

Choi Guk-In, Minor Diaspora, and *Year of the Dragon*: From Chongjin to Shanghai, Moscow and Almaty

Chris Berry
(King’s College London)

Abstract

This essay examines the idea of “minor diaspora” through the case study of Choi Guk-In’s biography and his co-directed film, *Year of the Dragon* [Год Дракона, 1981]. Engaging with migration, sojourning, exile and minor diaspora, double diaspora and internal diaspora, it uses analysis of forms and forces driving population movements to distinguish key concepts within the framework of migration and diaspora that highlight salient differences amongst “Sino-Korean screen connections.” Turning to Choi and *Year of the Dragon*, it focuses on understanding both the idea of minor diaspora and the film through minor-to-minor diasporic and ethnic relations. By attending to the film’s status as a connection between the North Korean diaspora within the Korean diaspora in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Uyghur diaspora in the Kazakh SSR, as well as the Kazakh—North Korean co-direction of the film, it hopes to bring out new meanings and enable us to see the tactics adopted by the otherwise voiceless.

Keywords: Diaspora, Migration, Choi Guk-In, *Year of the Dragon*, Sino-Korean Screen Connections.

Introduction

The *Situations* 2024 conference theme of “minor diasporas in Asia and beyond” has prompted me to think about how this idea might improve my work. I am a film scholar and not a migration scholar. One of my areas of interest is what I call “Sino-Korean screen connections.”¹ The conference theme has made me realize that those connections are also often migration stories. Some of them are also diaspora stories, and a number are minor diaspora stories.

The key case study for this essay, which I will return to in the final sections, is a particular Sino-Korean screen connection. It consists of the multiple journeys of Choi Guk-In [최국인, Гук ИИ Цюй]. He travelled from Chongjin in colonial Chosun Korea to Shanghai in what was the Republic of China, back to the People’s Republic of Korea—soon to become the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea—then to Moscow in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and from there to Almaty in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), now Kazakhstan. I first became aware of Choi’s story from Kim Soyoung’s documentary, *Goodbye My Love, North Korea* [굿바이 마이 러브, NK, 2017], which focuses on the North Korean diaspora in the former Soviet Union and, in particular, a group of filmmakers. Given that this is a smaller diaspora within the larger *Koryosaram* Korean diaspora in the USSR, the majority of whom live in the Central Asian republics, I think it qualifies as a “minor diaspora in Asia and beyond.”

It is in the Kazakh SSR that Choi’s work becomes relevant to my interest in Sino-Korean screen connections. At the Kazakhfilm Studio in Almaty in 1981, he co-directed a film called *Year of the Dragon* [Год Дракона] with Asanali Ashimov. This is not to be confused with the Hollywood 1985 film directed by Michael Cimino, starring Mickey Rourke, also known as *Year of the Dragon*. Nor is it to be mistaken for the 1973 Bruce Lee film, *Enter the Dragon* [龙争虎斗, Longzheng Hudou] directed by Robert Clouse, or the 1972 Bruce Lee film *Way of the Dragon* [猛龙过江, Menglong Guojiang] directed by Lee, which is also known as *Return of the Dragon!* Choi and Ashimov’s 1981 *Year of the Dragon* is a historical action-adventure film that depicts the Qing Dynasty conquest of what is most widely known today as Xinjiang, and some people call



Figure 1. Poster for *Year of the Dragon* (1981)

East Turkestan. Xinjiang is part of the People's Republic of China today, so Choi's co-direction makes for the Sino-Korean screen connection behind the film.

The call for papers for the 2024 *Situations* conference had two moments of conceptual instability, and these made me realize that both “minor diaspora” and “diaspora” are by no means straightforward or fixed concepts. First, although the call enjoined us to think about minor diasporas, it also stated that “. . . all diasporas by their very nature constitute a site of minority.”² If all diasporas are “minor,” the term “minor diaspora” could be redundant. Second, immediately after this statement, the call went on to explain that “minor” can be understood through Shih and Lionnet's idea of “minor transnationalism” to refer to those diasporic

subjects who are doubly minoritized not only in relation to the dominant cultures but also to the general discourses on diaspora.³ Shih and Lionnet emphasize lateral connections—diaspora to diaspora, and minor to minor as potentially productive in their disruption of domination. However, the same Shih Shu-mei invoked here has also written an essay called “Against Diaspora,” in which she argues that all diasporas must have an expiry date, so to speak—a moment when the diasporan is allowed to become a local.⁴

In the face of these indeed valid reservations around both “minor diaspora” and “diaspora,” I want to argue that both are still useful as analytical tools. But to make that argument, I do three things. First, I examine the larger framework of migration and diaspora to begin to tease out some definitional distinctions that can help us to understand the variety of Sino-Korean screen connections, including the case of Choi and *Year of the Dragon*. They are useful because they highlight and differentiate the forces driving the connections and also the types of relationships between the states and individuals involved. Second, I turn to Shih’s objections to diaspora and her focus on the temporality of diaspora to further define the specificity of the idea of diaspora as I want to use it here.

Third, I return to the idea of “minor diaspora” as lateral minor-to-minor connection, disrupting or at least cutting across major-to-major and major-to-minor relations. By the time Choi Guk-In defected from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to the USSR, the rhetoric of socialist internationalist ideals had long ago worn thin. Here, I will argue that thinking about how Choi’s North Korean defector status makes him a minor diasporan within the minor diaspora of Koreans in the USSR may lead us to see his co-directed film, *Year of the Dragon*, in new ways. Furthermore, thinking about the relations between Kazakhs and Uyghurs as minority ethnic groups and, in the case of the Uyghurs, another minor diaspora in the Soviet Union, can also open up new possible understandings of the film in the context of the Soviet Union in the early 1980s as a site that carries ironic, poignant, and faint echoes of the liberatory potential driving the earlier dream of internationalism.

Migration Stories, Diaspora Stories

Kim Soyoung's film, *Goodbye My Love, North Korea*, the film that first drew my attention to Choi Guk-In and *Year of the Dragon*, is part of her work on rethinking Korean cinema as what she calls "trans-cinema." My own interest in exploring Sino-Korean screen connections was inspired by her project. Kim's "trans" has nothing to do with the LGBTQIA "trans." Instead, her use of the term is a response to globalization and the shift away from the old approach to national cinema as films by filmmakers from a certain country for audiences in that country. Kim argued for a new understanding of Korean cinema and by extension Korea and Korean-ness as crossing borders and being multiple and diverse.⁵

There is an echo here with diaspora studies. One of the original appeals of diaspora studies was also its capacity to spotlight people, experiences, and phenomena neglected by the assumptions of "methodological nationalism." I want to show how diaspora—including minor diaspora—can add specificity and nuance to our understanding of trans-cinema phenomena such as Sino-Korean screen connections. However, in the initial surge of excitement that followed writing such as James Clifford's and William Safran's famous essays on diaspora and the rapid development of the research into a field,⁶ there were expressions of concern. Rogers Brubaker wrote that the term was becoming used so widely that it might be "stretched" to the point of losing definition and therefore explicatory power.⁷ So, before getting to "minor diasporas," it is necessary to return to the relationship between migration and diaspora and explain how those terms are being used here. In the process, I hope to show how a toolkit of sufficiently defined concepts and ideas related to migration and diaspora can help us to understand the specificity of Choi Guk-In's experience and *Year of the Dragon* within Sino-Korean screen connections.

All migration stories are stories about movement away from a space of origin thought of as "home." But they may be "internal migration" events that involve no crossing of national borders. For example, noting 2009 Chinese government statistics that claim 229.8 million rural migrant workers, the International Labour Organization designates China as the country having the world's greatest internal migrations

today.⁸ Historically, the USSR was also characterised by massive internal migration movements throughout its history. But whereas today's internal migrations in the People's Republic of China are driven by the market economy's labour demands, in the USSR both planned economy industrialization and the forced migration of borderland populations deemed untrustworthy led to the transformation of Central Asia and its ethnic composition.⁹

However, even from the barebones description given earlier, it is clear that Choi Guk-In's experiences are not internal and do involve border-crossing migrations. We can make a further distinction by considering the possibility of return. Chinese internal migrants may return home. Indeed, annual trips home for the Spring Festival break that marks the lunar new year are a feature of contemporary Chinese internal migration. Furthermore, the *hukou* household registration system ties these migrants to their original homes. When migration, internal or cross-border, is marked by return, it becomes a sojourn. When Choi Guk-In returned to the Korean peninsula from Shanghai, where he had been taken by his parents, his stay in China became a sojourn.

Because a prerequisite for a population to be understood as a diaspora is distance not just from home but from one's homeland, it is characterized by cross-border migration. Furthermore, it has to be a permanent migration away, and return may be blocked for political and other reasons. But we also need to note that not all members of diaspora communities are border-crossing migrants, for many are born in the diaspora. One of the arguments I make in my research on Sino-Korean screen connections is that they constitute a "history in fragments." This fragmentation is a result of the experience of modernity not as an internal, linear, and gradual development, but as a project violently and explosively imposed from outside, evident in various ways including colonial conquest and the Cold War divisions that persist to this day. The result has been multiple generations of Koreans living outside the Korean peninsula, most of them born within the borders of the same state where they live now.

In Choi Guk-In's case, his story is clearly both a migration story and a cross-border one. But if we look at other "fragments" composing

Sino-Korean screen connections, we can find diasporans who were not migrants. The filmmaker Zhang Lü [张律], whose Korean name is Jang Ryul [장률], is a third generation Chinese Korean. He was born in the city of Yanji in Yanbian Autonomous Korean Prefecture in China on the borders with North Korea in 1962. He grew up there to become a Professor of Chinese Literature before taking up filmmaking.¹⁰ I do not know the full details of his family background, but most of the ethnic Koreans born in China are there because their ancestors moved there several generations ago. In this sense, they are diasporans but not themselves migrants. The same is true of the group of second-generation Japanese Korean filmmakers who emerged as early as the 1970s to direct films in what is known as Zainichi Cinema, although that goes beyond my Sino-Korean framework.¹¹

Comparing Zhang Lü and Choi Guk-in's stories also highlights other ways to use the idea of the sojourner within the migration and diaspora framework to specify and nuance different patterns of trans-cinema. Both are not only involved in outward movements away from the Korean peninsula, but also movements towards the Korean peninsula. Many, including probably Zhang Lü's ancestors, went northwards into what is today Northeast China, but which after 1931 became part of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. As Michael Kim points out, postcolonial Korean discourse has emphasized participation in the Korean independence movement in these areas, but the pursuit of economic opportunity was also important in many cases.¹² Another option was Shanghai, which required no visa to enter at the time, making it a "port of last resort" for refugees.¹³ Because it was so easy to enter and also so cosmopolitan, a substantial and active Korean émigré community grew there.¹⁴ Although we do not know if their motivation was political or economic or both, Choi Guk-In's parents took him there as an 8-year-old boy in 1934.¹⁵

After the end of Japanese colonial occupation of the Korean peninsula, Choi Guk-In returned to his homeland in the North and the fledgling People's Republic of Korea, which was established in 1945 and became the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948. In doing so, his status in China changed retrospectively from being a migrant and

probably also a diasporan and an exile to having been a sojourner. In recent years, Zhang Lü has also moved to the Korean peninsula, and most of his films are produced and shot in South Korea now. As far as I know, no element of force or desperation was involved in this move; rather, Zhang moved in pursuit of better opportunities. So, this move would be a transition from being a diasporan by birth but not a migrant, to becoming an economic or perhaps even “cultural” migrant. In the sense implied in Israel’s Law of Return,¹⁶ it also makes him a returnee, even though he was not born there. Although there is no equivalent in South Korea to the Israeli law that entitles any Jew to move there regardless of where they were born, there are laws that enable ethnic Koreans to settle there.¹⁷ However, although he is a returnee, not having been born in Korea, he cannot be considered as a sojourner.

Against Diaspora and the Temporality of Flows

The examples above give just a few illustrations of how different patterns of migration and different forces driving them generate a variety of terms that can be used to differentiate the fragments composing Sino-Korean screen connections. But the examples of both Choi and Zhang’s changing status as they move also remind us that diaspora and migration are not only spatial but also temporal, as Shelly Chan has emphasized.¹⁸ This temporality of diaspora also takes us to Shih Shu-mei’s demand that diaspora should have an end date.¹⁹ On one hand, we have a potentially positive evaluation of minor diaspora, borrowing from Shih and Lionnet’s idea of minor transnationalism, as something that may disrupt structures of domination. But on the other hand, we have Shih’s warning against diaspora. So, before turning to the potential of minor diaspora as an analytical concept, it is also important to note its drawbacks as an experience.

Shih’s critique of the over-valuation of diaspora is based on the idea that diaspora freezes people in a specific kind of double minoritization. On one hand, diasporans are minoritized by the place they have moved to and not allowed to become fully local. For example, how many generations does it take before Chinese Americans will simply become

“Americans”? In this instance, of course, the issue of visible difference, codified as race, further specifies the experience, because white Americans are not usually asked where they come from, and, even if they are, they are not then usually spoken of as part of, for example, an “Italian diaspora.” On the other hand, diaspora also freezes diasporans outside the space designated as the homeland.

What about China? Do Sino-Korean screen connections demonstrate that members of the Korean diaspora in China can become simply local? The fact that Zhang Lü was a Professor of Chinese Literature suggests that maybe he could at least become highly integrated. But the issue is more complex than that. To understand it more fully, we need to consider that ethnicity is understood differently in different places. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) constitution declares it is a nation-state [国家, *guojia*] composed of 56 equal ethnic groups [民族, *minzu*]. Koreans are one of those constitutionally equal *minzu* ethnic groups. The Chinese government classifies all the *minzu* except for the majority Han Chinese as “ethnic minorities” [少数民族 *shaoshu minzu*], including the Korean *minzu*. They are not spoken of as a Korean diaspora within China, not least because that might suggest they have allegiances outside China. On one hand, the constitution views all recognized ethnic groups as equal and fully internal to the PRC, but on the other, the “ethnic minority” tag opens up questions about just how equal those minorities are at the same time as it discourages any perception of ties elsewhere.

Another example from Sino-Korean screen connections of someone localized rather than marked as a member of the Korean diaspora would be Jin Yan [金焰], or Kim Yom [김염] in Korean. He was taken to China as an infant just after the Japanese took over Korea. His father was an independence activist fleeing Japanese colonial police. Therefore, he was both a migrant and a member of the Korean diaspora in China. In Shanghai he became China’s most popular male film star, and he adopted the English stage name of Raymond King. Known also as the “Rudolph Valentino of Shanghai,” he held Chinese citizenship, was a hero of the left, and acted in Chinese films into the late 1950s, until his health declined.²⁰

If one side of the double minoritization implied by diaspora is the

question of becoming local, the other side is the claim of the country of origin. In “Against Diaspora,” Shih is particularly concerned with China’s policy towards and claims over those ethnic Chinese living outside the current borders of the People’s Republic of China. In so far as the putative homeland has a call on the members of the diaspora, exercised for example by refusing to recognize dual citizenship, it also prevents or limits their ability to become “at home” where they are living now.

Shih emphasizes that being in a diaspora is an experience of vulnerability, alienated from both the homeland left behind and the putative new homeland. Both her ethical intervention against the over-valuation of diaspora and the examples of highly integrated figures like Zhang Lü and Jin Yan in China help to further hone our understanding of diaspora. Just being able to trace ancestors across borders does not automatically make one a member of a diaspora. Those ancestors must have been in flight, whether for political, economic, or other reasons. And one has to be in some way not fully local. In other words, one does not quite fit, and this quality that can be very difficult as an experience is precisely what makes diaspora always minor to some degree and unsettling for the established order.

Choi Guk-In and Minor Diaspora

With these distinctions between migration, sojourning and diaspora in mind, we can see that in the Kazakh SSR Choi Guk-In was certainly a migrant and a member of a diaspora. In his earlier incarnation as a member of the Korean diaspora in Shanghai, he was in flight from Japanese-occupied Chosun. But in the Kazakh SSR he was in effect a political refugee or defector from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union’s self-image was of internationalism and fraternal relations among supposedly equal socialist countries. On the other hand, the usual imagination of the USSR in many places is of a state that many people tried to flee and defect from. Choi’s minor diasporan experience unsettles both these dominant images.

The origins of this unusual turn of events lie in the decision to send

eight students from Pyongyang to the famous Moscow film school, the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, known as VGIK, in the early 1950s. As Kim Soyoun's film *Goodbye My Love, North Korea* recounts, while they were there, the DPRK was turned upside down by political purges and power struggles within the government. Khrushchev denounced Stalin's cult of personality in 1956, following Stalin's death. Some of the eight North Koreans at VGIK made similar criticisms about Kim Il-Sung, possibly expecting Kim to be overthrown. But Kim stayed in power. Fearful of what would happen to them if they returned to Pyongyang, they asked to be able to stay in the Soviet Union after graduation. Effectively, they applied for political asylum. Perhaps surprisingly, they were granted it. At this point, Choi's anticipated sojourn in the USSR was transformed into diaspora and exile.

When he left VGIK, Choi was assigned to the Kazakhfilm Studio in Almaty. There he became a member of the Korean diaspora in Central Asia. According to German Kim, the Korean diaspora consisted of three populations. The earliest and largest component traced their roots to economic flight into far eastern Russia in the nineteenth century. In 1937, Stalin became doubtful of their loyalty to the Soviet Union and deported them into Central Asia, as he did with many other ethnic groups. Here they became a political diaspora, known to themselves and others as the "*Koryo-saram*."²¹

The original *Koryo-saram* were joined by Koreans from Sakhalin Island after the USSR took over the whole island at the end of World War Two, and then by North Koreans such as Choi. Because these two waves of *Koryo-saram* had already been diasporans prior to their relocation to Central Asia, we can understand this relocation as an experience of double diaspora: having outlived their diasporic status in far eastern Russia and on Sakhalin and settled into new homelands, they were again uprooted. And, because all this occurred within the USSR but across the borders of the republics composing it, perhaps we can also consider this as a form of internal diaspora.

Although the North Koreans were a very small number among the overall *Koryo-saram* population, German Kim has noted that their command of the Korean language and their relatively high levels of

education gave them a more prominent position and enabled them to take on important cultural roles.²² Nevertheless, however privileged they were, the North Koreans were a minor diaspora within the larger *Koryo-saram* diaspora, not only numerically, but also because the Stalin-era deportation that was a fundamental cultural memory for most members of the diaspora was not part of their direct experience. Ironically, the same state that drove the majority of the *Koryo-saram* population into exile rescued the North Koreans.

Just as we need to understand how ethnicity is conceptualized and practised in the People's Republic of China to grasp some of the specificities of Korean experiences there, we need to do the same thing for the Soviet Union. Among the ethnic minority peoples of the Soviet Union, a clear distinction can be made between those whose homelands lie within the USSR, and those, like the *Koryo-saram* and the Volga Germans, who trace their origins to homelands elsewhere. Stalin defined a national people as those sharing a common culture, language and territory. Those whose origins lay within the USSR and were recognised as such became the "titular nations"—the national peoples whose territories formed the basis of the union republics that composed the USSR and the smaller autonomous regions within them, which were drawn up on the basis of this definition and named after these national peoples.²³ This federation of republics was produced, in principle, in contrast to the Tsarist Russian Empire, even though it continued to be ruled from Moscow. However, the *Koryo-saram* were never recognized as having territory within the USSR, and so they were doubly minoritized in relation first to the USSR as a whole and second to the titular nations where they lived. In this sense, Choi Guk-In and the North Koreans in the USSR were a minor diaspora within a minor diaspora.

Year of the Dragon: Voice of the Minor Diasporas?

Turning now to Choi's co-directed film, *Year of the Dragon*, paying attention to the complex minor-to-minor dimensions at work in the film underneath the major forces shaping it significantly informs the ways in which it can be understood. According to Choi in his interview for

Kim Soyoungh's documentary *Goodbye My Love, North Korea, Year of the Dragon* was made in response to the desire of the Soviet government for a film that would criticize China. The People's Republic of China and the USSR's fraternal socialist relationship had collapsed after Stalin's death, because Mao's China stuck with Stalin's line and accused the Soviets under Khrushchev of "revisionism."²⁴ In this hostile environment, border disputes escalated into military clashes in 1969, most famously on the frontier between Siberia and Northeast China at Zhenbao Island, but also on the Kazakh SSR border with Xinjiang at Tielieketi. Relations were still hostile ten years later.²⁵

The minor-to-minor connections start with the original novel, *Mayimhan*, which was written by Ziya Samedi. Samedi was a Uyghur nationalist who was an officer of the Second East Turkestan Republic in the 1940s. When the USSR and the newly formed People's Republic of China ended the existence of the Second East Turkestan Republic together and merged it into the larger territory of Xinjiang, Samedi continued as a cadre there, taking on various roles. However, he was arrested in 1958, and fled to the Soviet Union in 1961, after completing a re-education through labor sentence. Shichor states that he is "regarded as the greatest modern Uyghur intellectual" and also notes that he directed the Committee for the Liberation of East Turkestan, "established in 1963, undoubtedly with Soviet knowledge and probably encouragement."²⁶ Like the *Koryo-saram*, the Uyghurs living inside the Soviet Union were not recognized as being entitled to a republic or even an autonomous region of their own inside the USSR, because they did not have a homeland there. As a result, like the *Koryo-saram*, they can be considered as a minor diaspora within the USSR.

The film fulfils its commission by communicating the Soviet position of the day on China. It contains a key scene in which a Uyghur teacher and community leader debates with the Qing dynasty governor-general who has captured him. The governor-general argues that everyone wants to become part of the Qing empire and lose their separate identity as they share the benefits of absorption into the empire. The Uyghur leader asserts that a people will always want self-determination. This scene underlines a key difference between the Soviet Union and

the People's Republic of China, which the former used to criticize the latter through the allegory of the film's narrative. The USSR was based on ethnically defined republics as a repudiation of the Russian Empire that had preceded it, although Russian dominance remained an issue. On the other hand, the People's Republic of China directly inherits the composition of the empire as one state, albeit a republic.²⁷ There are various "autonomous" regions and counties in China, but no implicit endorsement of the self-determination of national peoples as in the composition of the USSR. The implication of the scene in the film is therefore a critique of China's treatment of its non-Han Chinese ethnic minorities, suggesting that the PRC is an heir to the old empire that oppresses minorities, whereas the Soviet Union is based on overthrowing the old empire and liberating the national peoples within it. Another way in which the film conforms to Soviet ideology, although not directly relevant to this essay, is its portrayal of women. Not only is the eponymous heroine a woman who joins the Uyghur cavalry and becomes a resistance fighter, but also none of the Uyghur women wear the veil. Indeed, religion is conspicuously absent from the film.

Although Samedi was a minor diasporan, his authorial voice is clear in the film, not only because he is the writer of the novel it was adapted from, but also because the content of the film matched his known political position as a Uyghur nationalist. However, even here we must note that his ability to extend his authorial voice to a big budget feature film was only possible because his position was useful to the USSR at the time. In the case of the two co-directors, we need to be more cautious about assuming that Choi had a lot of creative control. Asanali Ashimov, as a Kazakh, was a member of a minority nationality in the USSR. Although the Kazakhs were the titular nationality in the Kazakh SSR and Ashimov was already famous as an actor, *Year of the Dragon* was his first film as director. So, we can surmise that Choi was brought in to co-direct because of his professional training in that field. The implication is that while he might have had credibility when it comes to filmmaking technique, Ashimov carried the star power and local authority in Almaty.

Furthermore, in the Soviet system, the assumption that a film director might be an author was by no means taken for granted at this time. In the

Soviet studio system, as in classical Hollywood, most directors did not originate projects, but rather hoped to be assigned to them by the studio. There were not enough projects to go round. In these shortage economy circumstances, it is not clear that expressing themselves would be a primary motivation for taking on a project. Historian of Kazakh cinema Gulnara Abikeyeva points out that employees at the Kazakhfilm Studio in Almaty received a basic but not substantial salary, unless they were working on a project, during which time they received much greater material rewards.²⁸ In other words, we have no way of knowing whether Choi took the job on the understanding that his primary role was to provide professional support to a first-time director and motivated by material advantage, or whether he had more of a creative and/or political commitment to the film.

What we do know is that *Year of the Dragon* had a surprisingly limited release. Peter Rollberg has noted that *Year of the Dragon* was a big budget action film that won an award at the Fifteenth Soviet Film Festival in Tallinn in 1982 and would normally have received enhanced distribution and exhibition throughout the USSR as a result. However, it disappeared from view quite quickly.²⁹ This observation is also supported in the comments below the low-quality scan of the film that can be streamed on YouTube, where some people even claim that the film was banned.³⁰ At this point, we have no definitive answer about the reasons for the film's limited release. Certainly, one major reason could have been a thaw in Sino-Soviet relations marked by Brezhnev's March 1982 speech in Tashkent appealing for an end to the state of hostility between the two countries.³¹ However, Rollberg also speculates that the film's support for the Uyghurs against their imperial oppressors could, in the context of Brezhnev-era Soviet politics, have been understood allegorically as a criticism of Soviet control over other Central Asian peoples, including perhaps the Kazakhs.³²

In this regard, it is relevant to note that the film can be seen as a kind of anti-Eastern. The "Eastern" [*isterny*] is a genre of Soviet cinema that was well-established and had already had its heyday in the late 1960s and early 1970s before *Year of the Dragon* was made. Conventional Easterns are set in the immediate post-revolutionary days of the 1920s,

with Soviet soldiers coming to Central Asia to liberate the people from feudal and religious oppression. Many of the tropes are borrowed from the Hollywood Western, with the opposition between the civilized Europeans and the “backward” indigenous people. In the form of “bandits,” those indigenous people sometimes take on the tropes of the “Indians” in Westerns, whereas the Soviets are the “cowboys” coming to liberate the people from their bandit leaders. Visual tropes like men on horseback, wide rolling plains and deserts, and so on all feature heavily.³³ Given their themes and settings around relations among the national peoples of the Soviet Union, Easterns resonate with the legacy of internationalist idealism. But at the same time their borrowings from the Hollywood genre that glorified the genocidal foundations of the United States strike a discordant note that punctures that idealism.

Hollywood had begun to make films with sympathetic Native American protagonists—albeit usually played by European American actors in brownface—in the 1950s. Key examples of such Anti-Westerns might include *Apache* (1954) and *Broken Arrow* (1950). Of course, it would be impossible to make a film that directly countered the key themes of the Eastern within the Soviet Union, which maintained strict film censorship, because if they were set in the 1920s, anti-Easterns would portray the arrival of the Soviets as an imperial conquest and the oppression of indigenous peoples in Central Asia. But *Year of the Dragon* preserves many of the visual tropes of the Eastern, with numerous fighters on horseback, the rolling and sparsely populated plains, and various “native” cultural displays of dancing and so forth. However, by being set in the more distant past, with the Chinese as the enemy, there is no direct engagement with Soviet actions in Central Asia. At the same time, by invoking the tropes of the Eastern, the film opens up the possibility of an even broader allegorical reading as not only an anti-Chinese imperialist allegory in line with the legacy of Soviet internationalism, but also an attack on all forms of imperialism and racism, including possibly those of the Soviet Union itself.

Although this understanding of both the text and the reasons for the distribution and exhibition fate of *Year of the Dragon* as an anti-Eastern cannot be proven, analysis through the framework of minority makes

it more plausible. In this case, minority includes not only the triple minority of key individuals behind its creation: the minor diasporan author Samedi; the minor diasporan co-director Choi; and the ethnic minority co-director Ashimov. It also includes the minority status of many of the film's key audiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, focusing on minor diaspora enables us to go beyond simply noting a Sino-Korean screen connection in Choi's role as the co-director of *Year of the Dragon*. Adding Choi's minor diasporan status to the larger network of minority constituting both its context of production and reception unsettles the dominant meanings *Year of the Dragon* was certainly intended to convey. For someone like Choi, working in a system that did not allow him to originate projects and whose priorities did not encourage the production of major feature films about non-titular nationalities, perhaps this was also an indirect way of expressing a story he related to personally, even though he was very much part of the local Soviet cultural establishment and awarded for his work.

This raises a final issue concerning how we think about minor diasporas, that is, their relationship to subalternity. If, notoriously, the subaltern is defined as someone who cannot speak, what about the minor diasporan?³⁴ And how should this inability to speak be thought? Is it about lack of consciousness or about lack of access to resources, or both? Part of Spivak's argument concerns the formation of the subaltern's subjectivity, or rather their lack of subjectivity as subalterns. But Choi was a leading cultural member of his community and highly educated, even though he was working in a system that did not allocate him resources to tell his own story or the story of *Koryo-saram* on film. It is hard to imagine he did not have a strong sense of his ethnic subjectivity away from his homeland, just as Samedi, his Uyghur minority diasporan counterpart, certainly did. Looking at the case study of *Year of the Dragon*, can we say that minor-to-minor connections such as those outlined here enable indirect articulation and expression even when the larger system does not?

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the organizers of the *Situations* 2024 Conference for inviting me to speak and to the audience for their insightful responses. In developing this paper, I am grateful to Kim Soyoung, Gulnara Abikeyeva, German Kim, Raisa Sidenova and others for their support and assistance.

Notes

¹ Chris Berry, “Sino-Korean Screen Connections: Towards a History in Fragments,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 10, no. 3 (2016): 247–64.

² “[CFP] 2024 Situations International Conference: Minor Diasporas in Asia and Beyond (Feb 1–3, 2024),” *H-Asia*, November 1, 2023, accessed January 13, 2024, http://situations.yonsei.ac.kr/bbs/board.php?tbl=bbs61&mode=VIEW&num=47&category=&findType=&findWord=&sort1=&sort2=&it_id=&shop_flag=&mobile_flag=&page=1.

³ Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴ Shu-Mei Shih. “Against Diaspora: The Sinophone as Places of Cultural Production,” in *Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays*, eds. Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 29–48.

⁵ Soyoung Kim, *Korean Cinema in Global Contexts: Post-Colonial Phantom, Blockbuster and Trans-Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 11–22.

⁶ James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302–38; William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83–99.

⁷ Rogers Brubaker, “The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 1–19.

⁸ “Labour Migration in China and Mongolia,” *International Labour Organization*, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://www.ilo.org/regions-and-countries/asia-and-pacific/ilo-china-and-mongolia-old/areas-work/labour-migration-china-and-mongolia>.

⁹ Delia Rahmonova-Schwarz, “Migrations during the Soviet Period and in the Early Years of the USSR’s Dissolution: A Focus on Central Asia,” *Migrations en Asie Centrale et au Caucase* 26, no. 3 (2010): 9–30.

¹⁰ “Jang Ryul (Lu Zhang),” *Cine 21*, accessed November 30, 2024, http://www.cine21.com/db/person/info/?person_id=20343.

¹¹ Oliver Dew, *Zainichi Cinema: Korean-in-Japan Film Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Mika Ko, *Japanese Cinema and Otherness: Multiculturalism and the Problem of Japaneseness* (New York: Routledge, 2010), especially Part 3, 115–69.

¹² Michael Kim, “The Lost Memories of Empire and the Korean Return from Manchuria, 1945–1950: Conceptualizing Manchuria in Modern Korean History,” *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 23, no. 2 (2010): 195–223.

¹³ Marcia Reynders Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Minseung Kim, “*The Rise and Fall of the Fighters: Colonial Korean Exiles in China*” (*Master’s Thesis, University of Washington at Saint Louis, 2019*).

¹⁵ “Tsoi Guk-In: Soviet and Kazakh Actor, Theatre Director, Film Director, Theatre Teacher. Laureate of the State Prize of the Kazakh SSR” [Tsoi Guk-In: Sovyetskiy i Kazhskiy Aktër, Teatralliniy Režissyër, Kinoežissyër, Teatralliniy Pedagogu. Laureat Gosudarstvennoi Premii

Kazkhskoi SSR], *Library-Koresaram.com*, accessed November 30, 2024, <https://library-koresaram.com/shop/product/coj-guk-in-sovetskij-i-kazahskij-akter-teatralnyj-rezhisser-kinorezhisser-teatralnyj-pedagog-laureat-gosudarstvennoj-premii-kazahskoj-ssr>.

¹⁶ Dan Ernst, “The Meaning and Liberal Justifications of Israel’s Law of Return,” *Israel Law Review* 42, no. 3 (2009): 564–602.

¹⁷ Chulwoo Lee, “How Can You Say You’re Korean? Law, Governmentality and National Membership in South Korea,” *Citizenship Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 85–102.

¹⁸ Shelly Chan, “The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74, no. 1 (2015): 107–28.

¹⁹ See Shih.

²⁰ Richard Meyer, *Jin Yan: The Rudolph Valentino of Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009).

²¹ German Kim, “Korean Diaspora in Kazakhstan: Question of Topical Problems for Minorities in Post-Soviet Space,” *Newsletter of the Japanese Institute for Area Studies* no. 89 (2003): 63–74.

²² *Ibid.*, 68–69.

²³ Salvatore J. Freni, “The Soviet Nationality Policy in Central Asia,” *Inquiries Journal* 5, no. 3 (2013), accessed December 1, 2024, <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/731/the-soviet-nationality-policy-in-central-asia>.

²⁴ Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

²⁵ Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement,” *Cold War History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 21–52.

²⁶ Y. Shichor, “Pawns in Central Asia’s Playground: Uyghurs between Moscow and Beijing,” *East Asia* 32 (2015): 101–16.

²⁷ This is an important observation providing a premise for Wang Hui in *China from Empire to Nation-State*, trans. Michael Gibbs Hill (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

²⁸ Online conversation with author, December 25, 2023.

²⁹ Peter Rollberg, *The Cinema of Soviet Kazakhstan, 1925–1991* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), 332.

³⁰ History, “Year of the Dragon 1981,” *YouTube*, May 15, 2019, accessed December 1, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAAP4ZkSRPU>.

³¹ Nirmala Joshi, “The Sino-Soviet Thaw,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1987): 57–69, 62.

³² Rollberg, 332.

³³ Vincent Bohlinger, “‘The East Is a Delicate Matter’: *White Sun of the Desert* and the Soviet Western,” in *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier*, ed. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2014), 373–81; Alexander Morrison, “Soviet Bolsheviks in the Soviet ‘Eastern,’” in *Cinematic Settlers: The Settler Colonial World in Film*, ed. Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower (New York: Routledge, 2020), 50–62;

Alexander V. Prusin and Scott C. Zeman, "Taming Russia's Wild East: The Central Asian Historical-Revolutionary Film as Soviet Orientalism," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 23, no. 3 (2003): 259–70.

³⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice," *Wedge* nos. 7–8 (1985): 120–30.

Submitted: December 3, 2024

Reviews Completed: February 7, 2025

Accepted: February 10, 2025