When you have thus formed the chain of ideas in the heads of your citizens, you will then be able to pride yourselves on guiding them and being their masters. A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas.

—Servan 1767, 35, quoted in Foucault 1979, 102–103

The clang of the lock in the steel doors when they were opened or closed always made me tense up in fear. Elderly prisoners with weak hearts said that hearing the steel-on-steel grating of the keys was like being stabbed in the heart with a dagger.

—Suh Sung 2001, 74

These are two visions of the modern prison. For Foucault, the modern penal system is a disciplinary institution like the school, and he traces the transformation from physical torture into the “improvement” of the prisoner in modern confinement (Foucault 1979). This discourse is an image of prison which does not rely on naked force or brutality, though Foucault himself hardly approved of “modern” prisons. For Suh Sung and other former South Korean political prisoners in recent decades, there is little transformation in the tools and methods of the South Korean prison, an experience of violence and inhumanity particularly for political prisoners. This dark image of prisons and law does not surprise the Korean public, for whom prisons and penal codes reflect a traditional authoritarian state in its modern form. In modern South Korea, one particular law—the National Security Law, itself the successor to security laws going back to

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colonial times—has been particularly powerful in shaping this image of
prison and law among the public. *The Road Taken* (*Seontaek*), released in
2003, was the first film to directly tackle the National Security Law and
national security apparatus in South Korea. It is the central film in a new
genre, released in the late 1990s, that deals with Korean reunification,
repatriation, and the experience of “unconverted” political prisoners in
South Korea. These films—*Shiri* (dir. Gang Je-Gyu, 1999), *JSA* (*Gongdŏng Gyeongbi Guyeok, Joint Security Area*, dir. Park Chan-wook,
helped to propel a changing understanding of reunification, repatriation,
and national security in South Korea.

**Filming Reconciliation and Repatriation**

*The Road Taken* is based on a true story. It depicts a political prisoner’s life in
an anti-Communist land. The hero, Kim Seon-Myeong, was sentenced to
forty-five years in prison in 1951 for violating South Korea’s National
Security Law. After his release, Kim spent another five years under a form of
police-supervised house arrest. Kim could have been released much earlier—but
he would have had to agree to “convert” to South Korea’s system of liberal
democracy. Under the South Korean National Security Law—which remains
in effect though its draconian application has now somewhat eased—only
such converts could be released even after the end of their full sentences.
Unwilling to convert, Kim remained under guard. Eventually, and only after
the successful summit meeting between South and North Korea in June
2000, Kim was finally sent back to his ideological home, North Korea, after
fifty-one years in southern prisons.

*The Road Taken* appeared three years after Kim was repatriated to North
Korea, but that release was only possible in the midst of South Korea’s
expanding democratization and after the 2000 South–North Korea summit
meeting. Even five years earlier, production and distribution of such a film
would have been impossible. So *The Road Taken* and other films of the
repatriation and national security cycle are a useful reflection of changing
politics in South Korea and the evolution of South–North Korean relations.
But they are also a superb window into understanding the image of law in
South Korea, and the changing relations between law and the state in South
Korea from 1951 to 2000.

*The Road Taken* and related films take a different approach to North
Korea than films in the past, and an approach that has itself changed
considerably since the first such film, *Shiri*, appeared in 1999. Traditionally,