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Mimang : Strolling through the city with a string of hypotheses

“Mimang”, the screen debut of rising Korean director Kim Taeyang, was released in the fall of 2023. The film follows the simple events of a young woman and man who reunite on the streets of Seoul and stroll through the city chatting casually. Instead of intense dramatic conflict or consequences, the film shows us fragments of the characters’ lives and moments of human connection in three chapters, including another man who confesses his love for the female in the second chapter, and the passing of the two protagonists’ common friend in the third chapter. As the years go by, the cityscape changes, and the people and relationships within it flow slowly in the river of the mind. “Mimang” does not intend to define the relationships among people, nor does it dwell on love and regret, but more on presenting a real state of life.

We could stroll through the bustling streets of Seoul together, from bright sun to drizzling rain. Our conversations would seem to encompass everything and yet nothing that truly matters. We would talk about the reconstruction and relocation of the city’s buildings, the sword held by the national hero, and how your painting career is going. As words and phrases flow from our mouths, I would be curious about your life and concerned about your feelings, but never breaking the calm surface of the lake, even if the water is inevitably turned up under the hidden waves. If I ran into my ex-girlfriend on the street, I’m sure we’d be interacting just like the female and male protagonists in “Mimang”. Same as the characters in the film, We are all good at noticing the details of human relationships and are prone to many subtle emotions, but we do not consider “release” as an outlet for our emotions. On the contrary, burying the truest affections in our hearts forever is what we are most happy to do. The film “Mimang” is a perfect example of this distinctly East Asian style. The plot of the movie is very faint, showing everyone’s life in a vague, mysterious and fragmented way. As for the emotions and motivations of the characters are not clearly shown to the audience, but are more obscured behind the performance.

If the film only dealt with the inner world of the characters in a completely hidden way, then the creators would not have been clever in their expression. However, what is valuable in Mimang is not complete silence, but a kind of gaps similar to that of the lotus flowers showing a little sharp corner. Gap refers to what is left unsaid. The German linguist Wolfgang Iser focuses on the reader’s reception of the text during the

reading process. He sees blankness as a narrative strategy and at the same time a point of intersection between the text and the readers. That is, authors sometimes deliberately hide parts of their narratives to provoke readers to fill in and think deeply on their own (Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading : A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). When we consider the movie “Mimang” as a text, it is Yi Sunshin’s sculpture that is responsible for triggering the “gap effect”, which establishes another layer of historical context in the film: Imjin war, Japanese invasion of Korea 1592-1598. The Ming army aided Joseon in the war, which turned into an international war among the three East Asian countries. In seven years, the whole Korean Peninsula could not escape the whirlpool of war. As a result, the Imjin War was deeply rooted in the history of late Joseon and modern Korea. Yi Sunshin, who is mentioned in the movie, is the national hero of this war. “War Diary”, a diary written by Yi Sunshin from January 1, 1592 to November 17, 1598, which records the events during the Imjin War, is regarded as a national treasure by the Korean government. This work is actually a combination of a commander’s battle record and a private diary, containing both war conditions and Yi Sunshin’s observations and feelings about life. Interestingly, the history documented in the “War Diary” does not align with the history of Joseon as recorded in world history and other historical documents of Joseon. For example, the famous “Battle of the Myeongryang Sea” is recorded in the history of modern Korea as a great victory in which Yi Sunshin’s 12-13 warships fought against 133 Japanese warships and 200 transports, sank 31 Japanese ships, wounded 92 Japanese ships, killed 9,000 Japanese soldiers, and beheaded the other side’s admiral. But in “War Diary”, only a succinct description, “thief ship has thirty crashed”. We can no longer know what history really looks like, but the mismatch between the various narratives due to differences provokes us to think further about the key issue of reliability of narratives. This is precisely perhaps the path that the director wants to lead us on.

In the film, the female protagonist and the two male roles have discussed that the sculpture of Yi Sunshin is holding the sword with his right hand, but in reality, Admiral Yi is left-handed. They also mentioned that the sculpture’s face might not be Yi Sunshin’s real face. Meanwhile, in the second chapter of “Mimang”, the female protagonist confesses to the man who pursues her that she is a person who likes to make hypotheses. We can interpret this as the female firing signals to the audience that her narratives are not always reliable. Furthermore, in the film, it is worth noting that the

lives of the characters are never directly depicted and presented to the audience, but only continuously revealed through their oral narratives, which is exactly a kind of unreliable testimony. So, there seems to be an intertextuality between the truths depicted in the film and the historical truths revealed in the diaries. Intertextuality intends to emphasize that any single text is not self-sufficient, and its meaning is created in the process of cross-referencing with other texts (Kristeva, Julia. *Sēmeiōtikē : recherches pour une sémanalyse*. Éditions du Seuil, 1969). Through Yi Sunshin's diary, one realizes the unreliability of historical narratives; Yi Sunshin's sculpture reveals that the truth can be altered; and the personal narratives of the female protagonist and the hidden nature of the real life also reflect a similar viewpoint. We can see the film reinforces the expression of unreliable testimony on the three levels.

Therefore, when "Mimang" ends with the female character saying she is dating a man with children, is that the truth of her life or not? We have to be skeptical about that. Even the film deliberately leaves the door open for our skepticism. It is she who first says goodbye to the man who had a crush on her in Chapter 2, and the disappointed look on the man's face at the subway exit suggests that their relationship is not headed for romance. So when the female protagonist suddenly asks how to be a good stepmother to her children in the ambiguously intimate atmosphere with the male protagonist in Chapter 3, I didn't assume that her life was as she described it. Perhaps it was just a way for her to extinguish the chances of the two rekindling their relationship. Because a woman who loves to hypothesize is inevitably a woman who wants to take the initiative, both in life and in love. Because hypotheses represent possibilities.

With this in mind, the hidden emotions and partially concealed narratives in the film take on greater significance and function: they are the logical underpinnings that allow the unreliable narrative to take hold. Because the emotions that are not spread out under the gaze are the driving force of the unreliable narrative, the trick-like narrative discourse instead exposes the scent of restrained emotions, thus creating an intriguing tension. In the final scene of the film, the camera is synchronized with the trajectory of the bus. The changes in the city bring uncertainty, and we don't know if the female protagonist and the male character will meet again as they did at the beginning of the film, just as we don't know if we will see the person who made us want to make assumptions again the next day.

### Works Cited

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