



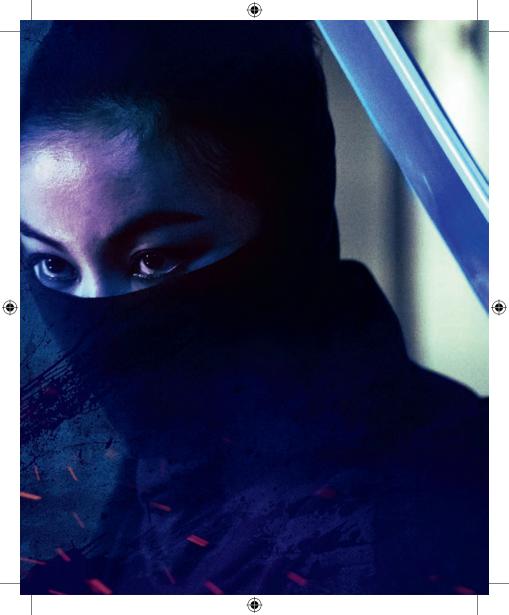
## THE VILLAINESS

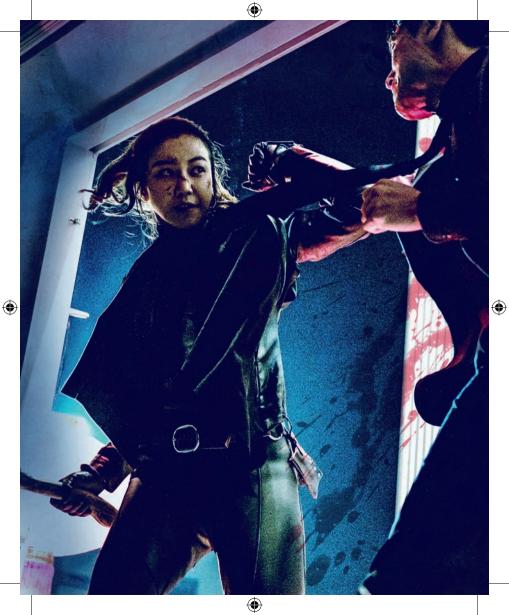
by Anton Bitel

#### 1. Stuck in the middle

The Villainess opens in medias res, and its first seven and a half minutes - leading up to the on-screen appearance of the Korean title, 악녀 or Ak-nyeo (literally 'evil woman') - certainly grab the attention, while throwing the viewer some mixed signals designed to discomfit and disorient. Initially what we watch is restricted to the point of view of a character whom we cannot see, but who rampages through a building taking on all comers with a gun, an axe and blades - and with extreme prejudice. From the timbre of the unseen character's breathing, it is possible to discern that this is the one and only woman in a grubby tenement filled with men. While it becomes clear that this is a den of criminals - complete with meth lab - its invader is no heroic crimefighter. Not only does she go in as the aggressor with gun blazing, and ruthlessly murder or at least maim literally everyone that crosses her path, but she even shoots dead a lab technician who is cowering from her rather than attacking like the rest. So there seems little doubt that she is the villainess of the title, ensuring that our identification with her, forced by our shared perspective, is very uneasy.

The first five minutes of this film throw us in with a ruthlessly efficient killing machine, in a first-person-shooter mode familiar from video games. There are no doubt several concealed cuts in this sequence, but to all appearances this is a bravura single take, dynamically tracking her view along corridors, down staircases and through rooms all crammed with armed men - and the unbroken fluidity of this POV shot only enhances our uncomfortable alliance







with her and the massacre that she both initiates and resolutely perpetrates. Only when she enters a gym full of thugs (including a large suited man who is obviously the 'boss' of this gaming level) is her head smashed into a mirror. And when we see her bloody face for the first time, a different kind of cut shifts the perspective to a more objective, if no less dynamic, style, as the camera (again in an apparent single take) cleaves close to her body for a further two-and-a-half minutes as she works her way through all her opponents (including the 'boss'), and leaps out the window onto the rainy alleyway below, where she surrenders to a group of policemen who all have their guns trained on her (in case anyone were still unaware on which side of the law she operates).

It is precisely because this opening scene is shot so immersively, plunging the viewer into an explosion of lethal violence without explanation, precursor or context, that it leaves us rocking and reeling along with the mobile camera, unsure where to find our moral footing. Yet even as we are made to align ourselves with a mass murderess (played by Kim Ok-bin, best know for Park Chan-wook's *Thirst* (2009)), there are ways in which this prologue also hints at a bigger picture, and at themes that the rest of the film will tease out. First, for all her kill-happy moves, our heroine gains our sympathies because of her vulnerability. This is not just because she is one against hundreds ("Eh, you came alone? Crazy bitch!", comments an incredulous tattooed giant, backed by an army of knife-wielding comrades), nor just because, when we finally see her, she is relatively diminutive in frame, but also because she is the sole woman in a violent world of men.

More hints come via allusions to other films. If the corridor fights obviously evoke *Oldboy* (2003), viewers might recall that in Park Chan-wook's film the aggressor was not only motivated by revenge, but also manipulated to action. If the single-take, multi-floor mayhem conjures a similar sequence in *Warrior King* (2003),



the aggressor in Prachya Pinkaew's film is unambiguously fighting for what is right - and the same might be said of the hero of Gareth Evans' *The Raid* (2011), who similarly raids a building and must fight his way up to the boss. The possibility remains that our villainess is not entirely beyond redemption - and in fact, the rest of the film will carefully unravel just why she came to be eliminating the entire population of that edifice, and how she had acquired the skills and drive to do so.

#### 2. Lights, camera... action

Before studying film at Chung-Ang University, writer-director Jung Byung-gil spent six months at the Seoul Action School. Although he has never himself worked as a stuntman, he used the connections and experience he gained there to make Action Boys (2008), an idiosyncratic feature-length documentary that follows several graduates of the School as they try to become film stuntmen. This was followed by his Confession of Murder (2012), a twisty psycho-thriller that pits a cold-case serial killer against a scarred cop and the vengeance-seeking relatives of several victims and is full of parkour-style chases and fights atop moving vehicles. So Jung is well placed to deliver on the action that the prologue to The Villainess seems so unequivocally to promise. Indeed. many of the elements that characterised Confession of Murder the deft switches between past and present, the heady manipulation of the viewer's moral orientation, and several very elaborately mounted action sequences at its centre - are further developed in Jung's latest film. Yet The Villainess is no more a straight action film than its protagonist is straightforwardly a villainess.







#### 3. "So melodramatic"

Our heroine's name, it turns out, is Sook-hee - although it will change over the course of the film to Chae Yoon-soo when she goes undercover as a sleeper agent for the Korean secret service. Her film's identity proves similarly hybrid. For as *The Villainess* follows Sook-hee's recruitment and training for the secret service, her growth as a loving mother to Eun-hye (Kim Yeon-woo), her new career as, appropriately enough, an actress, and her (second) marriage to spy-next-door Hyun-soo (Sung Joon), we see a woman struggling to reinvent herself, settle down and put a history of bloodshed behind her - even as triggered flashbacks reveal the continuities between her past and her present life, while those whom she imagined were long dead keep returning to haunt her.

When Sook-hee, leaving the training facility to take up her new life. bids a warm farewell to her friend Min-joo (Son Min-ji), rival trainee agent Kim Sun (Jo Eun-ji) takes exception to this display of heartfelt humanity, complaining, "So melodramatic," In this respect, Kim is perhaps giving expression to what many hardened action fans may be feeling at this point. For while The Villainess is certainly peppered with scenes of infiltration and assassination, much of its duration is taken up by Sook-hee's developing romance with Hyun-soo, her conflicted feelings about her first husband Joong-sang (Shin Ha-kvun), and her concern for the future of her toddler daughter. Such domestic preoccupations are indeed the stuff of melodrama and melodrama, that sentimental mode of Korean cinema to which Western viewers prove most averse, sits at odds with hyperviolent action. Yet here, the collision of those two genres is the very soul of the The Villainess, propelling the tension between Sook-hee's desire to live "a normal life", and the desire of others (including many viewers) that she get back to kicking ass. These are also the twin drives internalised within Sook-hee since she was a little girl. For on the one hand she is on a quest for vengeance upon the unseen man

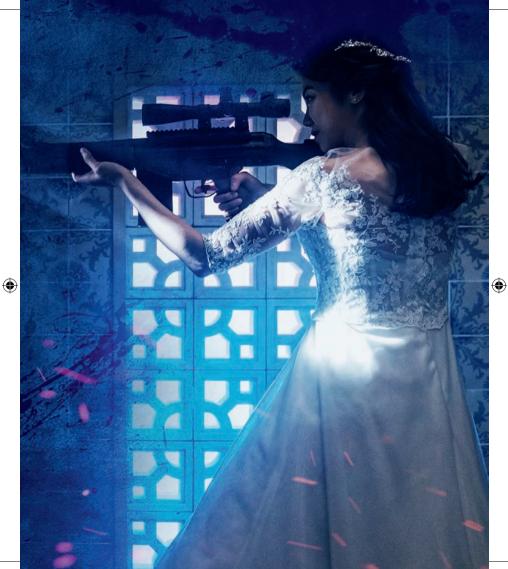


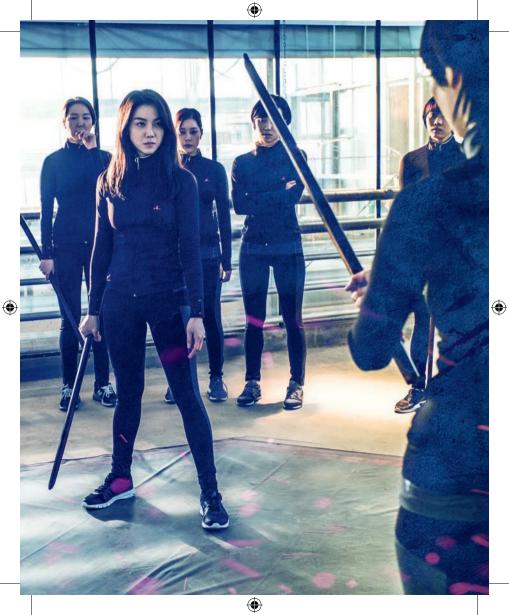
who murdered her father before her eyes, and whose distinctive whistle - the film's primal sound, so to speak, and the Pavlovian signal that always sets Sook-hee off on a murderous rampage - was heard in the film before even the bloody prologue kicked off. Yet on the other hand, Sook-hee just wants to return to the idyllic family life that she enjoyed before her father died.

This double motivation can be discerned in her evolving relationship with the older Joong-sang (shown in a series of flashbacks). At first, when this professional hitman rescues Sook-hee from child sex work and takes her under his wing, he serves as a father figure to the girl, teaching her. Léon-like, the tricks of the assassin's trade that she will need to avenge her real father. Yet as she gets older, Sook-hee develops different feelings for the man she (rather creepily) calls 'Mister', and invites him to marry her, with the words: "If you promise to stay with me, I'll forget about revenge, and live a normal life." It is her honeymoon that brings Sook-hee from her native Yanbian to Seoul, where, over dinner, Joong-sang tells her, "Let's live a normal life", before being called away on business. Informed by Joong-sang's lieutenant Choon-mo (Lee Seung-joo) that the men behind her father's death have now also killed her new husband, Sook-hee enters the building (catching up with the film's beginning) on a vindictive suicide mission - and miraculously, both succeeds and survives.

Detained in a facility, Sook-hee is persuaded to become an agent for the state on the promise from her handler Kwon-sook (Kim Seo-hyung) of protection for the baby that she is carrying, and of (again) "a normal life" - after ten years' service as an assassin. Yet this new life runs in parallel to the old one - more relationships rooted in deception, another wedding disrupted by violence (in a scene closely modelled on Luc Besson's *Nikita* (1990)) - with the parallelisms brought to the fore by a narrative that keeps crossing its chronologies. As old loves resurface and new ones prove falsely









grounded, Sook-hee's double-agency encapsulates the film's confounded allegiances to divergent genres.

#### 4. Villainess, or feminist heroine

From her hiding place under a bed, the child Sook-hee (played by Min Ye-ji) sees her father stabbed and then sledge-hammered to death. It is a primal scene closely modelled on the animated origin story of O-ren Ishii from Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003). Later, when Sook-hee goes on her first mission for the secret service, she realises with horror that she has come full circle, herself now responsible for murdering a father before his own daughter. This too borrows from the Bride's first messy murder in *Kill Bill*, and marks Sook-hee's realisation that she has become precisely what she abhors - and yet the point is that Sook-hee is not a natural born killer, but a villainess made by the misdeeds of others (and more specifically, of other men - even Kwon-sook must answer to her male superiors) who abuse, exploit and manipulate her to their own ends.

Here the perverse forces of patriarchy - embodied most fully by Joong-sang - keep wrenching from Sook-hee everything that she holds dear, until eventually in the end, as in the beginning, she is compelled to acts of brutal revenge which only put more blood on her hands and lead to her further entrapment. The film's climax, another apparent single take in which the camera weaves impossibly onto, through and around a barrelling bus as an injured, axe-wielding Sook-hee takes on all the professional killers inside, is precisely the show-stopping action spectacle that all at once the audience craves and Sook-hee herself has been steadfastly trying to avoid - and so the pleasure that we take in its fast-moving intensity and extreme stuntwork is tempered by our knowledge that we are seeing Sook-hee not so much liberating herself as remaining





caught in a vicious cycle, until in the end all her momentum comes to a crashing stop and she is once more arrested by gun-toting men.

As a vision of a serially wronged woman's plight, *The Villainess* is extremely bleak - but Sook-hee's strength, tenacity and capacity to resist the steepest of odds are what make her such an impressive and captivating, if ultimately tragic, character. She may be oppressed, her agency may not be entirely free, but Sook-hee, defiance incarnate, always struggles and always survives against her oppressors in their insidious male hierarchical structures - and that is what makes this villainess a feminist heroine, fighting the very system that has engendered her.

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# THE VILLAINESS TAKES OVER - THE RISE OF KOREA'S ACTION DAMES

by Pierce Conran

In the opening moments of *The Villainess*, a lone figure embarks on a bloody rampage that will see dozens of men cut down by bullets and blades. Experienced from the perspective of the mysterious assailant, we only learn the identity of this savage and efficient killer at the final stage of their mission. Cutting through a swathe of burly opponents in a gym room, our protagonist momentarily loses the upper hand and is slammed into a mirror. For the first time we catch a glimpse of their face – which to our surprise reveals the bloodied but determined Kim Ok-vin, star of Park Chan-wook's gleefully twisted vampire fable *Thirst*.

Of course, the gender and identity of this killing machine should be no real mystery in a film entitled *The Villainess*, yet this is no ordinary introduction. As she stares at herself in the mirror, her reflection glares back at the audience with a lingering and defiant gaze. As though issuing a direct challenge to us, as well as established action stars, both in Korea and around the world, she dares us to question her status and proficiency as one of the most fearsome on-screen threats seen anywhere in 2017.

Kim, who was plucked from relative obscurity to star in Park's 2009 Cannes Jury Prize winner, isn't Korea's first female action star, but in a country where the box-office charts were once littered with female-driven hits, it's surprising just how few women have appeared in commanding, physical roles in the years since.





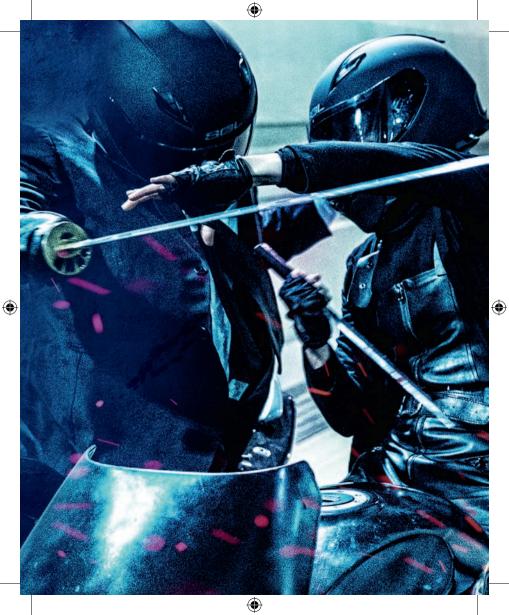
For example, if you look at the top ten most successful Korean films of the 1970s, you'll find that five feature either a woman's name or the word 'woman' in their titles, eight were primarily focused on a female protagonist and all ten featured an actress in a lead role. Compare that to 2016, when only one film (*The Last Princess*) satisfied those three criteria, while the other nine films in that year's top ten failed to tick even one box between them.

Since the 1970s, the Korean film industry has steadily moved away from the genres typically associated with women — romance, family dramas or romantic comedies. Studios have been shy to develop female-centric titles in popular genres, including thrillers and action films, while melodrama, the former bread and butter of the industry, faces increasingly stiff competition from the overwhelming popularity of TV dramas.

Prior to Kim blazing her way through a building full of male adversaries with the stylish efficiency of John Wick, strong female leads began to take root in the early 2000s. Formidable female protagonists featured prominently in the gangster comedy genre (My Wife Is a Gangster (2001)), swiftly followed by a number of darker, female-centric revenge thrillers, most notably Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (2005) and Princess Aurora (2005).

Parlaying the family drama into a four-quadrant title, gangster comedy franchises like *Marrying the Mafia*, *Hi Dharma!* and *Mapado* commanded the charts in the early 2000s. Similarly, *My Wife is a Gangster* follows the second-in-command of a powerful gang, who decides to fulfill her sister's dying wish, and find a man to marry, while keeping her criminal status secret from him. Playing the gangster bride of the title is Shin Eun-kyoung, laying claim to the title of modern Korean Cinema's first female action star. Shin led the first two films in the series, which proved major hits in 2001 and 2003, as well as the less well-received action titles *This Is Law* and *Blue*.









Truth be told, the powerful opening of *The Villainess* may be a nod to *My Wife Is a Gangster*, which used a similar trick to introduce a female action lead to many Korean audiences for the first time. A gangster recounts the legendary exploits of his boss 'Big Brother' to a friend, in which many hoods are beaten down during a raindrenched nighttime set piece. When the gangster invites his friend into the gang's headquarters to introduce him, the friend mistakenly addresses the wrong person while launching insults at the real 'Big Brother', who is revealed to be a woman.

In an industry besotted with gangster films, *My Wife Is a Gangster* was a refreshing novelty, relying heavily on the contrast and seeming surprise of seeing a woman do 'a man's job'. Welcoming well over five million viewers as it became the second biggest homegrown hit of the year, studios took notice and attempted to flood the marketplace with a number of similar films. Instead of giving more traditional male roles to women though, they began to peddle increasingly slapstick gangster-comedy fare, a fad that wore out after just a few years, while strong roles for women remained rare.

If the lesson wasn't learned in 2001, perhaps it was in 2005, with the arrival of both the final installment of Park Chan-wook's Vengeance Trilogy, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, and *Princess Aurora*, the directorial debut of actress Bang Eun-jin. While neither is an action film per se, both featured female leads (Lee Young-ae and Uhm Jung-hwa) hunting down mostly male targets in narratives that chronicle their brutal and effective vendettas. They fulfilled the same desires as Sun-woo in Kim Jee-woon's *A Bittersweet Life* or Dae-su in Park's previous hit, *Oldboy* (2003), with the only difference being that Lee Young-ae and Uhm Jung-hwa had to be more inventive with their murders than Lee Byung-hun and Choi Min-sik's use of guns, hammers and bare hands.

In the same year, Lee Myung-se's sumptuous swordplay actiondrama *The Duelist* transformed star Ha Ji-won from a horror victim



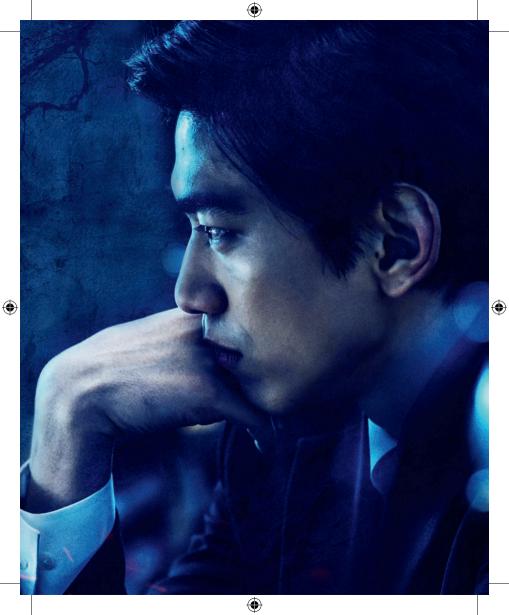


and romantic interest into a spunky action lead, snatching the crown of Korea's first true female action star from Shin Eun-kyoung in the process. *The Duelist* may not have lit the box office on fire but many consider it a seminal contemporary Korean film, and Ha's new persona allowed the actress to differentiate herself from the pack of hopeful Korean starlets. While she didn't give up her dramatic or comedic roles, the next few years and many hours in the gym, saw Ha become the industry's go-to girl for action.

Audiences finally cottoned on to Ha's dynamic versatility when she starred in Tsunami disaster blockbuster *Haeundae* in 2009, one of the most successful Korean films of all time. A year later she appeared alongside Hyun Bin in the wildly successful TV drama *Secret Garden*, playing a member of the Seoul Action School. A real establishment, the school is a training academy for stunt performers established by Korean martial artist and stunts legend Jung Doo-hong, responsible for the action in all of Ryoo Seung-wan's films. During press tours for *Lady Action* in 2015, a variety show that trained six actresses in stunt work (including *How to Use Girls with Secret Tips* (2013) lead Lee Si-young) Jung singled out Ha Ji-won as the only legitimate action star in Korea, acknowledging her significant action experience in Korean films and dramas.

Ha's image as an action star led JK Films, the powerhouse production company behind *Haeundae*, to build a new action project around her, the oil rig creature feature *Sector 7* (2011). Many column inches were devoted to Ha's workout regimen ahead of the film's release, which ultimately proved both a critical and commercial disappointment. Nevertheless, the project remains a milestone as a rare Korean blockbuster film centered around a female protagonist, who takes down a formidable villain while consistently upstaging her male co-stars.









Subsequently, in Korea's unforgiving commercial marketplace, Ha's lustre started to fade and her next, *The Huntresses*, was perhaps doomed to failure. A Joseon-era *Charlie's Angels*-style action romp featuring Ha at its centre, it endured several delays before debuting to little fanfare and scathing reviews in 2014.

As Korea's first legitimate action star began to dim, a few other hopefuls entered the domain. While none had been seen as an action star before, these actresses were already more successful than Ha at her peak. This new generation included Gianna Jun (aka Jun Ji-hyun), Son Ye-jin and Doona Bae.

Gianna Jun became, and has remained, one of Korea's top performers, following the release of rom-com classic *My Sassy Girl*. (2001). But after several romantic titles, Jun set her sights on Hollywood with the misbegotten horror-action project *Blood: The Last Vampire* (2009). Following another attempt at the Chinese market with *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2011), she returned to Korea to join the ensemble of Choi Dong-hoon's heist thriller *The Thieves* (2012), which remains one of the most successful Korean films of all time. This would be the first of three consecutive supporting roles in hit action titles for Jun, including Ryoo Seung-wan's *The Berlin File* (2013), and *Assassination* (2015).

While Jun has built her later career around action films, it would be a stretch to say she is considered an action star. Only in *Assassination* does she not play second fiddle to male action leads and in *The Berlin File*, despite shooting a man off a ledge, she's a portrayed as little more than a damsel in distress.

Ever more so than Jun, Son Ye-jin seemed an unlikely candidate for action film stardom. Known for soft feminine roles in a series of wistful melodramas and comedies, she experimented with a caper





thriller (*Open City* (2008)) and a disaster film (*The Tower* (2012)) before scoring box office gold with *The Pirates* (2015), an action-heavy comedy adventure in the spirit of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Her next role, in the China-Korea co-production *Bad Guys Always Die* (2015) was also an action-comedy, but since then she hasn't continued with action roles, though her image has expanded into more varied territory, including political thrillers (*The Truth Beneath* (2016)) and financial thrillers (*Negotiation* (2016)).

The most serious contender among the three is surely Doona Bae, star of early films from Bong Joon-ho (*Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000)) and Park Chan-wook (*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*), who played an archer with stage fright in Bong's *The Host* (2006). But it has been overseas where Bae's made her mark recently, as a bona fide action star in several works by the Wachowskis, including *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Jupiter Ascending* (2015) and Netlfix TV series *Sense8*. Her 500k follower-strong Instagram account frequently features snippets and images of her martial arts training.

But we're talking about Korean films, and following her sensational performance in *The Villainess*, the only action star on anyone's lips is Kim Ok-vin. Jung Byung-gil's revenge masterclass liberally references a wealth of action films from around the region. The eponymous heroine Sook-hee is gassed in her prison cell, reminding us of *Oldboy*'s Dae-su; she reassembles her weapon faster than her opponent, just like Sun-woo in *A Bittersweet Life*. She even witnesses her father's murder while cowering beneath a bed, just as O-Ren Ishii did in the animated segment of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 1*.

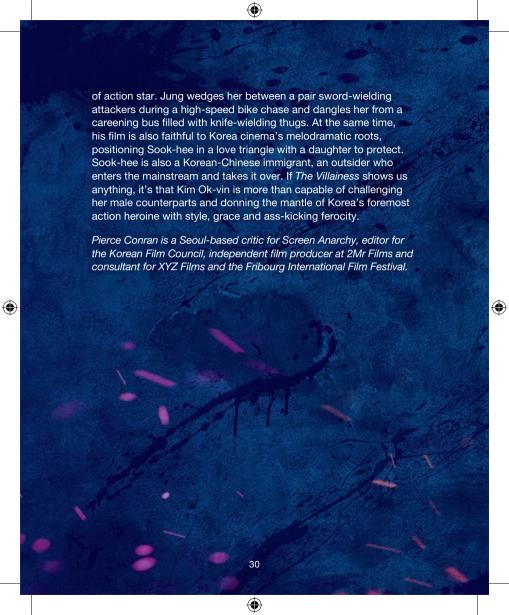
These sequences elevate Kim into the same arena as the greats of the genre, but it's in the film's unique and pulse-pounding set-pieces where she truly distinguishes herself as a new breed







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### **ABOUT THE TRANSFER**

The Villainess appears in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 5.1 surround sound. The High Definition master was supplied by Contents Panda (South Korea).

## **PRODUCTION CREDITS**

Discs and Booklet Produced by Mike Hewitt, Kevin Lambert
Executive Producer Francesco Simeoni
Technical Producer James White
QC Manager Nora Mehenni
Authoring & Subtitling DCU
Cover and Design Oink

## SPECIAL THANKS

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