

Contemporary Korean Cinema

Over the last two decades the South Korean film industry has spectacularly increased its status both domestically and abroad. At present, Korean films do not only repeatedly occupy the number one spot at the domestic box office, but many have even come to be included in the stock of video stores around the world, sometimes after winning several prizes at international film festivals. The success is, however, less remarkable in terms of figures than it is in terms of its likelihood. Taking into account the Japanese colonization of Korea that lasted almost half a century, the devastation caused by the Korean War, the vast constraints imposed by post-war military dictatorships, as well as the virtual absence of any form of state funding, it is close to a miracle that already at the outset of the current administration, Korean films represented a socio-political force to be reckoned with. Until then an institution of rigorous censorship and propaganda, as well as unfair competition from Western cinema, marred the development of an independent Korean cinema.

Review >
Korea

By Roald H. Maliangkay

Hyangjin Lee's *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics* explores how the socio-political status quo has influenced the work of directors and filmmakers in both North and South Korea over the years. Contrary to what the title suggests, it constitutes a history of the socio-political conditions, ideologies, and struggles regarding Korean cinema in both North and South Korea throughout the twentieth century. Lee analyses seventeen films from both sides of the thirty-eighth parallel and shows how they represent the disparate personal and state ideologies regarding nationalism, class, and gender, while at the same time conveying the Korean people's shared loyalty towards cultural traditions. Rather than building primarily on a chronological structure, she divides her studies of the issues of gender, nationalism, and class consciousness into four chapters that each deal with cinema on each side of the divided nation. At the end of the book a lengthy chronological filmography (pp.194–221) is included that summarizes the people and companies responsible for the films mentioned in the book, followed by a bibliography and index.

In her introduction (pp.1–15), Lee explains that the purpose of her study is to show that the way in which filmmakers have related past experiences often express ideological attitudes relevant to present-day society. Ideology, she notes, underlies all films in so far as that they are not reliable mirrors of actual reality but coloured reconstructions of it. Her focus on the aspect of ideology in the interpretations of North and South Korean films will, she predicts, demonstrate that while both nations claim a historical legitimacy over the other, they have also maintained the idea of a cultural and ethnical homogeneity. Following a summary of the discourse on ideology in film studies in general, Lee recounts the Marxist approach toward the expression of ideology in film, as well as that of post-structuralists and postmodernists, and ties this into a brief but sharp assessment of the relevance of the work of Foucault, Said, Geertz, and Barthes.

In the first chapter Lee relates the development of Korea's film industry vis-à-vis political oppression from the very outset. Within years after the introduction of the technology, film became a booming industry and it did not take long for the Japanese to realize the medium's potential as a powerful tool for propaganda. The severe competition from foreign films forced Korean filmmakers to work with Japanese distributors and investors, but they often did so unsuccessfully. The difficulties they faced in making independent Korean films was exacerbated following the establishment of a system of censorship in 1922. From then onwards, opportunities to express Korean nationalism became risky. By the 1940s, the Japanese had effectively abolished Korean cinema and turned it into an essential part of their propaganda system. In her account of the colonial history of Korean film and the Japanese efforts to exercise control over the work of subversive filmmakers such as Na Un'gyu and those associated with the proletarian KAPF (Korean Art Proletarian Federation), Lee regrettably omits an analysis of the phenomena of 'silent' films. Although she notes the nationalist importance of the 1926 film *Arirang*, for example, she fails to mention that this film too was silent and that Korean narrators (*pyŏnsa*) may have played an important role in the projection of its patriotic message.

The synopsis of the history of North and South Korean cinema continues with a description of how Kim Jong Il has applied his father's ideas of self-reliance and independence, *juche*, to film. Through his famous love for film,

he has personally seen to it that the medium of film has become no more than another revolutionary instrument through which the masses can free themselves from feudal oppression. Lee explores how and to what extent cinema has constituted a means to propagate nationalism and the ideals of the working class. In outlining the most important socio-political themes in North Korean cinema (pp.34–44), she makes important observations, such as the exclusion of the colonial period in North Korean history, how the emphasis that films made between 1945 and 1950 lay on the historical legitimacy of North Korea as opposed to that of the South, and the paradoxical use of scenes of capitalist luxury in films from the 1990s to meet audiences' increased curiosity about them. In her assessment of South Korean cinema, Lee points out how important socio-political events and, in particular, regulations have influenced film themes over the years. In doing so, the industry's necessity to comply with state ideology comes across as far more threatening than the mandatory adoption of the official doctrine in the North. This may be the inevitable result of the abundance of documentation regarding the violent measures exercised by the South Korean administration towards filmmakers who failed to comply, but I would have liked to see some words on the difficulty of assessing the risk run by 'irresponsible' filmmakers in North Korea.

In chapters two to four, Lee concentrates on films made between 1960 and 1999. She examines the various cinematic representations of the folk tale of *Ch'unhyangjŏn*, a story that centres on issues of gender and class, and demonstrates how the separate ideologies are reflected. North Korean renditions, she argues, lay emphasis on the issue of class, while South Korean versions focus on gender issues. In comparing, among other things, camera positions, the lines of the actors, and stage props, she makes a number of fascinating observations. One of these is the depiction of *Ch'unhyang* in a North Korean film as a provider to equate the monopoly of the filial virtue (p.84), another the surprising predominance of the girl's – Confucian – self-sacrifice in a version made by director Shin Sangok's after he was abducted to North Korea compared to an earlier version he made in the South (p.89).

Lee then turns to the representation of nationhood and the notion of class. The narratives of North and South Korean films, she finds, do not only express a strong faith in the Korean people's common cultural traits, and in the traditional Confucian family values and structure, but they also reflect a shared conviction that reunification is inevitable (p.141). She argues that although the socio-political discourse in North Korean films consistently emphasizes a classless society, class issues continue to arise out of a dualistic attitude towards social hierarchy inherited from the

past (p.180). The ways in which these issues are dealt with sometimes reflect a curious discontent with the absence of class. South Korean films have effectively reflected a similarly ambiguous concern over the inadequacy of status based on wealth, this time on the part of the new middle classes, who are depicted as cunning and blindly materialist. Lee's analysis shows us that although state ideologies are clearly represented in both North and South Korean films, the ways in which films deal with them is rarely one-dimensional.

The combination of chronology with issues of gender, class, and nationhood is useful in that it provides more than one excellent framework for future studies of Korean cinema. It is also because of the structure, however, that Lee is forced to recapitulate historic events a few times, which in a few cases leads to observations that I would have liked to see earlier in the text. The very important comment that in North Korean films South Koreans are not portrayed 'in depth because they do not represent a *separate* political entity that deserves meaningful attention' (p.140), for example, merits inclusion in the subchapter 'socio-political characteristics of North Korean film' (p.34). Due to Lee's historical approach, moreover, descriptions of, for example, the effects of specific films on various audiences, or detailed motivations for adopting specific ideas, are not given. Lee's inspiring study does hint at, for example, the one-dimensionality of the semantic narrative of contemporary North Korean films, which I have personally found to be one of their distinguishing features, but she does not further explore it. This leaves her account somewhat lacking in involvement, which personal experiences or the odd use of anthropological data may have prevented. The black-and-white pictures, meanwhile, never help to stir any enthusiasm either, as most of them are too dark and out of focus.

Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics is a wonderful addition to the dire volume of English-language sources on Korean cinema. Although I would have personally liked to read a little bit more about viewing experiences, as one of the first English-language works entirely dedicated to Korean film, its historical approach is certainly very welcome. Not only does Lee do a brilliant job recounting practically the entire history of Korean cinema from the first films shown in Korea up to Im Kwŏn-Taek's 2000 *Ch'unhyangjŏn*, but she also offers many novel insights and sharp observations. Since Lee has also scrupulously followed the McCune-Reischauer system – which is, ironically, misspelled (p.13) – this allows easy access to Korean materials. The majority of the films from before 1945, and of South Korean films up to the 1970s, however, had Sino-Korean titles, so I hope that future editions of this book will not only contain better pictures, but also a glossary. It is definitely worth it. ◀

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