

THE SUBVERSIVE STRAIN IN MODERN KOREAN FILM

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The role of Korean film has become more conspicuous within the realm of Asian popular culture with the rise of the Korean Wave (Hallyu), marked by transnationalism, when Asian countries moved away from American dominance and re-grouped across boundaries and time zones with mutual understandings linked by popular culture. Democracy in Korea and the Korean Wave have been associated with giving Koreans a collective voice of a subversive nature through films disseminated on a global stage. The film industry, since the 1960s, has provided a collective voice in varying degrees to convey social resentment irrespective of authoritarian government policies. However, there has been a general failure to recognize that the social history of Korea in the post-Korean War period has been closely associated with political, economic and social factors reflected in film. Furthermore, despite totalitarian governments exercising cultural hegemony, the Korean people have managed to resist a monolithic ideology through subversive tones in censored films. This paper focuses on the role Korean film has played as a component of Asian Popular Culture and as medium through which Korean people have exercised a collective voice under authoritarian regimes.

Introduction

In the repressive era of President Park Chung-hee (1961-1979), Koreans were expected to make personal sacrifices in the name of economic recovery. Political unrest was regarded as a threat to the overall revival and stability of the nation. Film was considered a propaganda tool and censorship was the norm. In that state of affairs, however, it is puzzling to find how a film confronting issues of homosexuality, authority, class and sexuality could avoid strict codes of censorship. Nevertheless, in 1972 director Ha Kil-jong confronted those taboos in *The Pollen of Flowers* (Hwabun).¹ Indeed, in a highly symbolic manner the

1 Korean Film Archive (KOFA). "100 Korean Films,"



film challenged the totalitarian nature of the Park regime. The *Pollen of Flowers* concerns a young, handsome concert pianist named Dan-joo who becomes a protégé, and possibly lover, of his master Hyun-ma. Furthermore, Dan-joo's difficult relationship with the wife of Hyun-ma, Se-ran, epitomizes the class discrimination of the time as she regards him as polluted because he is from a lower class.

Twenty-five years later, Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) was the first political opposition leader to become a democratically-elected president. At that time, there was a loosening of film censorship and Koreans began questioning their national identity. In this new era, blockbuster films like 2000's *The Joint Security Area* (*Gongdonggyeongbiguyeok*)², by director Park Chan-wook, dared to confront the long held anti-communist paradigm. In the film, two guards on different sides of the DMZ become friends. The South Korean guard visits his North Korean counterparts' barracks at night, where the supposed enemies talk and play juvenile games. Despite the tragic ending with South Korean Sgt. Lee (Lee Byung-hyun) committing suicide upon learning his bullet killed his North Korean friend, this emotional and compelling story reminded South Koreans that though they distrusted their brothers north of the DMZ, North Koreans are human too.

The two Korean films presented above were released at different times in the development of the Korean nation; however, they both carry subversive tones. The experience of the Korean film industry shows how both totalitarian and democratic governments have tried in different ways to use film as a way of reinforcing economic power structures and polices. These governments have rarely been able to completely suppress the subversive elements within the film industry, however. This paper will illustrate this argument with two cases studies.

The first case study will comment on the potentially subversive role film has played in Korea under the censorship and authoritarian rules of President Park Chung-hee (1961-79) and President Chun Doo-hwan (1980-88). Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003), when government control of film became far less restrictive and more of a cultural commodity. This allowed the Korean film industry to express subversive sentiments on much wider national and global stages.

http://www.koreafilm.org/feature/100_59.aspxhttp://www.koreafilm.org/feature/100_59.aspx (accessed April 10, 2011).

2 *The Joint Security Area*, directed by Park Chan-wook (2000; CJ Entertainment).



The most appropriate means of analyzing the methods by which the authoritarian regimes referred to above used cinema is via Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. This theory presumes a domineering ruling class governing the masses with the pretense of the "good for all," when in fact a majority are disadvantaged. The method in which the governments of Roh-Tae-woo and Kim Dae-jung can sufficiently be analyzed is via Joseph Nye's theory of soft power.³ Nye asserts, "[a] country's soft power rests on its resources of culture value and policies."⁴ The films to be briefly discussed here have been carefully selected, not only for their box office success, but also for the subversive social issues they addressed.

Subversive Films under Park and Chung

This paper will analyze the subversive nature of films during the repressive regimes of President Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) and President Chun Doo-hwan (1980-88). During these regimes, Korea experienced vicious political repression, economic growth, urbanization, a reassessment of conservative Confucian ideology and cultural hegemony through censorship and hard power.

During this era, the "group collective mentality" of Koreans was instrumental in pooling resources in support of Korea's post-war period when democracy and human rights were sacrificed in pursuit of economic recovery. Koreans accepted economic hardship and brutal clampdowns on so-called dissenters for the good of the country. In spite of Korea's economic success in the 1960s, "the cultural conditions for democratization were not favorable, and the political system was highly repressive, and the culture was strongly shaped by the hierarchical worldview of Confucianism ideology."⁵

In this context, the regimes of Presidents Park and Chun used the film industry as a propaganda tool and sought to suppress any subversive elements within that industry. As a proponent of subversive mechanisms, Lenin once said, "Of all the arts, cinema is the most important to us!"⁶ Like Lenin, the Korean government regarded cinema as a significant propaganda medium and

3 Joseph Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no.1 (2008): 94.

4 Ibid.

5 Thomas Kern, "Cultural Performance and Political Regime Change," *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 3 (2009): 294.

6 Andrei Lankov, 2007. *The Dawn of Modern Korea* (Seoul: EunHaeng NaMu, 2007), 273.



took firm control, aware that the medium could be also used against the government. Park Chung-hee's regime implemented the Motion Picture Law of 1962, which strictly controlled Korea's film production.⁷ One method was to decrease the number of movie companies from 71 to sixteen. Korean movie companies were legally entitled to import foreign movies, however they were obliged to produce three domestic movies for every foreign movie imported. It was also compulsory for cinemas to screen Korean movies for 90 days each year. In reality, however, foreign films were both more popular and lucrative than domestic offerings. Furthermore, Korean films were closely scrutinized and censored for politically subversive or pro-communist content, resulting in a flood of poor quality Korean films in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸ The arrests of filmmakers accused of producing movies of a pro-communist nature were presented by the regime as justification for authoritarian rule.

The Motion Picture Law was the foundation for the regime's cultural hegemony. Further, as a consequence of the government's national industrialization policy, the film industry received large government handouts, which strengthened its position as a propaganda tool.

In the 1970s, the government considered opposition to the censorship of pro-Communist voices. Films that portrayed social problems were banned, and genres that provided escapist entertainment were approved. In order to ensure the success of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Chun Doo-hwan implemented the "3S Policy" (sex, screen, sports) with the objective of deflecting attention away from films that raised potentially destructive issues for the government. The 3S Policy attempted to promote non-subversive films that allowed for an easing of censorship on sexual connotations in film and promoted the establishment of professional baseball and soccer teams. Despite the government using film to reinforce the existing power structure, many Korean film directors creatively avoided government censorship to show their discontent with the social status quo. For example, the following four films question (sometimes in the guise of comedy) authority, sexuality, gender bigotry, youth culture and censorship itself.

Yeong-Ja's Heydays (*Yeongja-ui Jeonseongsidae*; 1975), directed by Kim Ho-Seon, remains the most important "hostess melodrama"⁹ of the 1970s.

7 Ibid., 274.

8 Ibid.

9 The hostess melodrama was a genre regarding young women lured to Seoul in the promise of



The film dealt with young women from the countryside being forced into prostitution due to social breakdown in a society striving for economic success.¹⁰ The *March of Fools* (*Babodeul-ui Haengjin*; 1975)¹¹ directed by Ha Kil-jong, applied a cynical twist as it depicted the unhappy lives of young people in the 1970s. This film gave a realistic perspective on the government's clampdown on youth culture by focusing on issues such as long hair, heavy drinking, modern romance, the closing of universities due to anti-regime demonstrations and the military draft.

Winter Woman (*Gyeoul Yeoja*; 1975),¹² directed by Kang Dae-jin, instigated a great social debate by exploring the new boundaries of sexual moralities for women against the backdrop of a Confucian patriarchal society. *Winter Woman* challenged its critics and the unpopular local film industry when it exceeded foreign film profits at the box office.

Good Windy Day (*Balambul-eo Joh-eun Nal*; 1980),¹³ directed by Lee Jang-ho, was a black comedy that focused on Korea's alienated youth and social inconsistencies due to the country's economic and political policies in the 1980s. *Good Windy Day* stood apart from other 1980s films by defying Chun Doo-hwan's 3S Policy's emphasis on erotic and melodramatic movies.

In summary, despite the tremendous efforts of the totalitarian governments of Presidents Park and Chun to establish absolute cultural hegemony over film, writers, directors and actors managed to project the collective voice of the masses in resisting the dominant ideology through subversive tones in censored films. Next, a different government approach to films as cultural commodities for export and soft power will be discussed.

Reevaluation of National Identity

This second case study will be divided into two segments. In both, the subversive issue of Korea's reevaluation of national identity in a response to collective social experiences will be analyzed. The first section will briefly cover the

work. Instead, they found themselves cheated and ended up in prostitution.

10 Korean Film Archive (KOFA). "100 Korean Films," http://www.koreafilm.org/feature/100_59.asphttp://www.koreafilm.org/feature/100_59.asp (accessed April 10, 2011).

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.



period of liberalization under President Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993), which is considered the period when Korea made a procedural transition to democracy. This section will be followed by the second segment covering the period of President Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), during which Korea made a full substantive transition to a democratic republic.

During the first period, the presence of the Minjung Movement and President Roh's shift away from an inflexible military dictatorship resulted in a relaxation of film censorship. The Minjung Movement began under authoritarian governments as a political movement of the middle class, with politics run by intellectuals and students who lobbied for political and economic change. There was also a reevaluation of national identity and collective political, economic and social experiences in which the Korean film industry played an active role. Korea's new film era of auteurist cinema and Korean blockbusters became the agent for conveying this new concept.

Two films directed by Minjung Movement member Park Kwang-su embody the ideology of the movement: *To Black Republic* (Geudeuldo Uricheoreom; 1990)¹⁴ and *A Single Spark* (Areumdaun Cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il; 1995).¹⁵ Park was critical of the military's uncompromising policy of modernization and the social dislocation that resulted from state capitalism and the widening class divisions in Korean society.¹⁶

The film *Sopyonje* (1993),¹⁷ directed by Im Kwon-taek, was produced at a time when Koreans were starting to reflect how much of their culture and tradition they had lost due to modernization. Andrew Salmon has pointed out the loss of tradition is a common side effect of "hardware-focused" economies.¹⁸ In effect, *Sopyonje* provided an opportunity for Koreans to be reconciled with their past.¹⁹ Although the film was not expected to draw large crowds, it surpassed all expectations and became the number one box office hit between 1990–1995. The film ran for six months throughout Korea and sold a total of 1,035,741 tickets.²⁰

14 To Black Republic, directed by Park Kwang-su (1990; Dong A Exports Co., Ltd.).

15 A Single Spark, directed by Park Kwang-su (1995; Age of Planning).

16 Eunjin Min, Jinsook Joo, and Ju Kwak Han, *Korean Film History, Resistance and Democratic Imagination* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 119.

17 *Sopyonje*, directed by Im Kwon-taek (1993; Taehung Pictures).

18 Andrew Salmon, "Zero to Superhero and Anti-hero," *Korea Times*, October 10, 2010.

19 Eunjin Min, Jinsook Joo, and Ju Kwak Han, *Korea Film History, Resistance and Democratic Imagination*, 131.

20 Darcy, Paquet, "A Short History of Korean Film," Last updated March 1, 2007 <http://koreanfilm>.



Sopyonje tells a story of three pansori²¹ performers, Yeo-bong and his two children, who travel through the country performing pansori and endeavoring to be true to the tradition of their art. The film's setting runs between the 1940s and 1970s and portrays the pressure that invading Japanese and American traditions placed on the art of pansori performers.

The second segment of this case study begins with the presidency of President Kim Dae-jung, who represented the first peaceful transfer of power to the leader of an opposition party. Unlike former governments, which had taken a strong anti-communist line, President Kim pursued a stance of national reconciliation with North Korea through his Sunshine Policy, while promoting Korean national culture. Joseph Nye states that Korea's democratic political system and the attractiveness of Korean arts, crafts and cuisine allowed Korea to use its culture as soft power.²² In other words, culture became an export commodity and a foreign policy tool that allowed Korea to integrate more closely into a pan-Asian community. The use of culture as soft power may be interpreted as a tactic by the government to reinforce the existing power structures. The distinct difference in comparison to Korea's former authoritarian governments was the freedom to produce subversive material that challenged the government.

President Kim's new democratic government took a more pluralist approach to values and ideologies in a more consumer and pleasure-oriented environment. Thus, the younger generation's sense of values changed. Rejecting the self-denial of their parent's generation, they displayed a strong sense of personal freedom and interest in materialism. They placed a high importance on emotional display, reflecting an association of Confucian ideology with Western democratic values.

The Kim Dae-Jung government's involvement in the Korean film industry began in 1998 when the Basic Law for the Cultural Industry Promotion came into effect. In a new positive environment for film, and an initial budget of \$148.5 million, the Busan International Film Festival was inaugurated.²³ The law also facilitated the participation of financial investment in the film industry.

org/history.htmlhttp://koreanfilm.org/history.html (accessed April 19, 2011).

21 Pansori is a Korean vocal art performed by a solo singer with a dramatic story line.

22 Joseph Nye, "South Korea's Growing Soft Power," Project Syndicate, 2009 <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nye76/English>http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nye76/English (accessed April 19, 2011).

23 Doobo Shim, "Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia," *Media, Culture & Society* 28, no. 1 (2006): 34.



Under Kim Dae-jung the cultural sector's budget increased from 484.8 billion won in 1998, to 1,281.5 billion won, or 1.15 percent of the total government budget, in 2002.²⁴

The above conditions gave rise to the "Korean Wave"²⁵ in cinema, which began to take shape around 1997.²⁶ Following colonization by Japan in the first half of the twentieth century and then successive authoritarian regimes up to the late 1980s, the Korean Wave was a catalyst for globalization on the world stage. The Korean Wave heralded a new era for Korean cinema that resisted Hollywood domination and in doing so developed a style that reflected Korea's culture and history.

An aspect of the Korean Wave was the rise of the Korean blockbuster and the Korean auteurist cinema (itself an offshoot of the New Korean Cinema).²⁷ While the Korean blockbusters pursued mass appeal and financial success, the less auteurist films were also influential in conveying social issues. Important auteurist films during this era were *Silver Stallion* (Eunmaneun oji anneunda; 1991),²⁸ which dealt with issues of post colonialism; *White Badge* (Hayan jeonjaeng; 1992),²⁹ which contemplated national division; *Berlin Report* (Baereurlin ripoteu; 1991),³⁰ which addressed modernization and democratization; and *A Petal* (Kkonnip; 1996),³¹ which scrutinized globalization. Blockbuster films such as *Taegukgi*, *Silmido*, *The King and the Clown* and *The Host* also reflected Korea's new national identity.

Taegukgi (*Taegukgi hwinallimiyoeo*; 2004),³² directed by Kang Je-kyu, tells the story of two brothers separated during the Korean War. Their brotherly love is tested during the ordeal of battles. Questions are raised about the division of North and South on the Korean peninsula. *Silmido* (2003),³³ directed by Kang Woo-suk, is a true account set in 1968 of 31 death-row prisoners who were selected to assassinate Kim Il-sung. They endured intensive and

24 Ibid., 35.

25 The term that refers to the global dispersion of Korean popular culture.

26 Shim, "Korean Popular Culture," 28.

27 The New Korean Cinema was an activist film movement established in 1988 to resurrect the domestic film industry.

28 *Silver Stallion*, directed by Jang Kil-su (1991; Han Jin Enterprises Co., Ltd.).

29 *White Badge*, directed by Jeong Ji-yeong (1992; Vanguard Cinema).

30 *Berlin Report*, directed by Park Kwang-su (1991).

31 *A Petal*, directed by Jang Sun-woo (1996; Miracin Korea).

32 *Taegukgi*, directed by Kang Je-gyu (2004; Samuel Goldwyn Films, Destination Films).

33 *Silmido*, directed by Kang Woo-suk (2003; Cinema Service).



cruel training only to see the mission aborted at the last minute. The film shows the harshness and disloyalty of the authoritarian regime and those who serve it. *The King and the Clown* (Wang-ui namja; 2005),³⁴ directed by Lee Joon-ik, is a story of entertainers during the reign of King Yeonsan in the late fifteenth century, who had the courage to ridicule the king. It challenges conventional Korean views on hierarchy, ignorance regarding sexual issues and intolerance of homosexuals. The movie also scrutinizes corruption of authority and Korean prejudice against the arts and entertainment. *The Host* (Goemool; 2006),³⁵ directed by Bong Joon-ho, is a monster film with a blockbuster story and a political message that focuses on the reality of the American military presence in Korea. It was written as a response to an incident in 2000 when a US military mortician dumped formaldehyde down a drainpipe. In the film, the formaldehyde mutates and gives birth to a horrifying monster that terrorizes Seoulites. At the time of the incident in 2000, Green Korea United³⁶ released a strong statement:

This case serves as an exemplar for how the US and US military is deceiving, purposefully or not, the Korea and its people. [T]he fact that the US military is disposing of toxic fluids such as formaldehyde in the Han River, where ten million people use it for household use, is in itself an outrage and mockery to the Korean people.

Furthermore, in American National Security Law Brief of 2011, Jimmy Koo refers to *The Host*.³⁷ In his brief, he mentions that the film generated anti-Americanism in Korea and reminded Koreans of the financial burden of bearing the American military's neglect of environmental concerns.

The Host was a domestic success, with the audience of approximately 13,010,000 viewers in 2006. As such, it continued to be Korea's top-selling film until 2010.³⁸ Nikki Lee points out that the portrayal of real historical events and social issues in blockbuster movies confirms the Korean film industry's nation-

34 *The King and the Clown*, directed by Lee Joon-ik (2005; Cinema Service).

35 *The Host*, directed by Bong Joon-ho (2006; Showbox, Magnolia Pictures).

36 Green Korea United, "The Eighth US Army Division Discharged Toxic Fluid (Formaldehyde) into the Han-River," Green Korea United, <http://green-korea.tistory.com/74> (accessed April 16, 2012).

37 Jimmy H. Koo, "The Uncomfortable SOFA: Anti-American Sentiments In South Korea and The U.S.-South Korea Status of Forces Agreement," *National Security Law Brief* 1 (2011): 105.

38 Nikki J.Y Lee, "Localized Globalization and a Monster National: The Host and the South Korean Film Industry," *Cinema Journal* 50 (2011): 47.



alist stance.³⁹ In nationalist films, such as *The Host*, shared historical memories are identified by domestic audiences as “cultural texts” that symbolize the nation.

In summary, democratic changes facilitated a new style in Korean film. The government loosened censorship and became more involved in marketing Korean film, using it as an instrument of imposing soft power. National identity and radical issues of a subversive nature integrated with cinema were given a collective voice in Korean films.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the two case studies above have endeavored to prove, the history of cinema in Korea has been equally depressing and inspirational. This paper concludes that the function of film in Korea has changed over time to adapt to unique social, political and economic conditions under totalitarian and democratic regimes, in order to produce “a cultural product [that] embodies the system of beliefs and values of people as well as external constraints given in the production process.”⁴⁰

Films have facilitated a collective voice and revealed Korea’s social history. Under the totalitarian regimes of President Park and Chun, films were defined by domestic politics, government constraint, anti-communist ideology, escapism and strong efforts to boost national pride for economic development. Despite the amount of top-down influence, film genres questioning gender bigotry, sexuality, youth culture and censorship reflected social discontent. By comparison, global politics, economic recovery, government support, soft power, national reunification, changes in social values and reassessment of national identity have defined films under and after the presidency of Kim Dae-jung. Likewise, films advocating national identity and reflecting social changes were achieved through conveyed messages such as loyalty, duty, friendship, governmental responsibility, ignorance, intolerance and anti-Americanism.

Films as cultural hegemony under the hardware-driven economy, or films as a soft-power cultural commodity, have still been able to reflect significant social discontent and changes in popular opinion. Undoubtedly, regardless of govern-

39 Ibid., 50.

40 Eunjin Min, Jinsook Joo, and Ju Kwak Han, *Korean Film History, Resistance and Democratic Imagination*, 22.





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ment's interference or support to build up the existing power structure, efforts at total suppression have failed. As a medium through which to express Korean people's thoughts and ideas, films have empowered their voices to be heard throughout the state and society. **PEAR**

