

Im Kwon-Taek

The Making of a Korean National Cinema

Review >
Korea

For over a decade the success of Korean films on the domestic and international scene has generated an increasing readership of Korean film studies and reviews. There are, however, still only a handful of related works available in English. David E. James and Kyung Hyun Kim's *Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema* should help to fill the gap.

By Roald H. Maliangkay

What sets this work apart from other books on Korean film that have recently come out in Western languages is the fact that it explores the work of Korea's foremost director, Im Kwon-Taek, head-on, without first trying to explain every single detail about Korean culture. It looks into the ideas behind Im's films and sheds light on the director's unique position in Korean cinema. The book consists of nine articles, an interview with the director, a filmography, a handy list of important political and cultural events, a useful three-page bibliography of related sources in English, and an index. Twenty-odd black-and-white photographs that allow us to envisage the scenes are also discussed.

The first chapter recounts Im's role in the history of Korean cinema. Kyung Hyun Kim talks of the significance of Im's family background, the grim working environments under the military dictatorships, and the international film festivals. The working conditions are again described in the analysis of two of Im's films on Buddhism,

Mandala (1981) and *Come, Come, Come Upward* (1989) respectively. Here, David James argues that Im's partiality towards Sŏn Buddhism may explain why he dichotomizes a sacred yet socially indifferent landscape and a disgraced but socially involving city. He finds his use of landscapes and female bodies to allegorize the Korean nation or the working classes contradictory, as it risks exploiting the women visually. Eunsu Cho further explores Im's use of women as metaphors, this time in *Adada* (1988) and *Surrogate Mother* (1986). In both films, the protagonists are mute; their inner suffering, *han*, is implied, but not articulated. When they denounce the ineffective patriarchal authority, they do so in a language of their own. Both James and Cho find that although the women allegorize the Korean nation, the focus on their beauty risks their visual debasement. Chungmoo Choi examines the role played by colonialism, cultural imperialism and nationalism, and nostalgia in *Sopyonje* (1993) and *The Genealogy* (1978). Her analysis of how Im's use of, for example, a particular gendering or landscape often supports a counter-

hegemonic imagery is fascinating. Unfortunately, interpretations of what may or may not have been conscious decisions on Im's part are too often given as fact, without any supporting comments from the director. As a result, the studies tell us more about the authors than the director.

In chapter five, Cho Hae Joang once more recounts the success of *Sopyonje*, this time focusing on its reception in Korea. She relates how people from all generations explained the success in terms of its nationalist importance, implying that not every one enjoyed the film as much as the attention it received suggests, and points out the danger of excessive traditionalism. Julian Stringer looks at the reasons behind the film's failure to attract foreign audiences. Contrary to Cho Hae Joang, he favours the depiction of traditions when they can be used to counter the hegemony of Western cinema, even if their effect will rely upon exoticism and orientalism. He argues that Im's film, paradoxically, invents traditions for the purpose of increasing their appeal to modern society. In addition to these studies of Im's arguably apolitical

nationalism and traditionalism, Yi Hyoin looks into the director's political views. He contends that, like other films, *Fly High, Run Far: Kaebyŏk* (1991) shows that Im has not been the socio-political conscience he could have been. The fact that in this film, again, a violent antithesis is eschewed may, Yi argues, be related to the difficulties faced by Im's family during the Korean War and the many international political crises around the time he made it.

Im's belief in humanism, tradition, and liberal democracy as a means for progress is the subject of the last two studies of this collection. Kyung Hyun Kim's second article on the sexual victimization of male protagonists in Im's 1994 *The Taebaek Mountains* forms a welcome contrast with the studies of Im's feminine allegories. Kim analyses why and how this victimization signals the need for patriarchal authority. He explains why in this epic of the Korean War, Im once again leaves out simplistic depictions of war violence, focusing instead on social tensions and political violence among locals. Han Ju Kwak's study looks into how Im's 1996 *Festival* argues the possibility of a synthesis between 1990s modernity and tradition. He demonstrates that, while the film underscores Im's belief in the reunifying power of traditions, it also warns against their ruthless execution.

Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema is a very welcome addition to the volume of studies on Korean film in general. I should, however, caution novices to Korean film. One reason is that this work does

not argue the importance of Im Kwon-taek's oeuvre. Another is that, although the writing is meticulously edited, if arguably a little turgid, the romanization is very inconsistent, leaving many Korean names and references unreliable. Those primarily interested in what has been going on in Korean cinema since the mid-1990s will find another cause for frustration in the fact that, due to a six-year delay between the initial submission of the papers and publication, it contains many outdated comments regarding the current status of films in Korea. This collection does, nevertheless, offer many novel insights and fascinating observations regarding the work of Im Kwon-Taek. It shows Im to be a modest, hard-working individual, as well as a Korean and a talented director. Although some of the contributors have a tendency to interpret scenes without sufficient back-up, they all provide excellent material for further discussion. I am convinced, therefore, that it will prove to be a great resource to those involved in world cinema or Korean cultural studies. <

- James, David E., and Kyung Hyun Kim (eds.), *Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press (2002), pp.294, ISBN 0-8143-2868-7

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