

Woman power in the Choson era

Damo: The Undercover Lady Detective

Every time we turn on the TV, it seems we see a new permutation of CSI or some other police show, and we may be tempted to forget that crime is not a modern invention. Long ago and far away, as long and far as say, 17th century Korea, there was also the need to investigate crimes and dispense justice. While the clothing, culture and customs may differ, the need to catch criminals remains the same — even if only for the sake of entertaining a modern-day TV audience.

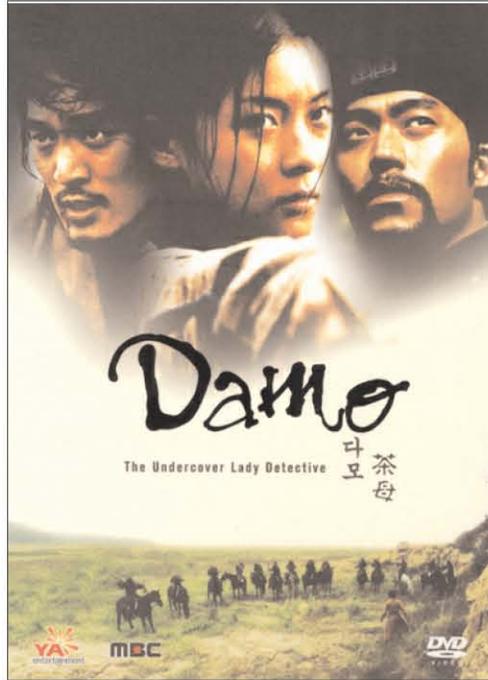
Which brings us to the Korean pseudo-historical drama, *Damo*. Instead of a gritty, modern city, *Damo* begins with an aerial shot of mountainous emerald countryside. A shift to a serene bamboo forest. A man smiles lazily at a woman pointing a sword directly at him.

Except for the blood and sweat, they might for all the world be at a garden party, lounging negligently, but are revealed to be levitating in the treetops, resting between some interrupted conversation. She leaps. They fight, flying through the fragile-looking bamboo lurching in the wind of their gyrating feet. She cuts him; he whirls gently to the ground; she follows.

“Were you trying to kill me?” she asks. His reply: “I already killed you.” Obviously, this is not a typical detective drama. And indeed, *Damo* blends intrigue, romance, action and even philosophy into a 14-hour yarn that is entertaining and unique in the genre.

In 17th century Choson Korea, there was a class of women known as damo — literally, “tea servants.” The damo prepared and served tea, and were of lowly status, practically slaves. As happens with skilled slaves, the best were highly prized by the aristocracy. Police officers were members of the aristocracy at the time, just like any other military officer, so they employed damo.

Eventually, another need for the services of the damo slave women was discovered by these aristocratic



cratic police officers. As women, they could investigate crimes by and against highborn women. Due to the strict gender hierarchy and roles of the time, men were not allowed to look at or touch the bodies of women — at least, not aristocratic women. Also, presumably because women, particularly servant women, were part of the background, damo could go undercover. They were not, of course, official female police detectives, but since some obviously were needed, damo filled the gap.

Hak-gi Gan’s series of manhwa (comic books), *Damo Nam-soon*, started in the 1970s, and started a tough, independent-minded young damo. MBC based its 2003 series on this manhwa. Ji-won Ha stars as Chae-ok Jang, a young police damo. Chae-ok, originally named Jae-hui Jang, traumatically loses her family at the age of seven, is separated from her brother, Jae-ho, and never sees him again nor learns what became of him.

Made a slave due to her father’s crimes against the state, she is given as a servant to young Hwangbo Yoon, the half-noble, half-common illegitimate son of a good magistrate. Yoon and Jae-hui form an immediate bond as veritable orphans and develop a close, brother and sister relationship. When they become young adults, Yoon (Seo-jin Lee) is sent to train as a police officer and Jae-hui

eventually is allowed to join him as a damo, with her name changed to Chae-ok presumably to hide her identity as a traitor’s daughter.

Yoon becomes the commander of the Left Police Bureau. (In Choson times, public service departments were referred to as left, right or middle, merely as a differentiation, much as American military formations are numbered.) He enjoys the favor of the Minister of Police, Se-ok Jo (Young-kyu Park), even over the minister’s own son.

As a police procedural, *Damo* follows the CSI model of developing a case and revealing the criminal and his or her motives. Chae-ok is a competent and intuitive investigator. One important case involves a huge, well-coordinated counterfeiting ring that threatens the security of the kingdom. Intense, secret police work uncovers a gang operating in the mountains. Chae-ok, carrying out her part in the investigations, meets a mysterious fighting man who helps her out of some difficult situations. This man turns out to be Sung-baek Jang (Min-joon Kim), whom we saw in the first scene flying through the trees pursued by Chae-ok. When she later infiltrates his organization with the help of a partially reformed thief named Chuk-ji Mah (whose name is actually a criminal nickname somewhat like “quick-foot Mah” — played by Lee Moon-sik), Sung-baek and Chae-ok quickly develop a strong, mysterious bond.

The relationship between Chae-ok and Sung-baek is complicated by the fact that he is not simply a vicious criminal. He regards himself, instead, as a revolutionary of the people, a Robin Hood figure. Chae-ok begins to see a different person than the brutal malefactor she expected. Their special bond is soon revealed by flashbacks of their mutual past.

This bond constitutes one of the missed opportunities of the series. For Chae-ok and Sung-baek, not to realize their true relationship seems rather odd for two such intuitive people. What’s more, many clues are available to them, but they never put the whole picture together.

Instead of Chae-ok choosing between her role as a purveyor of justice through the law and that of a vigilante, instead of a clash between her life with her police officer comrades, with whom she shares a deep mutual respect, and the well-meaning, undeniably oppressed rebels who gain her sympathy, instead of being forced to choose between two men she regards as brothers, she rather falls victim to a doomed affair.

An interesting and compelling dichotomy is sacrificed for a trite love triangle. However, overall, *Damo* is self-aware and well-choreographed entertainment. Chae-ok is smart, agile, intuitive and brave, and a highly-trained sword fighter. In fact, she is more highly trained than an actual human being could possibly be, as are all of the swordsmen in this drama.

Damo is filmed in the style of Chinese *wuxia* (chivalric martial arts) films, with the attendant theme of social justice and use of fantastic high-wire fighting, mystical energy and extreme acupressure techniques. These stunts are so intrinsic to the action one hardly has a chance to think, “They couldn’t really do that!” — they just do, and because it does not break the flow of the drama, the viewer can suspend disbelief. It’s all part of the fun of this kind of story.

Many memorable characters populate *Damo*, not the least of whom are Sung-baek’s followers, who love their families, are devoted to their friends and yearn to live as free men. Yoon’s loyal police subordinates include brooding, enigmatic but kind Won-hae Lee (Oh-joong Kwon), faint-hearted Jo-wan Baek (Han-wee Lee) and Chae-ok’s inept, foolish but steadfast suitor, Byung-taek Ahn (Seung-hwan Shin), who surprisingly becomes a

key source of information to crack the criminal organization.

Comedy is provided by this stumblebum lover, as well as by the thief Quick-foot Mah and his wife (whose sense of honor proves her undoing). Even Minister of Police Joh’s sullen, resentful son eventually shows himself to be more of a man than first impressions would indicate.

These are characters who are not completely good nor bad, but human. Unfortunately, the truly bad guys of *Damo*, Minister Jung (Wook Jung), Ho-keun Jung as Official Choi, and Kye-bum Ahn as Kato, Choi’s Japanese henchman, are pretty one-dimensional characters who seem to be only after power and money, but this is a quibble. Minister Johs unmarried daughter Nan-hui (Young-sun Bae), as the only unequivocally good person in the drama, possessed of an instinctive moral compass, is modest, accomplished, respectful, and unerringly kind. The character is also charmingly and convincingly played.

King Suk-jong (Sun Woo Jae-duk), the only character representing an actual historical figure, is revealed (fictionally) to be frightened and flawed, unable to choose whom to trust. The question of whether a country belongs to all the people or is the god-given property of the king, who carries the burden for the people and should be preserved at all costs, is presented in an attempt to elevate *Damo* from purely an action yarn to a philosophical treatise. This does not always succeed.

In the end, *Damo* may not be Shakespeare (even though it has been compared to it) and it may not be history (although it resembles it), but it is undeniably magnificent entertainment.

Note: Unlike the other facts used in this review, which were found at multiple places, the information about Damo Nam-soon came from a specific source, www.twitchfilm.net/archives/005168.html; this article also contains a comprehensive discussion of the events leading up to the making of Damo. ●