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The Historical Evolution of "Blue Story" in Korea Focusing on Fiction, Film, and Drama of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

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Abstract: This paper proposes "Blue Story" as an analytical framework grounded in the historical evolution of maritime narratives in Korean literature, film, and TV-OTT drama across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, aiming to intervene in the predominantly Western-centric discourse of Blue Humanities. Given Korea's geographical condition as a peninsula, the ocean has functioned not merely as a backdrop but as a profound narrative space where Korean society has articulated its deepest anxieties, memories, and aspirations. The argument traces the trajectory of the Korean "Blue Story" through three interconnected phases, "sea of memory," "sea of disaster," and "sea of care and ecology." This paper argues that the "Blue Story" constitutes a coherent narrative genealogy through which Korean society has repeatedly negotiated its most consequential conflicts and losses. By providing a cross-medial, historically grounded framework, this paper seeks to enrich Korean cultural studies and offer Blue Humanities a vital non-Western case study that extends its theoretical horizons toward a more global perspective.

Keywords: Blue Story; Blue Humanities; Korean Story; Memory; Disaster; Care; Ecology

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题目：韩国“蓝色故事”的历史演变——以二十世纪和二十一世纪小说、电影与电视剧为中心

摘要：本文提出“蓝色故事”这一分析框架，以20世纪和21世纪韩国文学、电影、电视剧和串流剧中海洋叙事的历史演变为基础，旨在介入以西方为中心的“蓝色人文”话语体系。鉴于韩国地处半岛的地理条件，海洋不仅是背景，更是韩国社会表达其最深层焦虑、记忆和愿望的深刻叙事空间。本文通过“记忆之海”、“灾难之海”和“关怀与生态之海”这三个相互关联的阶段，追溯了韩国“蓝色故事”的轨迹。本文认为，“蓝色故事”构成了一个连贯的叙事谱系，韩国社会通过这一谱系反复应对其最具影响力的冲突和损失。通过提供一个跨媒介、以历史为基础的框架，本文旨在丰富韩国文化研究，并为“蓝色人文”提供一个重要的非西方案例研究，从而拓展其理论视野，使其走向更加全球化的视角。

关键词：蓝色故事；蓝色人文；韩国故事；记忆；灾难；关怀；生态

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In an era marked by rising sea levels, intensifying maritime geopolitics, and growing scholarly interest in the marine environment, the humanities study of the ocean has taken on a new urgency. The emergence of a distinct research paradigm, Blue Humanities, most prominently articulated by Steve Mentz (2015; 2023) in *Shipwreck Modernity: The Ecology of Globalization, 1550–1719* and subsequent works, demonstrates a growing scholarly understanding of the ocean not as a natural backdrop to human history but as a constitutive force in culture, identity, and knowledge formation. However, despite the field's rapid expansion, its theoretical frameworks have largely developed from Western-centric, Atlantic-centric sources. The regional specificities of non-Western maritime traditions and the diverse media and historical contexts through which maritime experiences are narrated remain underrepresented in these discussions (DeLoughrey). To bridge this

gap, this paper proposes the concept of "Blue Story" by analyzing the historical evolution of maritime narratives in Korean fictions, films, and TV-OTT dramas across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The urgency of this intervention is heightened by several concurrent phenomena occurring in both Korean society and global culture. On the one hand, the recent rise of Korean culture through the global circulation of Korean fiction, films, dramas have provided unprecedented opportunities for Korean cultural texts to engage with international humanities discourse in their own context, rather than as exceptional objects of area studies. This has sparked renewed interest in the ecological and communal dimensions of Korean maritime traditions. These overlapping cultural, political, and ecological pressures make this a particularly opportune moment to examine how the sea has been described, imagined, and contested throughout Korean cultural history.

Korea's geography makes this consideration particularly crucial. As a peninsula surrounded by the East Sea to the east, the South Sea to the south, and the West Sea to the west, Korea has always had an intimate relationship with water. The sea has shaped the landscape of fishing, trade, migration, and military conflict, serving as both a conduit for cultural exchange and a boundary separating connection and separation. However, the significance of the sea in Korean culture extends beyond mere geography or economics; it carries profound narrative significance. Through various eras and media, the sea has served as a space for Korean society to express its deepest anxieties, memories, and aspirations. Therefore, tracing the historical evolution of these narratives is not a study of the past; it is a crucial process for understanding how society understands itself through its stories about the sea.

Despite the wealth of available data, existing studies have fallen short of fully addressing its complexity. In Korean fiction, maritime themes have primarily been examined within the context of individual authors or regional traditions. For example, Hyun Ki-young's approach to the trauma of the Jeju April 3rd Incident in his novel "Suni Samchon" (순이삼촌 1978) has not been analyzed within the broader context of maritime representation. The Jeju term "Samchon" transcends biological kinship; it serves as a gender-neutral honorific that weaves the entire village into a web of communal solidarity (Hyun 47). In the context of the "Blue Story," this term functions as an ethical anchor, linking individuals through shared historical trauma and the mutual support required for maritime survival. Korean film studies have also approached ocean-centric films like "Haeundae" (2009) solely from the perspective of genre criticism or social realism, failing to theorize the ocean itself as a representational space with a historical trajectory. While recent studies of Korean dramas have begun to focus on the maritime dimension in works like *Our Blues* (2022), these studies remain methodologically isolated and fail to account for the long-term flow of maritime narratives across various media. Crucially, none of these disciplines has effectively leveraged the theoretical resources of Blue Humanities, resulting in the marginalization of Korean maritime culture from international discourse. Despite this, Korean maritime culture is well positioned to enrich this discourse.

This paper aims to fill this gap by proposing the concept of "Blue Story," a historically evolving framework for maritime narratives in Korean cultural texts. "Blue Story" demonstrates how Korean society has articulated collective memory, overcome disasters, and imagined ecological and communal futures. "Blue

Story" is not a thematic category but an analytical framework. It questions not only how Koreans have told stories about the ocean, but also how the formal, genre, and media characteristics of these stories have evolved over time, and how these changes reveal the changing place of the sea in Korean social imagination. By proposing this concept, this paper aims to contribute in two ways. First, it provides a cross-medial and historically contextualized framework for analyzing sea representations in Korean cultural studies. Second, it broadens and deepens existing theoretical horizons by introducing non-Western case studies in the study of Blue Humanities.

This paper develops its argument around three interrelated research questions, each focusing on a different historical period and medium. First, how did late twentieth-century Korean fiction construct the sea as a space of collective memory and local identity in relation to state violence and the experiences of local communities? Second, how did Korean films of the 1990s and 2000s portray the sea as a site of disaster, war, and maritime labor, and what social imaginaries of crisis and vulnerability did these depictions produce? Third, how did Korean TV-OTT dramas since the 2010s reinterpret the sea as a space of care, solidarity, and ecological awareness, and what cultural and political functions did these reinterpretations serve? To answer these questions, this paper utilizes a research methodology that combines textual analysis, a comparison of various media genres, and theoretical contexts such as Blue Humanities, memory studies, disaster discourse, and cultural studies. By synthesizing these analytical approaches, this paper traces the overall flow of Korea's "Blue Story" from "the sea of memory" to "the sea of disaster" to "the sea of care and ecology," and demonstrates why this flow is important not only for Korean cultural studies but also for global maritime humanities.

1.0 Blue Humanities: The Oceanic Turn in the Humanities

The theoretical foundation of this paper is grounded in the interdisciplinary paradigm of Blue Humanities, which has emerged as one of the most productive areas in environmental and cultural studies over the past two decades. The term is generally attributed to Steve Mentz ("Toward" 997-1013), who proposed the concept of "Blue Cultural Studies" to reorient humanities research away from its traditional land-centric perspective and toward a focus on the ocean as a material, historical, and epistemological force in human life. In his seminal works, including *Shipwreck Modernity: The Ecology of Globalization, 1550–1719* (2015) and *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2023), he has argued that the sea is not a backdrop to human history, but rather an environment that actively challenges anthropocentric models of knowledge, agency, and belonging, disrupting human thought processes. According to his account, the ocean is a space of "ecological entanglement," in which the instability of water, characterized by its inability to be bounded, mapped, or possessed, becomes a productive metaphor and material fact for rethinking human culture in the Anthropocene era.

Alongside Mentz's contributions, Hester Blum's groundbreaking work established a complementary critical agenda. Blum asserts that "the sea is not a metaphor," arguing that oceanographic studies should not reduce the sea to a symbol of transnational mobility but rather attend to the historical, material, and labor

conditions of maritime life. It has had a profound impact on the field's methodological orientation (Blum,). Similarly, Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey's book, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, offered an early and fundamental challenge to Eurocentric and Atlanticist tendencies in oceanographic studies, introducing the concept of "tidalectics" to describe the cyclical and recursive relationship between land and sea that structures the epistemologies of the Caribbean and Pacific Islands. DeLoughrey's "tidalectics," borrowing from Kamau Brathwaite's concept (Kamau Brathwaite 1997), explains the cyclical movement between land and sea as a structural principle of island epistemology, a concept that holds significant implications for theorizing coastal and island cultures on the Korean Peninsula. The research of Mentz, Blum, DeLoughrey, and their collaborators has established Blue Humanities as a truly interdisciplinary field encompassing literary studies, environmental history, postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, and social science, and through this, theorizes the ocean as an ecological, social, and cultural mediating space.

Yet for all its theoretical richness, Blue Humanities as a field retains a significant structural limitation. Its empirical and textual archives have been developed predominantly through Western, and more specifically Anglophone Atlantic-centric, materials. The canonical texts of oceanic scholarship, from Melville's "Moby-Dick" to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," are drawn overwhelmingly from the European and North American literary traditions, while the maritime cultures of East Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa remain largely outside the field's purview. DeLoughrey's work represents an important corrective in foregrounding Caribbean and Pacific perspectives, but the systematic application of Blue Humanities frameworks to East Asian maritime traditions including Korea's extraordinarily rich and historically layered engagement with the sea has yet to be undertaken in any sustained way. This paper seeks to address that gap.

2.0 Toward "Blue Story"

To theorize the Korean cases, this paper proposes the concept of the "Blue Story," a term that serves as both an extension of and a departure from the broader Blue Humanities paradigm. While the Blue Humanities, in Steve Mentz's formulation, "comprises a current of scholarly and artistic discourses that foreground human relationships with water in all its forms" (Mentz 18) by operating at the level of ecology, materiality, and the long term, the "Blue Story" focuses on the level of narrative and mediation. Specifically, it examines how specific cultural texts produced in historical moments, by industries and institutions, and for audiences have constructed the meaning of the sea within the Korean social imagination. Steve Mentz (2023: 18) further notes that "during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, an early wave of Blue Humanities writing and thinking has emerged from Anglophone literary contexts, with emphases on Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Caribbean locations. Writers in the 2020s are widening the focus to engage global, non-Western, and Indigenous materials."

"Blue Story" is thus defined as the historically evolving system of maritime narratives in Korean cultural texts, through which Korean society has articulated, negotiated, and contested the meanings of the sea across changing historical conditions. The concept has three defining characteristics that distinguish it from simple

thematic analysis or maritime regionalism.

First, "Blue Story" is inherently historical and genealogical. It insists that the meanings attached to the sea in Korean cultural texts are not stable or universal but are produced by specific historical conditions, for instance, colonial memory, civil war, industrialization, democratization, ecological crisis and that tracing the evolution of these meanings across time is itself a critical act. The trajectory this paper proposes, from a "sea of memory" in late twentieth-century fiction, through a "sea of disaster" in turn of the millennium cinema, to a "sea of care and ecology" in contemporary TV-OTT drama, is not a teleological progression but a map of the social imaginary as it responds to successive historical pressures.

Second, "Blue Story" is cross-medial. It insists on attending to the formal and institutional specificities of fiction, film, and TV-OTT drama as distinct modes of cultural production, each of which engages the sea through different representational conventions, industrial logics, and audience relationships. The sea in Hyun Ki-young's fiction functions differently from the sea in Yoon Je-kyun's blockbuster disaster film, not merely because the authors' intentions differ, but because the formal affordances and generic conventions of the literary short story and the commercial disaster film shape what it is possible to say about the sea in each medium. A cross-medial approach allows the analysis to register these differences while also identifying the deeper structural continuities that connect maritime narratives across media.

Third, and most importantly, "Blue Story" is a concept rooted in the politics of memory and representation. It asks not simply what Koreans have said about the sea, but what those narratives have done, what experiences they have made speakable, what silences they have maintained, what communities and identities they have constituted or excluded. In this respect, "Blue Story" draws not only on Blue Humanities but also on the theoretical resources of memory studies, particularly the work of scholars who have analyzed the relationship between collective trauma, spatial memory, and cultural narrative. The sea in Korean cultural texts has repeatedly served as a site where national trauma is simultaneously encoded and concealed, where what cannot be said directly about state violence, mass death, or social abandonment finds expression in the imagery of islands, fog, and the deep.

3.0 The Sea as Memory and Mourning: Korean Fiction of the 1970s and 1980s

The first phase of Korean "Blue Story" takes shape in the literary imagination of the late twentieth century, a period defined by the political pressures of authoritarian rule and the simultaneous cultural imperative to recover and articulate suppressed collective experiences. In this context, the sea and the island function not as spaces of livelihood or leisure but as the primary topography of political mourning, acting as places where historical violence has been absorbed into the landscape. In these spaces, what cannot be spoken openly finds expression through imagery, the proximity of water to the dead, and the sensory textures of coastal life. Two figures dominate this phase, Hyun Ki-young, whose fiction of Jeju Island constitutes the founding document of modern Korean maritime fiction, and Han Seung-won, whose Namhae (the Southern Sea) fishing village narratives extend and complicate the sea's symbolic function in a different register.

Hyun Ki-young's "Suni Samchon" represents one of the most consequential acts of literary testimony in

contemporary Korean fiction. Published in the journal "Creation and Criticism" (창작과비평) at a moment when direct discussion of the Jeju April 3rd Incident in 1948 remained politically suppressed, the story inaugurated what would become a sustained literary archaeology of state violence, and its publication cost the author three days of arrest and torture by the authorities, who recognized the political charge of what Hyun had dared to put into print. Hyun Ki-young was arrested and tortured for three days following publication, and upon release he was warned never to write about the massacre again. What makes the text analytically significant for "Blue Story," however, is not its testimonial courage but the specific way in which the sea and the island are deployed as narrative and symbolic structures.

The story proceeds through the returning narrator's gradual reconstruction of Suni's fate across the thirty years since the massacre. This temporal structure is central to the text's maritime poetics. The sea in "Suni Samchon" is not a backdrop but a medium of deferred mourning, a space in which time moves differently, where the dead remain incompletely buried and incompletely known. The island's coastline serves as the boundary between the world of living and the world of the unacknowledged dead, a liminal zone that the narrator must traverse both literally and psychologically to recover what history has submerged. The black volcanic walls of Jeju, which appear throughout the story's landscape, reinforce this sense of the island as a place where human experience has been absorbed into the material environment, where the stone retains what the official record has erased. Suni's fate is pieced together from youth to violent death in a field, a patch of field that literally absorbs human blood and bone, giving it a deep realism and symbolism. The volcanic black stone walls (doldam) of Jeju, which appear throughout the text, intensify this symbolic function of the landscape as a material archive of suppressed memory. Crucially, the sea's function here is not cathartic but structural, in that it does not resolve mourning but maintains it in suspension, ensuring that the violence of 1948 continues to exert pressure on the present.

This use of maritime space as a medium of unresolved historical consciousness distinguishes Hyun's work sharply from the maritime imagery of earlier Korean modernist fiction, in which the sea had more often served as a figure of romantic yearning or cosmopolitan aspiration. In Hyun, the sea is saturated with political history; it is a space of what Pierre Nora might call "lieux de mémoire," (Pierre Nora 1989) sites where memory crystallizes precisely because living memory has been interrupted by violence and silence. The concept of "lieux de mémoire" is particularly applicable to the island as representational space in Korean fiction, insofar as the historical interruption of community memory by state violence is precisely the condition that transforms the landscape into a site of compensatory memorial significance. The island is not a place one can inhabit innocently; its geography is a palimpsest, layered with the traces of a past that the South Korean state had worked systematically to suppress.

Han Seung-won's fiction of the southern coastal region, particularly the fiction "Ajeaje Baraje" (아제아제 바라아제, 1985) set in and around the Namhae fishing communities, extends the sea's symbolic range in a different direction. Where Hyun's ocean is weighted with political trauma and the ethics of testimony, Han's sea is organized by the rhythms of labor, seasonal change, and Buddhist cosmology. The fishing village in Han's work is a space where existence is understood cyclically rather than historically,

exemplified by the net cast and drawn, the catch abundant or scarce, and the tide rising and falling. The sea here does not record political events but organizes a fatalistic relationship to time and contingency that Han identifies with the Buddhist notion of impermanence, "mujeong"(無情), the indifferent flux of all phenomena.

Yet to read Han's maritime vision as simply quietist or depoliticized would be to misread it. The fishing communities of his fiction are spaces of social stratification, gendered labor, and economic precarity; the sea that sustains them is also the sea that claims lives without explanation or recompense. The dialect of the south coast, which Han preserves with extraordinary fidelity in his prose, marks these communities as regional, marginal, and outside the cultural authority of Seoul-centered modernity. In this sense, Han's maritime fiction participates in a politics of regionalism, in which the sea becomes a figure for forms of experience and knowledge that mainstream Korean culture systematically overlooks. While Hyun's ocean is a site of suppressed political memory, Han's represents a site of suppressed cultural memory, which encompasses a way of life organized by temporal rhythms, ecological relationships, and epistemological priorities that differ from those of industrial capitalism and nationalist modernization.

Together, Hyun and Han establish the foundational terms of the first phase of the Korean "Blue Story," defining the sea as a space of collective mourning, political silence, and regional identity. Their works demonstrate that in the late twentieth century, the Korean ocean was above all a space of what this paper calls "deep memory," the memory that has been forced below the surface of official discourse and that finds expression not through direct statement but through the mediation of landscape, imagery, and the materiality of coastal life.

4.0 The Sea as Disaster: Korean Films of the 1990s and 2000s

The second phase of Korean "Blue Story" emerges in the cinema of the 1990s and 2000s, a period marked by the democratization of Korean society, the traumatic experience of the 1997–1998 IMF financial crisis, and the rapid industrialization of the Korean film industry into one of the world's most commercially ambitious and artistically distinguished national cinemas. In this context, the sea undergoes a dramatic representational transformation, whereby it becomes a space not of memory and mourning but of acute crisis. In this crisis, natural, economic, and military forces beyond human control reveal the precariousness of individual lives and the failures of state and social institutions. The "sea of disaster" that characterizes this phase is produced through the formal resources of multiple genres, including the war film, the disaster blockbuster, and the social realist thriller. Park Kwang-su's "I Want to Go to That Island"(그 섬에 가고 싶다, 1993) establishes an early and important bridge between the memory-oriented literature of the preceding phase and the more explicitly disaster-inflected cinema that follows. The film follows a mainland journalist who travels to a remote southern island to investigate the legacy of wartime violence, discovering a community that has lived for decades in the shadow of unacknowledged violence. The island here functions as a kind of spatial archive, which preserves in its geography and in the bodies of its aging survivors a version of history that the mainland has preferred to forget. The sea surrounding the island is a figure of enforced isolation, in which the water that separates the island community from metropolitan Korea is the same water that has preserved their traumatic

memory intact, keeping it unassimilated into the narratives of national development and democratic progress. In formal terms, the film's persistent long shots of the sea, which appear gray, flat, and featureless, function as visual correlatives of the silence that surrounds suppressed historical truth. This is because the sea here is not spectacular but oppressive, serving as a medium of enforced forgetting rather than of natural beauty.

The shift toward the spectacular "sea of disaster" is most fully realized in Yoon Je-kyun's *Haeundae* (2009), which holds the distinction of being the first major Korean disaster film and remains one of the most commercially successful Korean films ever produced, attracting over 11 million admissions in domestic release alone. (KOBIS①) The film's narrative is organized around the imminent arrival of a megatsunami at Haeundae Beach in Busan, the country's most popular coastal resort. What is analytically significant for "Blue Story" is not the tsunami itself but the representational logic that governs the film's relationship to the sea in the long pre-disaster section that occupies its first two-thirds.

Haeundae begins by establishing the beach as a space of leisure, consumption, and aspiration, being crowded with vacationers, animated by commerce, and suffused with the pleasures of summer. The coastal community depicted is sharply stratified, where the local fishermen and service workers who inhabit the permanent economy of Haeundae are distinguished from the wealthy urban tourists who temporarily occupy it. This stratification represents one of the film's central social concerns. Man-sik, the protagonist, is a local fisherman who has not returned to the sea since he accidentally caused the death of his girlfriend's father during a deep-sea expedition four years earlier. His guilt-stricken withdrawal from the ocean sets up one of the film's central structural ironies, in which the man most attuned to the sea's dangers is also the man most psychologically unable to confront it. This backstory establishes that the sea in *Haeundae* is never simply a natural environment but always already a space of moral consequence and social obligation.

When the tsunami arrives, the film's representational logic shifts dramatically. The spectacular CGI sequences that depict the wave's destruction of Haeundae's coastline, which drew considerable attention for their technical sophistication, are not merely generic spectacles. They function as a collapse of the social hierarchies that the pre-disaster section had carefully established, as the tsunami does not distinguish between tourist and resident, rich and poor, or the guilty and the innocent. While the ocean's violence is, in this sense, leveling, the film qualifies this democratic disaster by distributing its sacrificial deaths with considerable precision. By ensuring that the most socially marginal characters survive and the most self-sacrificing die, the film follows a pattern that reinforces rather than disrupts the social and emotional hierarchies of melodrama. (Linda Williams 1991) The sea of disaster in *Haeundae* ultimately confirms rather than transforms the social order, offering national catharsis through spectacular destruction while preserving the familial and communal values it temporarily threatens.

Shim Sung-bo's *Sea Fog* (2014) approaches the "sea of disaster" from a fundamentally different direction, one that is less concerned with spectacular catastrophe than with the slow, structural violence of economic desperation and moral degradation. The film is adapted from a 2007 stage play based on the true story of the 2001 Yeosu incident, in which 25 Korean Chinese undocumented migrants suffocated to death in the storage tank of a fishing vessel; their bodies were subsequently dumped into the sea by the crew. In transposing this

event to the period of the 1997–1998 IMF financial crisis, the film insists on the structural causality between economic collapse and moral catastrophe, presenting the captain's decision to take on the illegal commission not as individual wickedness but as the desperate response of a man whose livelihood has been destroyed by forces entirely beyond his control.

The *Sea Fog* of the title is one of the film's most precisely deployed symbolic elements. The sea fog that descends on the vessel mid-voyage is simultaneously a meteorological phenomenon and a moral condition, as it disorients navigation, renders visibility impossible, and fosters an environment where the crew's moral compass begins to fail. Cinematographer Hong Kyeong-pyo, working in a very different register from the CGI spectacle, uses the fog to create a visual environment of claustrophobic enclosure, whereby the open sea, despite its promise of space and perspective, is transformed into a prison without walls. It becomes a boundless environment that paradoxically traps its occupants in an ever-shrinking moral space (Maggie Lee②) . The fish storage tank in which the migrants are hidden, a confined and oxygen-depleted space below the waterline, figures as the logical endpoint of this progressive enclosure insofar as the sea becomes the literal medium of death for those to whom it had once promised escape and possibility.

What *Sea Fog* adds to the grammar of Korean "Blue Story" is a thoroughgoing critique of the structures of globalized maritime capitalism. The decaying fishing vessel, the indebted captain, the exploited crew, and the undocumented migrants seeking better lives represent a precarious maritime existence. Together, these figures constitute a social world organized by economic desperation and the systematic abandonment of the vulnerable by state and market alike. The sea in this film is not a site of natural disaster but of structural disaster, a space where the violence of the economic system is concentrated and made visible in its most extreme form. This represents a significant deepening of the representational logic established by *Haeundae* where Yoon's film used the disaster genre to stage a cathartic national drama of sacrifice and survival, Shim's film uses maritime realism to indict the social conditions that make such disasters not merely possible but inevitable.

5.0 The Sea as Care and Ecology: TV-OTT Dramas of the 2010s and 2020s

The third and most recent phase of Korean "Blue Story" is defined by what might be called an "ecological turn" and "ethical turn" in the representation of the sea, a shift from the logics of memory and disaster toward a sustained concern with the practices and structures of communal care, intergenerational solidarity, and ecological coexistence. This turn is most fully realized in the Korean TV-OTT drama of the 2010s and 2020s. As a medium defined by seriality, ensemble casting, and the slow development of character networks, it is particularly well-suited to depicting the textures of community life and the complex interdependencies that organize coastal social worlds. The dramas examined in this section share a common representational logic. In other words, they position the sea not as a threat to survive or a trauma to be processed, but as a medium through which forms of human and human-nonhuman solidarity become possible.

Noh Hee-kyung's *Our Blues* (우리들의 블루스) is the most ambitious and analytically rich text of this phase. Structured as an omnibus drama in which each narrative arc focuses on a different character or pair of

characters within the overlapping social world of Jeju Island's coastal community, the series refuses the hierarchies of centralized protagonism that conventional TV drama imposes. No single story is privileged over the others, and the community itself, for instance its fish market, its "haenyeo" collective, its fishing port, its web of long-standing relationships and half-buried grievances functions as the drama's true subject. This formal structure is not merely a narrative device but an ethical one. It embodies the principle of equal attention that the drama thematizes throughout, manifesting as a resolute refusal to rank lives by social utility or dramatic convenience.

The "haenyeo," the traditional female divers of Jeju who harvest abalone and other seafood through breath-hold diving without oxygen equipment, occupy the symbolic and ethical center of the drama. Their practice is depicted with unusual specificity and respect. The series meticulously documents the preparation rituals, the arduous underwater labor, the "bulteok," (the communal warming shelter where "haenyeo" gather before and after diving) and the deep-seated collective solidarity that sustains their working community. The "bulteok" is particularly significant as a spatial figure. Situated at the literal margin of the sea, this space of female sociality and mutual support allows the harsh demands of underwater labor to give way to the warmth of shared experience, gossip, generational knowledge, and emotional sustenance. In representing this space with care and precision, *Our Blues* makes an implicit argument about the forms of care that are systematically rendered invisible by the dominant narratives of capitalist productivity.

The figure of Ok-dong, a widowed "haenyeo" whose daughter died while diving, crystallizes the drama's thematic concerns with force. Ok-dong's relationship to the sea is defined by a profound ambivalence; while the ocean has taken her daughter from her, she nevertheless continues to dive, participating in the collective life of the "haenyeo" community and drawing sustenance from the ecological and social world that the sea makes possible. This ambivalence refuses the binary of the sea as either beneficent or destructive; instead, it presents the ocean as an environment that demands ongoing negotiation, a space in which human beings are permanently vulnerable and permanently sustained, simultaneously at risk and held by ecological and communal structures that exceed individual control. Shot with a visual attentiveness that borders on reverence, the drama's most powerful sequences are those in which Ok-dong and her fellow "haenyeo" enter the water together. These scenes figure the act of diving not as labor but as a form of communion with both the nonhuman world of the ocean floor and the collective body of women who have performed this practice across generations.

Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha (갯마을 차차차 2021) approaches the sea of care from a different angle, one more explicitly concerned with the conditions of possibility for sustainable community life in an era of rapid urbanization and the decline of fishing economies. The drama's coastal village, Gongjin, is presented as a space that has survived the tourist gaze and the logic of urban development without being entirely transformed by either. The village effectively preserves its fish market, aging fishermen, and communal rhythms and values, even as it opens itself to new arrivals from the city. The tension between these two modes of inhabiting the coastal environment, that is the extractive, tourist-oriented economy of "Gongjin as destination" and the subsistence-oriented, communally embedded economy of "Gongjin as home" organizes much of the drama's

social conflict.

The sea in *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* functions primarily as a guarantor of communal continuity. It is the element that keeps the village anchored to its way of life, resistant to the homogenizing pressures of urban modernity. The daily rhythms of the fishing community, the early-morning departures, the market stalls, the shared meals of fresh catch, are presented as forms of ecological intelligence, ways of living that are calibrated to the rhythms of the nonhuman world rather than to the imperatives of capital accumulation. This is a representational politics that, while romanticizing the fishing village to some degree, nonetheless performs an important cultural work. It insists on the value of forms of knowledge and practice that industrial modernity has systematically devalued, and it positions the sea as the ground of a countermodernity organized around sufficiency, reciprocity, and care.

Taken together, the dramas of this phase reveal a significant shift in the cultural work that the sea is called upon to perform within Korean "Blue Story." Where the literary texts of the late twentieth century used the ocean to mediate suppressed historical trauma, and where the films of the following decades deployed the sea as a space of spectacular disaster and structural violence, the dramas of the 2010s and 2020s reconstruct the ocean as what Nel Noddings(1984) might call a "space of caring relations," an environment in which the ethical imperatives of attentiveness, responsibility, and mutual sustenance are made visible and affirmed. The application of care ethics to ecological and spatial contexts has been developed in Joan C. Tronto (1993). This shift is not merely aesthetic, in that it registers a broader cultural turn in Korean society toward the reassertion of local ecological knowledge, feminist care ethics, and communal forms of solidarity in the face of the alienations produced by decades of rapid capitalist development. The sea has not ceased to be a space of risk and loss; but it has become, in the hands of these drama writers and directors, a medium through which a different social imaginary, organized by care rather than by competition, by ecological attentiveness rather than by extractive exploitation, can be articulated and shared.

6.0 Conclusion

The trajectory traced in this paper, from Hyun Ki-young's island of suppressed mourning, through the disaster-saturated oceans of Korean blockbuster and social realist cinema, to the caring, ecologically attentive seas of contemporary TV-OTT drama, constitutes more than a chronological survey of maritime representation. It constitutes, this paper has argued, a coherent and historically legible narrative genealogy. The "Blue Story" has been through which Korean society has repeatedly returned to the ocean as the site where its deepest conflicts, losses, and aspirations find cultural form. The concept of "Blue Story," as developed here, is not a thematic label but an analytic framework, and the argument this paper has advanced on its behalf has implications that extend in several directions simultaneously.

The first implication concerns the internal architecture of Korean cultural studies. This paper has demonstrated that the representation of the sea in Korean fiction, film, and drama is not a peripheral or incidental matter but a central and structurally significant dimension of Korean cultural history. The sea has served, across the period examined here, as a privileged medium through which experiences that resist direct

articulation, for instance, state violence, economic catastrophe, social abandonment, ecological crisis, find narrative expression and cultural transmission. To read Korean cultural texts without attending to their maritime dimensions is to miss a constitutive layer of their meaning. The concept of "Blue Story" provides Korean cultural studies with a cross-medial, historically grounded framework for recovering this layer, one that can situate individual texts within the longer arc of a shared narrative tradition that has evolved in response to the successive historical pressures of the Korean twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The second implication concerns the relationship between "Blue Story" and the broader theoretical paradigm of Blue Humanities. Working across many disciplines, Blue Humanities challenges the cultural primacy of standard sea narratives and promotes disanthropocentric discourses about water ecologies. "Blue Story," as this paper has elaborated it, is fully consonant with this ambition, but it pursues it through a specifically narrative and medial methodology that the broader paradigm has not yet fully developed. Blue Humanities as a critical practice, especially as written by scholars from the global north, runs an ongoing risk of being co-opted by imperial maritime histories and racializing ideologies (Foucault; Culler). The Korean case study offered here represents precisely the kind of intervention needed to counter this risk by demonstrating that maritime cultures outside the Western Atlantic tradition have generated their own distinctive narrative genealogies of the sea. These genealogies engage with questions of state violence, postcolonial identity, gendered labor, and ecological care in ways that the Anglophone canon cannot fully anticipate or accommodate. Rather than applying Blue Humanities frameworks to Korean materials as if those frameworks were universal, this paper leverages Korean materials to identify the limits of existing frameworks, proposing necessary revisions that make Blue Humanities more genuinely global and more attentive to the historical specificity of non-Western maritime cultures.

The third implication is theoretical, and it concerns the concept of "Blue Story" itself. This paper argues that Korean maritime narratives evolve along a trajectory from memory through disaster to care and ecology. It is important, however, to be precise about the epistemological status of this trajectory. It is not a teleological progression in which each phase supersedes and replaces the preceding one; the "sea of care" that characterizes contemporary Korean drama does not cancel the "sea of memory" or the "sea of disaster" that precede it. Rather, the three phases are better understood as sedimentary layers of meaning, each of which continues to exert pressure on subsequent representations even as new meanings accumulate on top of it. The "haenyeo" in *Our Blues* dive in a sea that is simultaneously the site of ecological sustenance and the site of political trauma, the same water that witnessed the April 3rd violent incident is now the water in which Ok-dong and her fellow divers perform their daily labor of care and survival. The genius of the best Korean maritime narrative lies precisely in this capacity to hold multiple temporal layers of meaning in suspension, to make the sea a space where history and ecology, memory and future, grief and solidarity coexist without resolution. This is what distinguishes "Blue Story" as a critical concept from simpler notions of maritime thematism. It attends not merely to what the sea means in any given text but to how different layers of oceanic meaning accumulate, conflict, and interact across the full temporal depth of a narrative tradition.

What this paper has sought to establish, above all, is that the sea is not a peripheral concern for Korean

cultural studies but its very core, a space in which the most consequential questions about Korean identity, history, and futurity have been repeatedly negotiated and contested. "Blue Story" is the name this paper proposes for the narrative tradition through which that negotiation has taken place, and for the analytical framework through which it can be most productively studied. In a world where the oceans are simultaneously under unprecedented ecological pressure and more central than ever to human political and cultural life, the humanistic study of maritime narratives is not an academic luxury but an urgent necessity. Korean "Blue Story," with its extraordinary richness of historical experience and its remarkable range of narrative and medial resources, has much to contribute to that necessity, which in turn supports the broader project of imagining more just and ecologically sustainable relationships between human societies and the sea.

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Notes

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