflict is one of three impending problems, besides class conflicts and regional conflicts, which await solution (Bak 1998: 12).

We may postulate that the generation gap or conflict is manifested in the various fields of society including family, school or company, and cultural forms such as mass media or arts. However, it suffices here to illustrate one of the most recent findings which shows generation gaps in the area of values and beliefs in Korean society.

According to Eun-Yeong Na and Jae-Ho Cha (2000), who most recently analyzed the changes in values and generation gaps between the 1970's and the 1990's in Korea, the most remarkable characteristics of the values of the late 1990's

Koreans were: (1) an increase in individualism emphasizing self and close family, (2) an increase in egalitarian attitude toward women (in terms of pursuing a career or social activity, and the decrease in adherence to chastity), and (3) an increase in self-assertiveness (Na and Cha 2000).

Their survey data also demonstrated that those younger generation's values which show a more distinct increase in generation gaps were an emphasis on abundant life styles, a de-emphasis on chastity and distinction based hierarchy, and an increase in individualism and self-assertiveness (Na and Cha 2000).

In general, the study of generations "has relevance both in the understanding of new forms of social organization as well as the study of social dynamics and change" (Prasad 1992: 22). This study, however, through the reception of the film, delimits the range of the topic and focuses on the main areas of conflicts in cultural values and beliefs held by the key filmmakers of the older generation and the university student audiences of the younger generation. The elucidation of the nature of generational conflicts will lead to the identification of a contemporary Korean society.

Before going into the analysis of students' reactions

to the film, it is necessary to remark briefly on the characteristic features of the socio-cultural environments where the younger generation have been living.

First of all, in order to understand the generation of university students, it helps to examine the changes which occurred in society after the 1970s when the younger generation were born and grew up. Jaeyeol Yee (2000) described the major changes in society in the last decades as follows:

Korea has achieved modernity in a very short period of time. Within only one generation, the agrarian society has been transformed into a modern and urban community. Complex organizations have proliferated during the rapid industrialization. The expansion of education has contributed to the diffusion of modern values. The country now maintains democratic institutions and modern corporations, which governs the routine life of the people (Yee 2000: 1).

Euisup Im (1994), in his study on social transformations in Korea, also characterized the major changes in Korean society throughout the 1970s and afterward as "industrialization," "urbanization," "expansion of higher education," "decline in population," "shift to a nuclear family," "increase of middle class," "diffusion of popular culture" and "internationalization."

We can postulate that the existence of such a socio-cultural milieu has played an important part in forming and affecting the culture of the younger generation. Building

on the general features of social transformations of the past and today, it is possible to categorize the distinctive characteristics of the younger generation at large in the following ways.

First, the younger generation are more oriented to consumerism than other generations, and they are the primary recipients and consumers of the recently flourishing mass media (cinema, video, MTV), the fashion or body-related industry (cosmetics, slimming and plastic surgery), the fast food industry and other emerging industries targeted for them. Second, new forms of communication media have enormously influenced their life styles and way of thinking as indicated in the naming of the younger generation as the "digital," "cyber," "net," or "video" generation. Third, since they have grown up as members of nuclear families, the younger generation tend to put more emphasis on individualism. Individual rooms, walkman, cellular phones and the internet form one part of the cultural environment that the younger generation are used to. Fourth, the younger generation tends to be exposed to western popular culture due to the opportunity to make trips to foreign countries and the expansion of mass media including satellite broadcasting.

In the next section, I will explore in detail how the student audience reacted to the film as a cultural text.

Students' Comments on Generational Gap and Oppositional Readings

First of all, a majority of students responded that the film is "unrealistic" and an improper representation of the "reality" of the society.

This film is not realistic to me as a man of age twenty. I cannot take the story in the film as a contemporary one and therefore can hardly comprehend the film. (Student 2; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The three main female characters are portrayed in an extremely unrealistic way which evinces that the director failed to portray the reality of contemporary Korean society as it is. (Student 3; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Frankly speaking, the film is not interesting to me. Especially, the theme of the film is so outdated and unrealistic. The filmmaker had better tell a story which the younger audience can sympathize with. (Student 4; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Some students commented that

Chimhyang reminds me of films made in the 1970s and 1980s. (Student 5; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

I am wondering if it is a story of the 1970s or 1980s, not the 1990s. (Student 6; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Another student expressed his impression of the film:

I guess that the dominant ideology in the society in which the older filmmakers were educated and influenced is unconsciously implanted in the film. (Student 7; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Many students also directly mentioned a "generational gap" as follows:

I vividly realized again that there is a big generational difference between the filmmakers and me. There are so many parts in the film which I could not fully understand even though the main characters seem to belong to the same generation as me. (Student 8; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

I found that the filmmakers are imbued with Confucian ideology. I felt a so-called "generation gap" in the film. (Student 9; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Students were especially disturbed by and showed their expressions of outrage at the images of women, sexism and patriarchal ideology depicted in the film. They attributed them to the outdated ideology of the filmmakers of the older generation. Interestingly enough, I found that the oppositional readings of the film in regard to those issues came from both female and male students. They commented in similar ways, but read the film against the key filmmakers of the older generation.

The distortion of the image of women seems to originate from the filmmakers' old-fashioned values, which shows that they adhere to the values of the older generation. I do not blame them for their different values. They may have different worldviews because they have lived in different ages. However,

they should have reflected contemporary values instead of sticking to old ones, which should be criticized. (Student 5; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The patriarchy is portrayed as too natural a phenomena in the film, which may be due to the age and the gender of the filmmakers because they have lived in a patriarchal society in the past. (Student 10; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The sexual discrimination in the film may be rooted in their age. (Student 11; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The film is too partial. They judged the contemporary society and the younger generation from their old-fashioned angle. The film reminded me why we need to keep up on the feminist movement. In short, the film failed to portray the thoughts and values of the youth. It just shows the ideology of patriarchy and male dominance, which proves that filmmakers cannot separate themselves from their own experiences and ideologies. (Student 9; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The values of three main female characters are not so different from those of the 1960s and 1970s. They are very passive and dependent. (Student 12; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The feminists would throw stones and spit on the film. (Student 13; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The female characters are all victims in the movie. They never take the initiative or act independently. They help the male character, but the final decision is always made by him, not by them. I was very disappointed that the cliché of the old-fashioned image of women still persists in a new film by well-known filmmakers. (Student 2; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The students' critical attitudes toward issues of

sexuality support Hayjeong Jo's (1998) argument that one of the areas in which the younger generation try to differentiate themselves from the older generation must be found in the discourse on sexuality and Hyeran Bak's (1993) assertion that thoughts on and attitudes toward women's position and role in family and society result in the generational gap. The following statement also shows one aspect of recent changing values on sexuality and gender relationships in Korea in general, although it is impossible to generalize, and it demonstrates that students align their criticism with the prevalent discourse on it.

Women now take the ideology of sexual morality as old-fashioned. Moreover, they attempt to establish their sexual subjecthood in a more positive way. They refuse to follow a custom that has considered women to be asexual and passive, and they try to obtain sexual rights as women. They have begun to take the double standard in sexual norms seriously and have defied the male-dominated sexuality which treats females as sexual objects and sexual commodities. (Jo Yeongmi 1999: 12; author's translation from Korean citation)

The Oppositional Reading 1: Prostitution

Scene #37.

A Beer Pub.

The night before *Chanu* (a hero in the film) enlists in the army. *Chanu*'s male and female friends, juniors (*hubae*) and seniors (*seonbae*) are having a farewell party for him in the beer pub.

Senior (*seonbae*): Hey guys! (Smiling) There is one thing that you cannot find in the army. Do you know what it is? You don't know it? I will show it to you tonight. Just follow me.

Everybody stands up and goes out of the beer pub triumphantly while leaving the female characters behind.

Scene # 38

Prostitution Quarter.

Prostitutes solicit the male characters. The male characters go inside accompanied by them.

The prostitution plays an important role in the film not because the film makes prostitution a central issue or portrays social problems of prostitution critically, but because the filmmakers set up prostitutes as central characters (*Seonhi* and *Jingyeong*) and use the related stories to transmit their main messages in the film. In TV and film magazine interviews, the director, screenwriter and cinematographer have repeatedly expressed their opinions on the message of the film with special references to the depiction of prostitutes as follows:

We wanted to portray in the film that a person, such as a prostitute, who is cast out from society, can preserve the scent of a real human being as far as if he/she cherished humanity. (author's translation from Korean citation)

Contrary to the filmmakers' intention, however, almost

all of the students strongly resisted what the filmmakers intended to say in the scene. They expressed extreme annoyance about the description of prostitution in the film and especially the male characters' attitudes towards it.

First of all, the research has found that their criticisms are not confined to the text in itself. They asserted their opinions beyond the scene itself and addressed broader social or cultural issues, even though such issues are not made explicit within the scene itself. As David Buckingham has demonstrated in *Public Secrets: EastEnders and its Audience*, the film "directly invites its viewers to make moral and ideological judgments" (Buckingham 1987: 174), and in criticizing the characters and stories, student viewers used the film "as a vehicle for working out their own ideological perspectives, or giving voice to their own needs or desires" (Buckingham 1987: 174-175). In other words, students commented on specific descriptions of characters or subject matters, for example, prostitution, as a means of cultural critique on Korean society in general.

In the scene about prostitution, the film shows the distorted sexuality of the youth and the commodification of sexuality in this society. (Student 14; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The scene reminded me how sexuality is conceived in the wrong way in our society. It also shows that males can enjoy sex freely without repentance while for females sexuality plays the role of a repressive mechanism in our society. (Student 15; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The scene reflects the ideology of male dominance and the inequality of gender in society. According to the patriarchy and Confucian ideology in our society, it is taken for granted that males are free to enjoy sex and to express their sexual instinct, but females should hide their sexual instinct and pretend to be passive to sexuality. Moreover, female's chastity is highly praised as a virtue, which demonstrates that there is a double standard for premarital sex between genders. Therefore, it is often said that prostitution is a necessary vice in society. People even take it for granted that a visit to the prostitution quarter is a rite of passage, as depicted in the film, and nobody would take it seriously. Under such circumstances, there should be only two kinds of women: a woman who sticks to chastity and a prostitute. Women are treated on an unequal basis in our society. (Student 1; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

In this type of reading, I have found that students' concerns extend beyond the film itself to such social issues as commodification of sexuality, inequality of sexuality between men and women and patriarchal ideology supporting discriminatory sexuality in Korean society. I have also discovered that their criticisms tend to revolve around the prevailing critical social discourses on sexuality at large in Korea, as follows.

It is said that moralistic discourse based on Confucianism has dominated the discourse on sexuality in Korea . . . In Confucianism, people tend to consider sexuality as a means to form and keep a

family rather than as individual pleasure or sexual desire . . . In the traditional society, from the perspective of men, people have formally interpreted sexuality in relation to procreation and marriage and consequently they did not take concubinage and prostitution seriously. Meanwhile, virginal purity and chastity have been forced on women. Thus, the traditional ideology of sexuality in Korea has served to divide women into sexually pure women and sexually corrupt ones and thereby has been an oppressive mechanism for women. (Jo Yeongmi 1999: 27-29; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

As David Buckingham noted, students' interpretations and reactions "are profoundly influenced by the broader social discourses in which they are interpellated" (Buckingham 1987: 2). Thus, the study reconfirms that the reading of the film is shaped by "a two-way relationship between viewer's lives and the narratives" in the film (Buckingham 1987: 2).

In the second type of reading shown below, students' comments on the film show how student viewers' real experiences play important roles in the way they interpret a film. As David Morley asserts, students as "subjects" of a text "bring their histories to bear on meaning production in a text" (Morley 1980: 164). Students, as the younger generation, have different cultural experiences and backgrounds and therefore their meaning-makings of the film tend to be constructed in a different way from what the filmmakers intended to convey. In this type of reading,

students also draw on their experiences to emphasize the "unreality" of the depiction of prostitution in the film and to relate it to generational gaps in the interpretation of the film.

I myself, as a university student, have never seen seniors (*seonbae*) take a junior (*hubae*) who enlists in the army to the prostitution quarter. Such a custom might have existed in the past and may still persist, but the film portrays a very rare and undesirable custom as if it is an inevitable rite of passage. That is a problem. (Student 16; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The female character, a prostitute in the film, must be a figure from the past who could not help prostituting herself due to poverty. We cannot find such a young girl any more in these days. Nowadays, such a young girl is only interested in making easy money. The scene does not add up to reality. (Student 17; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The third type of oppositional readings in the next section shows that students use their knowledge of other films or novels in order to criticize the filmmakers' uses of outmoded cinematic conventions or clichés of characterization or narrative. This type of reading highlights the fact that student's intertextual knowledge contributes to the interpretation of the film, just as their ideologies (as shown in the first type of reading) or real experiences (as shown in the second type of reading) do. The finding here supports Jacqueline Bobo's argument that "a viewer of a film (reader of a text) comes to the

moment of engagement with the work with a knowledge of the world and *a knowledge of other texts, or media products*"

(emphasis added) (Bobo 1988: 96).

The female character who is portrayed as a young prostitute of pure soul is a cinematic cliché. It is very conventional and old-fashioned. (Student 2; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The convention is that of the 1970s in a film of the 1990s. The cinematic clichés make the film monotonous and boring to watch. The characterization of a prostitute in the movie has been a conventional cliché which was frequently used in the movies of 1970s and 1980s. (Student 7; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

A brief, cursory look at one of the most popular genres of the 1960s and 1970s, known as the "genre of hostess," proves that students rightly point out that the filmmakers in this film reiterate the conventional cliché of those periods, as demonstrated in the following statement about the "genre of hostess":

In the 1960s and 1970s, one of the most popular genres in Korea was the "genre of hostess." It mainly dealt with the conflict between tradition and modernism, including the sexual ideology of gender, and resulted from the radical industrialization of the country. For example, "Hometown of Stars" (1974), a box office hit with a society in the beginning stage of industrialization in the 1970s as a backdrop depicted how an ordinary woman sunk to prostitution and finally committed suicide. (Ju 1999: 80; author's translation from Korean citation)

One of the students briefly summarize his negative reaction to the filmmakers' stereotyped description of a prostitute as a main character as follows:

I could not feel any sense of the real in the film because of overly conventionalized characterization. I do not understand which period the filmmakers want to talk about in the film. (Student 18; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The Oppositional Reading 2: Preference for Male Offspring and Image of Women

Scene #103

On the riverside.

Chanu: One thing? What did he (*Gwangho*) want from you?

Jingyeong: It's a baby.

Chanu: A baby?

Jingyeong: He wanted it from me.

Chanu: Is a baby so important?

Jingyeong: Yes, it is to him. However, his dream was broken because he cannot have a baby. He is infertile himself. Moreover, recently, he is often told that he is possessed of a tree ghost. He has gone more berserk now. It is a sort of self-torture.

Scene #105

In the middle of the woods.

Gwangho loudly shouts to co-workers.

Gwangho: Humble as I may appear, I am the only son in the fifth generation in a row in my family. Only one thing I need is a son in my family. Damn it! I brought a young concubine into the house to get a baby and looked forward to her pregnancy. However, I have heard no good news from her. Damn it!

A co-worker: See? I told you. Because you cut the old tree the other day. It is an evil consequence of the tree ghost.

Gwangho: I am not afraid of the tree ghost at all. Let's see if you, a ghost, will die, or I will die. You dare let my family tree die out! Damn it! You dare! Damn it!

Scene # 89

In a restaurant near a Buddhist temple.

Owner of the Restaurant: The family in that house is very weird.

Chanu: What do you mean by "weird?"

Owner: I mean, isn't it strange that an original wife and a concubine live together under the same roof in these days?

Chanu: (Shocked!)

Owner: The original wife has almost become a housemaid in spite of her status. I don't understand them at all.

Students unanimously criticized the inclusion of the above scenes in the film. They are certainly not tolerant towards the negative images of women in the film. This led them to question the ideological terms of reference of the

filmmakers which they perceived in the film and to apply their own critical frameworks to the film.

The scene shows a distorted image of women in a most extreme way. In the movie, *Gwangho* abandons his original wife and brings *Jingyeong* into his house with the expectation of having a baby. *Jingyeong* subsequently assumes the position of the original wife because she is expected to bear a baby. Consequently, the film portrays a woman as an instrument of propagation by showing that only a woman of fertility is qualified for a higher position in the family . . . The film also depicts women as voiceless and dependent on men, unable to challenge the paternalistic system of the society. A majority of the female audience were resentful of the scene. (Student 19; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

These criticisms again moved outside the fictional world of the film and became a debate, not merely about the representation of women in film, but also about the negative aspects of Korean culture in terms of sexuality and with special reference to people's preference for sons.

"Keeping a family tree through a male offspring" is an ideology, not a biological phenomena, in the Korean society. (Student 15; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

In the movie, the male character blames women for their infertility without taking his infertility into serious consideration. Through this I could make the interpretation that Korean society in the past was male-dominated and oriented to a preference for male offspring. (Student 20; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The following examples show how students related the fictional world to the cultural themes in general in order

to assert their opinions in a more concrete way.

Pedagogically speaking, I have found that these students' reactions to the film are good examples of the supremacy of the film as an educational means of cultivating student audiences' insights and thinking as cultural critics.

In the movie, the male character clings to a son. The female character, in spite of her hatred for him, also dreams of having a baby, which shows that Korean society still suffers from an obsession with sons. In our society, for example, *the Confucian sacrificial rite* reconfirms the importance of a male offspring because it is performed by male descendents. The family think highly of a male child because their eternal immortality would only be secured by *sacrificial rites* performed by their male offspring in the future. From the part of women, giving birth to sons has been instrumental for them in becoming a member of a family. An obsession with sons still persists in the society. It is not an exaggeration to say that women have existed as instruments for bearing male children in paternalistic Confucianism. (emphasis added) (Student 21; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Gwangho, in the film, considers a woman to be an instrument of parturition and treats women as if they are belongings of and inferior to men, which actually reflects only a small part of the ideology of the male sexuality in Korea. In this society, the idea that women are inferior to men is still prevalent. A *family register* would be a good example to verify it. In the *family register*, a woman has her name listed in the husband's *family register* as a wife, not in her original *family register*. A married woman has taken it for granted and has been obliged to live as a member of the family of her husband. The film makes me reflect on the meaning of women's lives in our society. (emphasis added) (Student 22; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Korea would be one of the countries which holds fast to the family. The filmmakers in the movie seem to align themselves with this in that the film is dominated by the ideology of descendants and the image of the ideal family with a baby. Anyway, I am annoyed by the fact that the *familism* in Korea is based on male-dominance and centers around the father-son relationship, which makes it an androcentric society. (emphasis added) (Student 23; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

It is significant here to note that students' cultural criticism shifts often to a debate about the film's lack of authenticity.

The main characters are unrealistic. In particular, in the case of *Jingyeong*, the characterization of her as a university graduate, a Buddhist nun, a serving girl in a tavern, and a concubine, is extremely unrealistic. It proves that the filmmakers do not represent contemporary society as it is. (Student 3; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

In relation to student viewers' criticisms of authenticity, I would assert that the students' comments on the film's lack of authenticity are based on a comparison between "what life is really like" and aspirations about "what life should be like." And the disagreement between the filmmakers and the student audience is a result of both different life experiences and different ideological positions between them.

It is too far-fetched. In a word, the film is too old-fashioned. The depiction of the women goes against the image of contemporary women. In these

days, women are becoming stronger and struggle to compete with men in every field of society. Consequently, the image of women has gotten stronger and more independent. The image of men has also changed a lot. In this respect, a depiction of society with a special reference to the images of men and women in the scene does not go well with the social reality. Every woman in the movie is bound to and dependent on men. (Student 24; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

As a man, I think that patriarchy could be favorable to men and to myself in general, but I argue that it should be changed. And the change should start with the transformation of the consciousness of the younger generation. (Student 21; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Students' comments on the plausibility of the characters and storylines are directly related to their judgments of the characters as "too far fetched" and the film as a misrepresentation of the social world by the filmmakers. Their responses would suggest that student viewers not only question elements which they consider as failing to adequately represent their experiences, but also directly reject, or provide oppositional readings of what filmmakers intended to claim in the film.

I cannot align myself with the awakening of the main character (*Chanu*), or the filmmakers' message because the female characters' lives, attitudes and values are so isolated from the reality. (Student 12; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Gwangho, in the scene, wields power over women. He is so paternalistic. He is also obsessed with succession of the family and treats women as inferior to men. Meanwhile, the original wife is submissive

to him and accepts her fate with resignation, in spite of her husband's infertility, and while living with a second wife. However, the characters are depicted in an extremely extraordinary way, which prevents me, as a member of the younger generation, from accepting the filmmakers' intention in the film. (Student 5; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

The Oppositional Reading 3: Family and Marriage

Scene #123

In *Jingyeong's* room.

Chanu tries to call the police to prove that *Jingyeong* is innocent, but *Jingyeong* stops him from reporting to the police.

Chanu: Let's call the police quickly. I saw it. He got stabbed through his own fault.

Jingyeong shakes her head.

Jingyeong: No. I killed him.

Chanu: What? Why do you say that?

Jingyeong: I hated him, but he enabled me to realize a very important thing in my life.

Chanu: . . .

Jingyeong: I wondered if I could have a baby and live together with a husband and a baby. It was really vague to me. However, he gave me a hope to have a baby and a family. When I slept with him every night, I imagined fresh plants and trees growing on my body. I dreamt a miracle-like dream that I could have a baby . . . Hug me please.

Chanu hugs her lovingly.

Jingyeong: Don't show me a sad face. I am free. I

am freedom myself. Let's have a celebration of freedom.

She undresses herself and is naked. They have sex as a celebration of freedom.

Scene # 125

Yura's apartment.

Yura: What did you do in the temple on earth? Did you fall in love with a ghost there?

Chanu: I am sorry. I wanted to bring *Chimhyang* (incense made from sunken oak) to you, but I couldn't.

Yura: Are you a nut? How can there be *Chimhyang* in these days? You must be a fool to seek for such a thing . . . By the way, I gave much thought to our relationship while you were away. If you are O.K., I would like to marry you. Did you think about that? What do you think of it?

. . .

Chanu brings out his luggage.

Scene # 128

In an interview room of the prison.

Jingyeong: What brought you here?

Chanu: Because I missed the scent of a real human being so much.

. . .

Chanu: *Jingyeong!* Prepare for a wedding dress until I come here next time.

Jingyeong: What did you say?

Chanu: A beautiful wedding dress.

Jingyeong smiles a happy smile through her. *Chanu* also smiles.

Students commented that the last episodes surrounding the marriage in the film are particularly bad. I have found that this ending is one of the areas where the student audience and the filmmakers disagree with each other most. One of the students succinctly points out the ideology of the film as follows:

The film portrays a woman's happiness as if it totally depends on whether she gets married and has a family or not, and consequently it puts an emphasis on the myth of family. (Student 3; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Some of the students expressed criticism that the female characters are presented as unrealistically passive. They were especially outraged at the female characters' failures to assert themselves in ways they would have wished to do in their own lives. As shown in "Oppositional Reading 1" and "Oppositional Reading 2," students' readings of these episodes also demonstrate that they tend to relate the actual stories and the characters' reactions in the stories to the social world, and that they extend their criticism to include more general comments on the overall culture in Korean society.

After all, in the movie, three women's goals in their lives are portrayed as romantic love with a man, marriage and a happy family. Throughout the film,

all of the three women are involved in marriage: *Seonhi* (a prostitute) tells *Chanu* that she wants to introduce him to her parents; *Yura* (*Chanu*'s female friend) expresses her desire to get married to *Chanu* in the end of the film; finally, *Chanu* proposes a marriage to *Jingyeong* in the last scene as a means of providing her with a place to find peace. Even in these days, many women still believe in a happy home and a happy family, beliefs which must be influenced by the ideology of paternalism. In short, the three women in the movie are stereotypical figures who tend to believe that women's lives are decided and directed by men. As people say, I argue that the enemy of women are women themselves, especially their ideologies and ways of life contrived by themselves in society. (Student 12; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Some students discerned "educational" intentions in the film and directly criticized the filmmaker's ideology of patriarchy and male dominance in reference to the scene on marriage and family:

The film fails to demythologize the stereotypical image of Korean women who tend to be depicted as dependent on men when it shows that even *Yura*, who is portrayed as independent and a proponent of sexual freedom in the beginning of the film, finally ends up becoming dependent on *Chanu* on the matter of marriage. (Student 19; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

While the film attempts to present humanism as a message, the ideology of patriarchy and male-dominance is hidden and revealed throughout the film. All of the three female characters in the film find their hopes and new lives through love and marriage with *Chanu*. I can hardly understand why they obtain freedom, emancipation or salvation through the male character. (Student 7; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

I think that the male character in the film represents the voice of the filmmakers. In other words, they are looking at women through their male-dominated eyes. I realized that a film takes on different colors depending on whose voice is implanted in the film and who directs the film. (Student 25; written in Korean by student and translated by author)

Students' criticisms of the misrepresentation of family and gender leads to a question of the origin of the ideology of family in Korean society which the filmmakers tend to base their thoughts on. The following argument by Hyejeong Jo will balance the students' oppositional readings of the text and the filmmakers' ideology in relation to family.

For men, a family means a patrilineal extended family system, but, for women, a family signifies 'uterine family' based on their children as well as their birthplace (their maiden home). Therefore, there is a big difference between men and women in terms of ways of looking at family. However, the traditionally prevalent image of family has been mainly dominated by the perspective of the male as a patriarch, not by that of whole members of a family. It explains that the public discourse on family has reflected an ideology of men, which prevents people from facing up to the reality of the family in society . . . Especially, due to the rapid change in society and the consequent differences in experiences between males and females, and between different generations, the members of a family have already lost any appropriate means of communication among them. (Jo 1998: 327; author's translation from Korean citation)

In terms of generational gaps and the idea of family and

gender, Bak Hyeran also articulates that "the gap in reference to the idea of family and kinship relationships is much wider and deeper than we imagine" and that "the primary factor for the generational gap comes from different thoughts and attitudes on the position and role of women in the family" (Bak 1993: 87).

As a whole, student viewers' reception of the film demonstrates that their oppositional readings of the film revolve around representations of women, sexuality, family and patriarchy which many students directly ascribed to the influence of traditional Confucian values. These findings support the fact that, in Korean society in general, the most conflict between the older generation and the younger generation occurs in the areas of ideas, beliefs and sentiments on family, marriage and gender by which they articulate and communicate about their world. (Jo Seongnam 1999)

The recent research (Na and Cha 2000; Jo Seongnam 1999) on the generation gaps between the youth and the elderly in Korean society makes specific reference to values and beliefs and supports the major findings of the oppositional reading of the students in my study.

In a research survey on the generational difference in attitudes toward traditional values such as family,

marriage and offspring, Seongnam Jo (1999) found that the younger generation put more emphasis on gender equality and equality in family structure and express more resistance against traditional family values. Based on her findings, she argues that attitudes toward the role and social activity of women should be considered as important variables in distinguishing the generational difference and goes further to maintain that the traditional attitudes towards the role and position of women in the family and society will soon disappear.

Eun-Yeong Na and Jae-Ho Cha (2000) conducted survey research on the generational gap between the 1970s and the 1990s with specific reference to changes in attitudes toward the position of women in the family as well as society. They demonstrated that "in the 1970s, more than half of those surveyed responded that a married woman belonged at home while in the 1990's, more than half responded that a married woman should pursue her own career" (Na and Cha 2000: 15). In this vein, Seongnam Jo characterized the meaning of marriage in traditional society in Korea as follows:

In the past, marriage has played the role of an instrument of parturition, and marriage has meant the production of children to the older generation. In particular, the birth of a son in the family was

considered more important than other matters. (Jo 1999; author's translation from Korean citation)

On the other hand, her research shows that there is an increase in the tendency of the number of the younger generation to put less emphasis on the importance of a male descendent or children themselves in the family, as evidenced by the students' resistance to the film. For example, findings indicate that 20.9 % of the respondents in their 50's responded that a male descendent is a necessary component of the family, while only 9.5 % of the respondents in their 20's answered in a similar way. Meanwhile, 25.9 % of those in their 20's responded that they do not necessarily prefer to have children, but only 5.8 % of those in their 50's answered in that way. This shows that there is a noticeable generational difference in terms of emphasis on the importance of a male descendent or children in the family.

Seongnam Jo concluded that

The Confucian tradition has provided social norms which have defined the role of women, the meaning of marriage, the position of a son in the family, as well as family relationships. However, the Confucian values are being challenged due to the industrialization, urbanization and internalization of the society in Korea. (Jo 1999: 33; author's translation from Korean citation)

Building on the students' oppositional readings of the

film and the supporting materials from recent studies of the generation gaps briefly discussed above, it can be tentatively concluded that the area of major conflicts between the younger students and the older filmmakers is found in their different interpretations of traditional Confucian values (for example, patriarchy, gender inequality or familism), and that this is a result of the transitional character of Korean society as indicated by Inglehart (1997: 17).

In short, while the younger generation have been educated according to traditional Confucian culture in the arena of family or school, at the same time they are also experiencing newly emerging socio-cultural environments (consumerism, popular culture or new media) in their everyday lives in which traditional Confucian values have become less influential. Hence, the generation gap widens between the older generation and them, which sufficiently explicates where the students' oppositional readings of the film in this study came from.

