

Independent South Korean Film

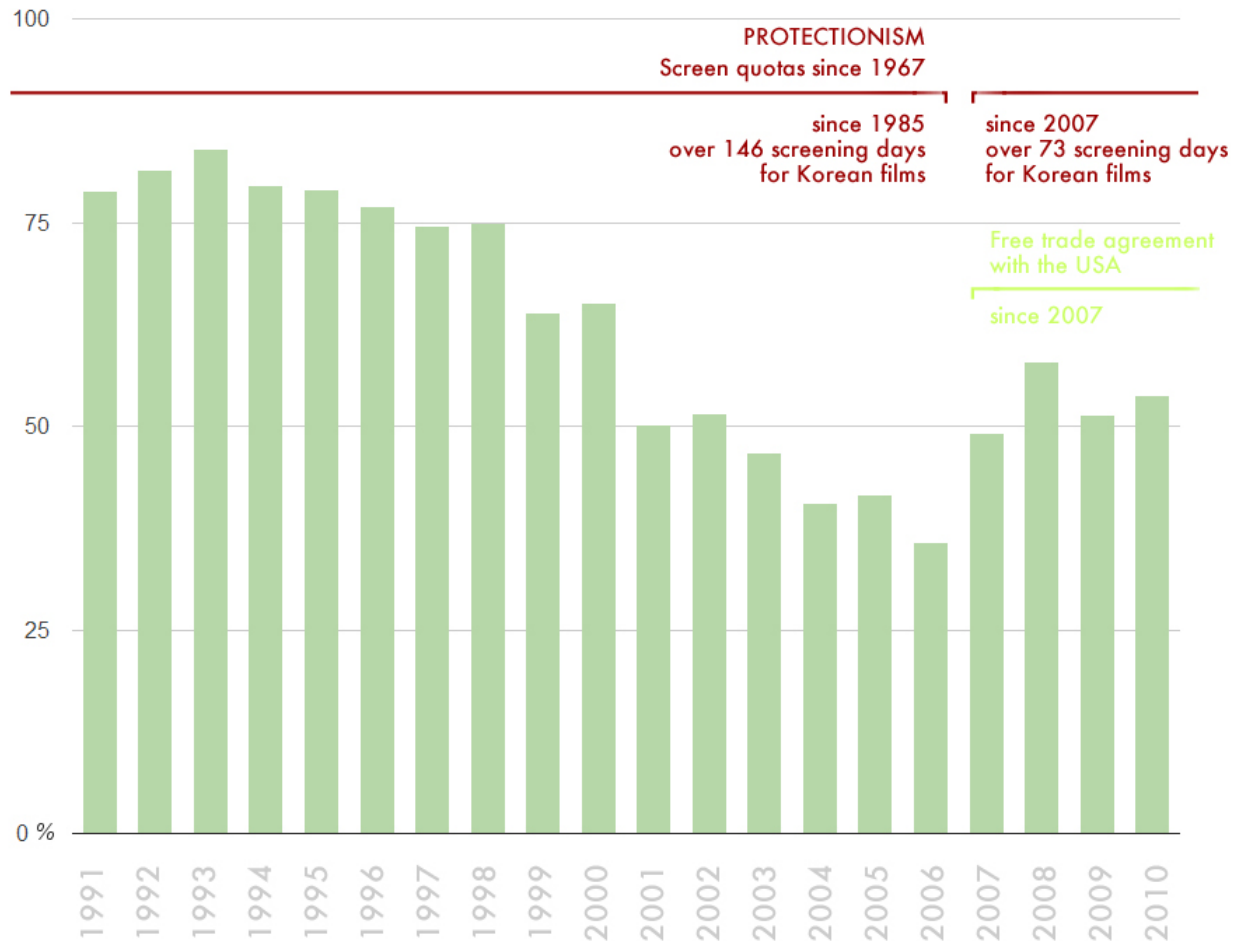
Modern Korean Society
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Hollywood versus the World

- Hollywood cinema dominates most of the world
 - Hollywood world-wide accounts for 60+% of world box office receipts (depending on the year)
 - Even in countries with major movie industries (like France, Italy, Japan, and China) Hollywood movies usually account for half or more of box office receipts
- Two major exceptions
 - India—where Bollywood Hindi language films (also Telugu and Tamil films that are not strictly Bollywood) dominate the box office, and are popular in Africa
 - South Korea—where domestic films account for 40-60% of local markets (depending on the year)

SOUTH KOREA 1991-2010

Foreign Films market share



Why is this Important?

- Some are concerned about the homogenization (Hollywoodization) of world culture and Korea is a counterexample (or is it?)
 - French “cultural exception” in WTO allows discriminatory tariffs against cultural imports (such as film) that may harm local identity
 - South Korea has taken advantage of this loophole with a screen quota system since 1967
 - Number of days reserved for Korean film reduced in 1985 (146 days) and again in 2007 (73 days)—but this only applies to commercial movie theaters
- Some South Koreans are more interested in the economic impact of cultural exports than anything else
- There is a political subtext to the development of South Korean cinema, and the success of commercial film is related to the development of South Korean independent film (Young-a Park’s point of view)

Neocolonialism

- Hollywood cinema is often criticized as “neocolonialist”
- The word “neocolonialism” was originally coined by Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah in 1963 to refer to domination of former colonies through economic investment
 - It was an extension of Lenin’s essay, “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism”
 - This analysis was later extended to include foreign intervention, and, later still, cultural domination by rich and influential countries (like the US)
- Criticism that Hollywood produces mere entertainment to make money
 - Hollywood movies are technically slick and attractive (therefore popular), but they are the cinematic equivalent of junk food
 - They are criticized for promoting mindless materialism and the desire for American lifestyles and products (product placement, for example)

Third Cinema

- Latin American film movement from the 1960s and 1970s to oppose Hollywood “neocolonial” cinema
 - *Hacia un tercer cine* (Toward a Third Cinema)
 - First cinema—Hollywood (promotes bourgeois values to a passive audience through escapist spectacle and characters)
 - Second cinema—Europe art house cinema (rejects Hollywood but expresses the individual *auteur* director’s vision)
 - “auteur” a term of French film criticism from the 1940s that emphasizes the central control of the director or producer that creates a unified theme and style of a film—the critical equivalent of a book’s author
 - N.B. some film buffs reject this term emphasizing that film is a collaborative art form with separate script writers and cinematographers as well as directors and producers
 - Third cinema—opposes Hollywood and sees the director as part of a collective whom the director wants to inspire to political action
 - Think “third cinema” films need to be screened clandestinely to avoid censorship and commercialization
 - N.B. the related term Third World (Tiers Monde) was coined in 1952 by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy
 - First world US and Western Europe, Second World the Communist block, Third World everybody else that he linked to the Third Estate (Tiers Etat) [ancien regime France—1. monarchy and clergy, 2. aristocracy, 3. bourgeoisie and peasants
 - N.B. this view of the world assumes that a communist block exists

Activist Film in South Korea

- Defined itself in the 1980s as a kind of Third Cinema inspired by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino
- Self-defined “cinema activists” (*yŏnghwa undongga*) to engage in political activism and fight the colonial legacy
- Works distributed not through commercial venues, but through unions, peasant associations, student movement organizations, and mass political demonstrations
- Later in the 2000s became an important part of the film festival circuit, and Park says contributed to the burgeoning international importance of Korean cinema

Prewar Korean Cinema

- Motion pictures shown in Korea from 1897
- Commercial movie theaters from 1903 showed films imported from Europe and the US
- 1920's first Korean feature films (often with Japanese technical cooperation)
 - Silent films with a live narrator (pyönsa) and music
 - 1926 *Arirang* the first hit in Korea (as well as Japan)
- 1935 first Korean language “talkie,” *Chunhyangjŏn*
 - other Korean talkies were made, but Japanese repression limited Korean-language film production
 - Japanese films promoted and available in Japanese parts of town, but Koreans preferred Hollywood films to Japanese

Postwar South Korean Cinema

- After liberation Korean language films began to be made again
 - 1946 *Viva Freedom* (Chayu manse!)
- The Korean War killed the industry (films were made, but no films survive from the 1950-3 era)
- 1955-72 Golden Age of South Korean cinematic melodramas
 - 1955 *Chunhyangjŏn*
 - 1956 *Madame Freedom* (Chayu puin)
 - 1961 *Stray Bullet* (Obalt'an); *The Coachman* (Mabu)—won Golden Bear Award at the 11th Berlin Film Festival
- After 1972 repression brought this era to an end

Younga Park skips the Golden Age

- Park Chung Hee era motion picture laws also skipped
 - 1962 first Motion Picture Law reduced production companies from 71 to 16 requiring certain facilities and number of productions
 - 1963, 1973 revisions to number of required pictures that qualified a company to import Hollywood pictures
 - 1966 domestic screen day quota system introduction
 - 1966 90 days
 - 1973 121 days
 - 1984 146 days

Famous Golden Age Directors

- Chŏng Changhwa 鄭唱和
 - Worked in Hong Kong martial arts films and sometimes passed off as Chinese Cheng Changho
 - 1972 *Five Fingers of Death* (天下第一拳) No. 1 in US release (first time for Hong Kong film)
- Sin Sangok 申相玉
 - Worked on *Viva Freedom*
 - 1961 *Sŏng Ch'unhyang* and dozens of others
 - 1978-86 kidnapped to North Korea (*Pulgasari*)
- Im Kwŏnt'aek
 - Commercial filmmaker until became more ambitious in late 1970s
 - 1981 *Mandala* break through film in terms of quality
 - 1993 *Sŏp'yŏnje* first to reach more than 1 million South Korean viewers and was screened at the Cannes Film Festival

South Korean Activist Film

- Appeared in context of declining Korean film industry after 1972 (Yusin) when government controls became more severe
- “Seoul spring” (1980) following Park’s assassination in October 1979 cut short by Chun Doo Hwan coup, and May 1980 declaration of martial law and Kwangju uprising and massacre
- Connected to the *minjung* cultural movement that also flourished among opposition intellectuals at the time

Minjung Movement

- Began with Minjung theology of the 1970s
 - Among Christians seeking a ministry of social justice
 - Developed “political hermeneutics of the *Gospel* in terms of Korean reality”
 - Focused on the *han* of those who suffered exclusion and oppression, who became the *minjung* or masses
- Namhee Lee *The Making of the Minjung* (dealt with 1980s and 1990s)
 - Minjung cultural movement addressed a “crisis in historical subjectivity”—a sense of the failure of Korean history
 - Posited the *minjung* as the subject of Korean history
 - An autonomous *minjung* subjectivity can then be posited as the agency of Korean history overcoming colonial images of Korean “heteronomy” *t’ayulsǒng* (a condition of being ruled by outside forces)
 - *Minjung* cultural movement sought to overcome both (mechanical) Marxist and (essentialist minjok) nationalist historiography

Revisionist History

- South Korean society viewed as neocolonial
- First Republic Syngman Rhee seen as dependent on landlords and US military
 - 1948 National Security Law used to purge opposition
- Seoul spring (1980) crushed by Chun Doo Hwan with (in revisionist view) US complicity
- Thus Korea analogous with Latin America, so Third Cinema is an appropriate response in the minds of minjung activists
- Choi Chungmoo—"dismantle colonial discourse on indigenous culture"
 - Thus can appropriate folk culture to overcome market-oriented foreign culture

Madanggŭk

- 1970's Korean theatre avant-garde
 - Create a chuch'e theatrical language (autonomous Korean subjectivity) out of indigenous traditions
 - Outdoor masked dance drama, drumming performance, shaman ceremonial, p'ansori provided models for "courtyard theater" (madanggŭk)
- As opposed to a Western proscenium stage with a curtain, these open air performances break down the distinction between audience and performer
- Carnavalesque, ritual-like performances that include audience participation and tend to create community
 - In anthropological terminology performances create Victor Turner's *communitas*—a feeling of diffuse solidarity created in rites of passage at points when people are betwixt and between (have been shorn of their old identity but not yet entered their new one)

Shaman in 1977



Mokp'o Street Performer
2015



Seoul National University
Professor of Dance Yi
Aeju in farewell
performane

National Treasue Yu
Chömja performing
Sikkim Kut, Mokp'ŏ
2015



Film Collectives

- From 1982 on—because the old film industry was seen as a “morally corrupted” industry parasitical on the military regime—i.e. dictatorship patronage
 - Why? Censorship, government regulations limited entry into film production to friendly companies, and financing influenced by government
 - Screen quota system encouraged production of quick cheapie films that could be screened to empty houses to get license to import more lucrative foreign films
- Disenchantment of art in the age of mass production? (Walter Benjamin)
 - Does consumption of art as ritual “re-enchant” it?

New Modes of Circulation

- Independent films not shown in commercial movie theaters (due to censorship)
- Made and shown as political acts
 - *Sanggyedong Olympics*—documentary of pitched battle of association of residents displaced by 1988 Olympics shown to the actual participants
 - Local “service gangs” (yongyŏk kkangp’ae) had been hired to evict the residents
 - Neighborhoods presented through long shots as “a community with a unified future and hope” rather than US network style “individual portraits” (i.e. Olympics coverage)
- Circulated also among social movement groups (Catholic activist groups, college campuses, civil movement organizations)

Alternative discursive space

- New movies, new circulation spaces created *counter-hegemonic discourses*
 - (in the context of this course think of the discourses of *militarized modernity*—nationalism, military service, anti-communism—as hegemonic)
- Central efforts
 - Re-reading of history as history of the oppressed minjung
 - Liberate film from commodification and Hollywoodization
 - Commodification—filming “others” (technocrats or intelligentsia with bourgeois lives and worldviews divorced from the masses) and showing their possessions as objects for people to covet

Alternative vocabularies

- Production should be a “collective project” (kongdong chagŏp)
- No director (kamdok) because term is too authoritarian, instead have an art-inducer (yŏnch’ulcha)
- In *Samggyedong Olympics* whoever grabbed the camera began videotaping what went on
- Self = downtrodden intelligentsia and downtrodden proletarians (minjung)
- Other = corrupt state, social elites, and foreign powers

Double Life of Film Buffs

- Under *Yusin* ability to see foreign films limited
- French Cultural Center's Thursday Cinema Club
 - there I saw in 1976 *Les enfants du paradis* (Marcel Carné director, Jacques Prévert screenwriter, Jean-Louis Barrault the mime) with a field assistant who later became a director
 - Later German Cultural Center, too
- Con GI's to get on American base in Seoul as KATUSA to see US films (*Bonnie and Clyde*)
- Might watch *Mash* on AFKN

Yallasyöng

- Founded by 1976-9 hakpön [year of entry] of SNU
- 1982 Seoul Film Collective
 - Idea of “open cinema” (yöllin yönghwa) that would emulate *madanggük*
 - “polymorphic open structure of mask-dance theater (t'alch'um, sandae nori) rather than a linear narrative structure
 - Incorporation of shamanic ritual
 - For example, begin political theater piece with a ceremonial evocation of past souls (similar to ancestor worship or shaman ceremony) so that the past and present can communicate with one another

Political Lines

- NL (National Liberation) line
 - Anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, national liberation, and people's democratic revolution
 - (incorporated CDR colonial, semi-feudal, semi-capitalist line, and the MO mass organization line)
 - Emphasized achieving autonomy (*chajusǒng*) from US imperialism
- PL (People's Democracy) line
 - Participating in citizens movements to improve social welfare and save the environment

From Activist Filmmakers to Independent Filmmakers

- Postauthoritarian (t'algwŏnwijuŭi) conditions led to deradicalization as democracy deepened after 1987
- Digital technology reduced cost of production so collective cooperation less necessary
- Showings of activist film possible in film festivals
- Former radical filmmakers reorganized as “independent filmmakers”
 - Independent Filmmakers' Association (Tongnip Yŏnghwa Hyŏbŭihoe) from 1990

What is Independent?

- US
 - 1920s—United Artists allowed distribution and release of feature made by directors and actors who sought more control over their films and profits
 - 1930-40—low budget genre or exploitation films
 - 1980-90—(since Sundance Film Festival began in 1978) specialty fare self or privately financed
 - More recently “independent” arms of major studios that have more artistic and political independence
- South Korea
 - Independent *from*—censorship, bit money, hackneyed cinematic formulae, power
 - Independent *for*—intense and honest representations, and protection of people’s human rights and minority’s freedoms
- Koreans would like the meaning of Korean and American independent film to be distinct, but the two have converged to some degree

3-8-6 Generation

- Originally referred to the Intel 80386 32-bit microprocessor (introduced in 1985—2006)
 - i486 1989, Pentium 2006, since i3-12
- Ex post facto explanation of the Ulate 1990s:
 - in their **30s**, went to college in the **1980s**, born in the **1960s**—core activists of the 1980s and 1990s who grew up in various corners of the minjung movement
- Under Kim Dae Jung (president 1998-2003) brought into the government as fresh, idealistic activists to replace “incompetent and corrupt” civilian rule
 - To symbolically resurrect and redeem the oppressed from their *han*

3-8-6 Initiatives

- Committee for Democratic Activists' Honor-Restoration and Compensation
- Presidential Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Suspicious Deaths (8,395 examples)
 - Dealt with democracy murders, as well as executions of leftists at the beginning of the Korean War, since DJ himself had been sentenced to death in 1980
- “story of suffering and redemption” extended on a national scale
 - DJ frequently invoked Kwangju and the “blood of young 386 martyrs”
 - 386 activists recalled being “democracy warriors” (minju chōnsa—cf. older sanōp chōnsa) in the 1980s democratization movement

Film Festival Circuit

- Pusan International Film Festival from 1996
 - First Korean international film festival organized by the “democratization generation” (same as 386 30대, 80학번, 60생)
 - Held at glamorous Haeundae Beach
 - 173 films from 31 countries (1996) with foreign directors and actors present
 - Enthusiastic youthful audience with “film fever” (yŏnghwa yŏlp’ung)
- Since 1996 film festivals have proliferated
 - Documentary, experimental, women’s rights, green, indie, youth, queer, animation, etc.
 - Wikipedia lists 38 South Korean international film festivals as of November 2018

Result of 1997 Currency Crisis

- 1998 US argued screen quota system violates free trade (blah to *exception culturelle*)
- 1999 US film companies allowed to directly import film
 - Shaved head campaign of 386 to save Korean film
 - Not simply “pap kūrut ssaum” but cultural identity and Korean spirit (Han’guk ūi ōl—goes back to folklore movement)
- 1999 *Shiri* beat *Titanic* in Korea, but also exported well
 - Criticized by Korean critics as “B-grade” fantasy for politically apathetic youngsters who are not serious

Bollywood versus Hollywood

- Heather Tyrrell criticizes the dichotomy of “Western/commercial/imperialist” cinema versus “non-Western/non-commercial/indigenous/politicized cinema” using Bollywood
 - Bollywood cinema claims that right to be taken seriously as a commercial popular cinema
- Park applies this to South Korea, too
 - South Korea using “global Hollywood images” to tell uniquely Korean satires
 - Success of Korean film due to films themselves, but also to claims to political legitimacy formulated through social processes
 - Past activist film
 - Screen quota struggle to save Korean film industry

Film and Gender?

- Organizational constraints
 - Everybody earns money for group, but 30% of one's earnings went into the communal kitty
 - Funder's support to Jinyeol went to communal kitty, but she needed collective's social capital
- Contrast of respect for *Repatriation*
 - Male POWs “sir” (선생님) female POWs “mother” (어머니)—effectively erasing them
 - *Repatriation* won the “freedom medal” at *Sundance*
 - Jinyeol's “Forgotten Warriors” about female POWs didn't get much attention
- *Divergence* about male union leaders selling out female employees (400 layoffs with $\frac{3}{4}$ female)
 - film received rave reviews at festivals but was heavily criticized by union leaders

New Audiences?

- Film festival audiences more diverse than activist audiences
 - Irreverent comments
 - Susceptible to *labor aristocrat* argument
- PIFF springboard to soft power
 - Paradise Hotel on Haeundae Beach for A-list PIFF guests
 - Politicians show up
 - *Panther* Korea segments filmed nearby
- Middle classes compete for status as cultural consumers of international film culture

Aftermath

- Conservative political turn in 2008
 - Myungbak Lee, and 2013 Park Geunhye
- Younga Park's book treats this as the end of an era
- However, Mun Jae-in president in 2017
 - 3-8-6 generation is ba-a-a-ak
- N.B. *Repatriation* will be shown November 8 in class. A different discussion that gives a variety of points of view is available in the electronic copy of Suk-young Kim's *DMZ Crossing* pp 87-98 in the UW library system.