

# Defence Sublimates Humanity — Comment on the Korean Film "The Attorney"

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## ABSTRACT

**"The Attorney" is a representative film in recent years in South Korea which tells the story of the hero Song Woo-seok, who is transformed from a mercenary lawyer to a democratic fighter who pleads in the name of the people, and finally starts to pursue the path of democracy and freedom. Through five thrilling court defences, the film shows the sublimation of human nature in the struggle from the "little self" who pursues nothing but making a life and get rich to the "great self" who dares to sacrifice himself to fight for people's rights. Taking "The Attorney" as a representative, it can also be seen that there are some common characteristics of Korean films in recent years, such as revelation of the dark side of society, the hope of people in tragedy, and the protagonist's empathetic transformation, etc.**

*Keywords: Korean films, "The Attorney", human nature*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The South Korean film "The Attorney" which was released on December 18, 2013, has won 11 awards including the "Best Actor at the Chunsa Film Art Award", "Best New Director", "The 50th Baeksang Arts Awards — Best Film", "Best Male Newcomer Award", "Best New Director", "Best Screenplay Award", "The 35th Blue Dragon Best Film Award", etc. by 2014. Relying on the power of the Internet, the film has been transmitted to China. It has attracted a lot of attention on Weibo and Wechat moments at a very fast speed, and caused a sensation among Chinese movie fans. The release of the film caused the "Busan Incident" to arouse hot social attention once again. Under the pressure of public opinion, The District Court of Busan initiated the retrial procedure on September 25, 2014. In the retrial, a verdict of not guilty was reached, and the defendant who had been held in custody for 33 years was cleared, which shows its high popularity and important status.

## II. TIME BACKGROUND AND STORY OUTLINE OF "THE ATTORNEY"

Thanks to South Korea's open film censorship system, the country has slowly developed a unique film path in recent years: using true stories to reflect social problems and promote government reform. "Although this type of film is not unique in South Korea, nor has an accurate and mature definition of the concept been formed, in recent years, this type of film has been presented to the public with an explosion of momentum and becomes a unique film development phenomenon"

[1]. "The Attorney" is one of the representative works. Hollywood screenwriter godfather Robert McKee once expressed that when we watch a film, it is equivalent to coming to a brand new realm of the film itself, where we can experience the visualized reality endowed by a movie, that is, although we have no real experience, we can empathize with the joys, sorrows and joys brought by the story. In this kind of experience, we read other people's stories, and bring this emotion back to the real world, so as to have a new understanding of life "[2]. Perhaps this is the unique charm of the film itself, which allows viewers to immerse themselves in it and get a unique experience.

The story of "The Attorney" is based on real events. The film starts with insignificant figures and combines them with the special historical background at that time. Early in September 1981, the early days of the new Korean military regime, the public security authorities illegally arrested and imprisoned 22 university students, teachers, company employees and social activists who were attending a social science reading club in Busan on the grounds of circulating harmful books and violating the "National Security Law" in the absence of the command, and detained and tortured them, which shocked the whole country and became known as the "Busan Incident" [3]. The "625 Incident" repeatedly mentioned in the film is actually War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea from the perspective of China. The war ended in defeat of the United States, bringing a truce between the North and the South of Korea, which remained tense for some time after that. The incumbent President then, Chun Doo-hwan, "began to purge the so-called communists in order to prevent the so-called communist regime from being overthrown

by military dictatorship" [4]. The film is based on the later president of South Korea, Roh Moo-hyun, an ordinary tax lawyer who became a human rights lawyer after being shocked to come into contact with the victim students and defend them. The film, in a sense, celebrates the events of the late South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun.

The film takes Song Woo-seok as the main line of character narration, who was a petty lawyer who only wanted to make money, but became an advocate who would sacrifice everything to fight for the country's democracy in the end. It is the gorgeous transformation of an ordinary lawyer's humanity, but also the growth of a man. "The Attorney" is a film that describes the growth of a common man. Only by going deep into the human nature and promoting the development of the plot amid the complexity and conflicts of human nature can the film be endowed with the power to move people's hearts and make the plot wonderful and logical. The success of the film is inseparable from its proper selection of materials, characterization and smooth narration. The film has a special historical background, controversial prototype of the defense lawyer and right selection of materials, which can catch the attention of others. Perhaps the expression of the story is not restrained enough to view the film in a more rigorous standard, but its depiction of the human nature of attorneys and the transformation of their mental journey are very clear, with strong logic and persuasion. The depiction of the human nature of other characters is also meticulous. There is no pure emotion or simple directness of stereotype. Instead, it is sincere and thought-provoking. There are no praises or demerits that viewers will feel. With only presentation, it is a well-made film.

"The Attorney" is adapted from the "Busan Incident" in South Korea. Although the specific content and relevant details are fictional, they give the audience a feeling of moving the Korean people to fight the country to the end at the expense of their own interests for democracy. As for films based on real events, some scholars once analyzed that, "In the process of watching the film, whenever the subtitle of 'this film is adapted from a real event' is seen at the beginning or the end of the film, it seems to make people more emotional, and the audience's views and psychological state of the film will change and they will immerse themselves in it. [5]" South Korean films of this genre can be increasingly mature and popular, due to the loose political environment in the country. The government's support for the film has emboldened screenwriters and directors to tell stories with facts, incorporate sensitive political themes into new film stories, and transform the historical pain and unspeakable emotions brought by the event into moving storylines. In addition, thanks to the convenience and speed of the online platform, the

influence and publicity of the film have been further strengthened.

### **III. MERCENARY LAWYER BEING TRANSFORMED TO A CIVIL WARRIOR**

The film starts with the image of a speculative lawyer named Song Woo-seok. The protagonist Song Woo-seok, who only finished his study in high school, finally got a lawyer's license after repeatedly failing the exam through hard work and persistence, and accurately smelled the business opportunity. He grasped every opportunity to send business cards and run businesses in person. He insisted on being a house lawyer, about which his colleagues are not optimistic and dealing with the real estate accounts for people. He just gives his contemptuous look whenever looked down on. With his hard work and persistence, he really saw results — Song Woo-seok jumped from penniless poor boy to budding successful lawyer who is rich. At this time, he was only interested in his own interests and had no concern for social justice. He enjoyed the happiness brought by the abundance of money and dressed himself in flamboyant clothes. He was keen on group games, and enjoyed drinking with his former classmates and thought that money would solve all his problems.

He bought back the house he had helped build when he was in dire straits. He went to the proprietress who had borrowed money from the restaurant seven years before in order to redeem the books for the judicial examination. She graciously forgave the meal expense and told him that it was more important to deal with the old debts more frequently than to settle them with money. The picture of Song and the proprietress' embracing is warm, and the human kindness presented there is just right. The film successfully portrays a kind proprietress, who will play a great role in the future. It can be said that without her kindness, it would be difficult for the audience to understand Song's transformation. Taking this as an opportunity, the relationship between the lawyer and the proprietress has been sublimated and become special and intimate.

In the film, South Korea is in the era of "Miracle on the Han River", with rapid economic development and remarkable improvement in people's thinking and life, but the ensuing conflicts become more and more intense. As the conflict between the authoritarian government and the public demonstrations intensified, different positions began to create a serious value divide between Song and his classmates and friends. This disagreement was amply demonstrated by a heated argument that took place in the restaurant. Becoming the president of the alumni association, Song Woo-seok took his classmates to the proprietress' restaurant for dinner. Reporter Lee Yoon-taek turned on the television, which was reporting on the student

demonstration. Then, Song Woo-seok and Lee Yoon-taek had a clash of values over the issue whether there is use for the students to stage demonstrations or not. Lee Yoon-taek pointed out that why the students are marching, which is for democracy. But Song Woo-seok holds the demonstrations won't change anything and it's meaningless. One can't change the world just by marching in the streets. And he told the proprietress' son to mind his own business, because the world would not change because of his participation in the demonstrations. But Mr. Song, who was self-interested and stayed out of the whole thing, was transformed. From his engagement in the hot potato of the case concerning "National Security Law", to the awakening of conscience, that he went down the hard path of defending justice with hustle in his vein, the key to his transformation is human nature.

Before that, the film was a chicken soup story of a stereotypical poor lawyer struggling to succeed. At that level, the film is at best one of many in the in the mediocre movie families. But the next five court debates bring the film to a climax. The contest in court is the most exciting twist of all, and any reversal can happen. It is these five defences, changes the Song's life as a lawyer. The five defenses makes him sublimated constantly, and also causes the people around him to change their minds. This is the beginning of a man's true maturity, of a man's true transformation, of a little man becoming a great man. At this point, the film really comes into the wonderful part.

The reason for Song Woo-seok to be the attorney without hesitation is that, the son of the proprietress of the Soup Restaurant Jin-woo who is a college student participated in a local reading club and was arrested as a "Red" in the reading party, and then suffered much abuse. Jin-woo is shy, pure and unworldly. He may be leftish in his thinking, but in terms of his behavior, he absolutely has no opposition to the system. Although Song is not satisfied with Jin-woo's criticism of the current situation, he loves Jin-woo as a younger brother. It is this love from the bottom of his heart that makes him not able to stand the arbitrary arrest and cruel torture by the government. "Won't give up, I definitely won't give up", Song Woo-seok determined to be an attorney, to defend Jin-woo. In the five defenses, the push-forward narration is used in the story structure, realizing the character's progressive humanity transformation, awakening and sublimation step by step, and bringing the story to the climax.

#### **IV. FIVE THRILLING DEFENSES**

The awakening of the protagonist's consciousness and the change of the attitude of the people around him have been fully reflected in the five public trials. Before the defense, he was faced with a choice between money and favor. The changes in Song Woo-seok's attitude can

be seen, from the time when the senior asked him whether he was willing to accept the case of the National Security law, to that when he took the initiative to ask his senior. Shocked by the inhumane torture, Song Woo-seok no longer immersed in the world of his own satisfaction and insisted on being the attorney.

The first defense is a defense out of gratitude. At this time, Song volunteered to be the attorney, out of a sort of requiting favors for which he had to take over the case and defense Jin-woo. At this time, none of the disdain from his journalist friends, the seniors' not rating him, the dismiss of the Attorney Park in his own debate team, or the procuratorate and the National Security Bureau's presupposition of it as a mere formality, has affected Song He did his best to fight for the rights of the nine victims in court. After the first defence, while his friends objected to continuing, Song decided not to give up. He says he wants to create a just social environment for his children, while a friend says he wants to apply emigration for his children and send them abroad. These are two different approaches to an authoritarian government. Song wants to change the status quo by allowing his children to live in a free and democratic environment. At this time, Song's heart is no longer merely defending in return for kindness.

The second defence represents the awakening conscience. Song continued to rush about for Jin-woo's case, making adequate preparations, reading the so-called "banned books", getting to know the authors and taking out the British Embassy documents, ... Outside the court, Song came to the place where Jin-woo was being held and tortured. He was beaten up by police officer Cha Dong-yeong. With his ferocious pugnacious look, Cha Dong-yeong said arrogantly, "You should be grateful to us. It is because of us that you can enjoy your peaceful life now." Indeed, Cha Dong-yeong is passionately loyal to the country. His father dead in the 625 Incident, he thought everything he did was for the country with all his hatred for his broken country and family. But it is full of irony. If his patriotism is reflected in the suffering of innocent students, then that is the worst that can happen to these students. But the families of these students, and thousands upon thousands of their citizens, could not help but live in terror. Even if they are in a so-called free camp, what kind of freedom is it? After the end of the second defense, Song told Jin-woo that "no matter how hard the rock is, it is still dead, and no matter how fragile the egg is, it is still alive. The rock will eventually break into fine sand, and the egg will eventually hatch out and the chick will stride over the rock" [6]. It is what Jin-woo once told Song, which marked the further awakening of Song's consciousness. He strengthened his faith in the path of defense and brought hope to Jin-woo.

The third defense is fearless persistence. Song did not shrink from being beaten by Che Dongying. In this defense, he used his sincerity to arouse the awakening of the numb people. The audience were indignant and protested against the violence to extorting confession by violence. And the reporter schoolfellow who showed dismissal at first was also touched by Song. He began to put facts into words and write fair and objective news, and no longer cowed in compromise. And when Song's clothes were soiled by eggs, he offered to change them to him. In his defense once again, Song found the absurdity and narrowness of the state power hierarchy under the "Incident of the Reading Club in Busan". They attempt to stifle the so-called "Reds", which in fact shows their fear to see people wake up politically and the rule of the authorities endangered by the demonstrations.

The fourth defence is a desperate struggle. By then, with more and more trouble ensuing, in front of the choice between the business that could bring him huge profit and keeping defending Jin-woo, he gave up money resolutely. The ignominy made him furious and he conducted the defence hysterically. When the matter seemed to be in a dead end, the military surgeon Yin woke up and took the initiative to testify in court. Yin has three impressive scenes in the film. The first one is that when Jin-woo pretends to faint when he is caught, Yin covered for him. The second is when things get nowhere, Yin asks Song to meet at the church through take-away message to testify. The third is his stimulating performance in the fifth public trial.

The fifth defence is a sad victory. The supervision of foreign press, the impassionate debate of Song, and the emphatic replies, all of which seem to signal a turned situation, did not spare the manipulative of Cha Dong-yeong and ended in failure. The neither overbearing nor servile replies of Yin, the ease with which he was framed by Cha Dong-yeong and captured by the gendarmes showed his strength, and the image of him standing up for justice is also deeply imprinted in people's minds. Although the defence did not worked out, the innocent children have their sentences reduced and were not acquitted of a charge, Song realized the sublimation from the "little self" to the "great self", and also awakened the power of justice

Through the analysis of "The Attorney", it can be easily found that the story without changes in the characters is boring, dull, dead and step-by-step. So, most films have two very different phases, or what some people call "the A and B side of the story," which means the same thing. "The choice of these two stories lies in the world outlook and the impulse of values of the creator" [7]. A good story must be one with an enlightening guiding ideology in master control. When ideas rot, stories will not have the sincerity to be looked forward to. The Korean film "The Attorney" made it.

This film is not destined to be one of those cheap individual inspirational chicken soup, but a work of social justice conscience. Like its title, it became a true attorney of democracy. It is worth time to analyze how "The Attorney" implements these three steps step by step and makes the hero change his life in the five defences, to realize the narration of such a grand theme, and finally to sublimate the humanity. This is not just a triumph of skill, it is a triumph of values.

## **V. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF KOREAN FEATURE FILM FROM "THE ATTORNEY"**

In "The Attorney", the lawyer Song turns from a mercenary "nouveau riche" into a champion of democracy, completing a transformation from concerning only about personal interests to defending the interests of others and national justice. It is not difficult to detect the hidden similar "pattern". South Korean films have a morbid obsession with this "pattern". Classic South Korean films, whether in crime dramas or real-life adaptations, feature a villain or potential villain, which can even be the government sometimes. Even if it's not the main villain, it's at least an obstacle to the character's pursuit of happiness. In general, these films have some common characteristics:

The first is the exposure of the dark side of society. South Korean films are merciless towards the dark side of reality, and sometimes even show the dark side of human nature in the fictional disaster stories. In "The Attorney", the authoritarian government is accused of persecuting innocent students; "The Terror Live" reveals that the government neglected the lives of ordinary workers in order to develop the economy; "The Crucible" exposes the sexual abuse of children in society; "Miracle in Cell No" criticizes the government for wronging the innocent; "Memories of Murder" shows the gory serial killings; "The Flu" reveals the shameless disregard for human life of government leaders during the epidemic. Crime itself is the ugly side of society. Korean films dare to face up to the bloody side, which is really worth learning. The great attention to reality is an important reason for the rise of Korean films.

The second is to give hope in a tragedy. Because Korean films dare to expose and criticize the reality, they show a relatively profound reflection. Many Korean films have a seemingly tragic ending, but the great thing about Korean films is that they light up a ray of hope in the tragedy and lead people forward. The best choice is not the pursuit of the perfect reunion. Instead, those movies that leave hope at the end and arouse the audience's passion are the good movies. At the end of "The Attorney", a once-upstart lawyer who has become a champion of democracy takes to the streets and gets caught, with hundreds of lawyers volunteering to defend him, which is a great hope in

defeat. At the end of the "The Crucible", the murderer did not get the deserved punishment. The hero called "don't be changed by the world", which was echoed by the reality, with the Crucible Act being introduced. The "Memories of Murder" shows even more desperation, in which the murderer has not been found even to the end, leaving only a new hope. It seems that Korean films intentionally do not make the audience relaxed. They make every effort to make people desperate, and then light a lamp, bringing the audience a sense of aesthetic sublimity.

The third is that people empathize with the protagonist's transformation. One important reason why the story of Korean films can move the audience is that the transformation of characters makes the audience empathize. The audience is unconsciously on the main protagonist's side when watching the movie. The completion of all these are based on the foreshadowing of protagonist's humanized real detail, making people real and believable. The hero of "The Attorney" is transformed from a speculative upstart lawyer into a champion of democracy who is devoted to vindicating students; in "The Terror Live", the hero get to the side of terrorists opposing the government, in order to get the scoop to become a reporter; in "The Crucible", the hero has changed from a teacher who seeks nothing but a peaceful life and his daughter being safety, to a champion of justice for the student victims; in the "Silmdo", the forces that assassinated Kim Jong-il become heroes against the brutal regime; and in the "Flu", the leading actor transformed from a rescuer who likes to pick up girls, to the hero who sacrificed his life to rescue the city. There are plenty of examples, and a good movie has to make that transition. Roles showing no transformation are flat and symbolic.

## VI. CONCLUSION

"The Attorney" brings us the enjoyment of beauty through Song Woo-seok's never-giving-up struggle. At the same time, it can also bring a lot of enlightenment to the development of Chinese film. Due to historical reasons, policy reasons and market reasons, there is a serious shortage of genres among Chinese films, and the quantity and quality are not optimistic. In their creation, South Korean films have always reflected their national style, reflecting on the realistic themes and using films to wake up the people under the once autocratic regime in South Korea. Although both of the systems of the film market in the two countries and the psychology of the people are quite different, the path of genre films in South Korea may be a reference for Chinese films.

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