*Masquerade* Reflection Paper

The South Korean historical drama *Masquerade* (dir. Choo Chang-min, 2012) reflects many of the attributes of Minjoong, Minjok, and Haan. While *Masquerade* mostly takes place in the aristocratic confines of King Gwanghae’s (Lee Byung-hun) castle, it is within these very walls where the legislation that regulates the daily lives of the Korean common-folk is debated and formed. Ha-seon, the common jokester turned King’s body double, not only represents the common Korean folk but through his both momentary comedic assimilation into the hierarchy reveals scenes reflective of Minjoong. In court, Ha-seon not only makes strides to learn of the surrounding politics but also makes efforts to challenge - then mistakenly fix - oppressive laws that are being put in place. The political oppression and economic exploitation definitive of Minjoong can also be seen in Sa-wol’s (Shim Eun-kyung) past, the King’s food taster, where her farmer father suffered harsh taxes and took on debilitating debts as a resolution, all eventually leading to his imprisonment and death. In terms of Minjok, Ha-seon’s subsequent refusal to send Korean troops as foreign aid to China, not wanting to waste Korean lives in a Chinese conflict, is more than just an independent act of defiance but also creates a patriotic sense of value for the Korean people. Finally, from The Queen’s (Han Hyo-joo) ice-cold emotional disposition, the roles women such as Sa-wol occupy, the slavery sold populace of Koreans, or even simply the unjust treatment of the common-folk whether it is an invading nation or an abusive domestic rule - *Masquerade*’s historical attempt to portray some Korean culture is representative of Haan.

On the other hand, *Masquerade* does portray the many different manifestations of haan too. Arguably, Ha-seon showcases a type of active haan in his justice-seeking; from making attempts at positive political change, reuniting Sa-wol with her family, and freeing the Queen’s imprisoned brother. The Queen herself makes for an interesting case of unconscious active haan as she carries a quiet indifference towards the actual King, whose relationship is slowly fleeting, and the court for the treatment of her accused brother. This unconscious active haan does change to active haan as the Queen threatens Ha-seon with her life if nothing soon changes with her brother’s condition. Alternatively, the Queen’s brother, even in his chained and tortured state does not show passive haan; when Ha-seon approached him he never gave in to a lack of hope. While Sa-wol’s family could be a candidate for passive haan, they are not necessarily present within the boundaries of the film.

*Masquerade*’s cinematography is not too different from what you would see in a Western film, but nonetheless, there is a certain quality and control to it that is more often than not lost in the typical Hollywood blockbusters. *Masquerade*’s pre-title sequence is indicative of this quality, with an almost musical-like montage of the King being intricately dressed for the day, then finished by his cold-stare into the camera. For a film mostly confined to a singular - albeit large - location, *Masquerade* does make strong use of its space with its cinematography; scenes with Ha-seon and the Queen come to mind or Captain Do’s (Kim In-Kown) realization of the imposter King. Then unlike popular Western blockbuster films, *Masquerade* does not splay in creating those visually iconic moments, the stuff of wallpapers, where the content or story has been merely drained for a visual moment of awe - something the popular superhero films of the last decade have relied heavily on.

There is no real catharsis to *Masquerade*’s ending. Ha-seon, our protagonist, makes no major change or impact in the last moments of the film, but rather escapes off into the sunset - questioning whether his leftover actions were honorable enough to make a change. The King has returned in better health, the attempted coup has been stopped, and the Queen with the rest of this hierarchy lives on. Everything seemed to have peaked in this metaphorical emotional rollercoaster by the end of the second act, with the third act just serving as a character send-off - answers are given to the remaining conflict but never in the direction expected. *Masquerade* does not bathe these characters in heroics - though a valid argument could be made for Captain Do’s final moments - or idolize the characters in the past traditions they portray. At the end of it, *Masquerade*’s ending may not be exciting or a real emotional gut-punch but denies a classical Hollywood ending with all strings wrapped-up in a tight little bowtie.

While just dramatized historical fiction, through its look at the past by way of traditions, the setting, clothing, and even to an extent character behavior, *Masquerade* becomes a strong piece of Korean national cinema. Weaved in and about the narrative, *Masquerade* is depicting a surface of Korean culture that is hopefully reflective of the Korea that derived it. Additionally, *Masquerade* also aligns itself with Third Cinema by way of its negative outlook on Chinese imperialism, its denial of Hollywood entertainment norms, and the nationalistic pride it aims to exert.