

# Four Variations on Korean Genre Film: Tears, Screams, Violence and Laughter

---

Chung Sung-ill

## **Motion Pictures arrive in Colonized Korea and Transplant Western Culture**

There are no indigenous genres in the Korean cinema. Rather, they are all imitations of or variations on Western and other Asian film genres. Hollywood created the western, Japan developed the samurai film, and Hong Kong invented the martial arts film. In contrast, Korea merely accepted various film genres from other countries and modified them. When the country was under Japanese colonial rule, Korea had no control over which films were imported. Korea first encountered motion pictures when modern culture was literally transplanted into Korea. Films served as a window that showed the Western culture from outside the country and motion pictures gave Koreans who were still in a feudal society an indirect experience of Western capitalism. As a result, the Korean audience was left with two different feelings in the movie theater. On one hand, they admired the Western society that was far more advanced than their own. On the other hand, they feared, hated and despised the West (and its technology) for it seemed to have taken their nation away from them.

Korean cinema itself faced even greater difficulties. For one thing, Ko-

rea lacked the cultural background to understand films when they first arrived. Three variations of depicting the world had evolved over a long period of time elsewhere: perspectival painting, photography, and moving pictures. All three arrived in Korea at almost the same time. Similarly, the short story form that had a great impact on early film's narrative structure came to Korea at the same time as newspapers. Vaudeville, the nineteenth century theater show in which actors performed in front of a camera, and *comedia dell'arte* were introduced to Korea together as a kind of comedy genre. Film was not only a technological invention, but also the artistic culmination of 19th century modern culture, and it required some time to fully understand it.

Furthermore, Korea could not develop films related to its own traditional culture because film's arrival in the country coincided with colonization. Japan controlled the Korean film industry by censoring every single film. Korean films had to be made within the Japanese legal system that allowed the censoring of public screenings. Korean films inevitably started by imitating imported hit films to ensure a good box-office return while also conforming to Japanese judicial restrictions. At first, Korean films copied the entire story. However, operating by trial and error, the belated film industry chose to adopt genres to enable steady and rapid catching up with Western culture. Of course, this also led to some unwanted consequences. However, it took some time to realize that importing genres inevitably brought in Western ideology as well. Therefore, genres developed in a rather peculiar manner in Korea, as the country tried to embrace them and at the same time deny them through criticism. Most of all, regarding genre film as a synonym for commercial film and groundlessly criticizing any genre film was an obstacle to the development of genres and the discovery of auteurist films. For example, there are no big names to represent a genre in Korea as John Ford represents the western, Alfred Hitchcock the thriller, Douglas Sirk the melodrama, or Howard Hawks the comedy. (Of course, there are other genres. But here, I will discuss only melodra-

mas, horror films, action films, and comedies.)

### **Melodramas: The Return of Confucianism through the Restoration of Patriarchy and the Sacrifice of Women**

Melodrama was the genre first adopted in Korea, and it enjoyed the greatest popularity for the longest time. There are three reasons for this. First, women were the first moviegoers in Korea. Even after modernization, most women, including those with jobs, did all the housework and men dominated society. Men were still under the Confucian belief that melodrama is a female genre and that shedding tears is not masculine. Therefore, most of these films were made for women. Entertainment was divided according to gender: sport was for men and film was for women. Second, most melodramas were based on popular novels whose readers were mostly women. Women audiences wanted to see the fantasy stories they read in books on screen. Youthful romances, domestic dramas and women's films depicting the ups and downs of women's lives became the most popular trends. Third, because melodrama focuses on the story and actors more than other genres, it did not require advanced filming techniques or expensive sets. In addition, Korean melodramas came close to the everyday life of Koreans, because the country's modern history was dramatic enough to be on screen. This enabled strong audience identification. This is how melodrama became the queen of all genres in Korea, and Korean movie star history the history of stars in popular melodramas.

However, the Korean melodrama was an exact copy of Japanese *shinpa* films to the extent that they were called “*namida* (tears, なみだ)” films, adopting the Japanese term for a tearjerker. Even after liberation, when Japanese films were strictly forbidden in Korea, plagiarism paradoxically persisted until the government allowed Japanese films back in 1998. In other words, melodrama brought in and modified Japanese melodramas and led Koreans to discover Korean cultural sentiments. The genre became so prevalent that in the 1980s it was almost impos-



*Madame Freedom* (Han Hyung-mo, 1956)

---



*My Sassy Girl* (Kwak Jae-yong, 2001)

---



*A Public Cemetery below the Moon*  
(Kwon Chul-hwi, 1967)

---

sible to find a director who did not make melodramas. Other genres even adopted melodrama in their own way and repeated the pattern of women's sacrifice and the restoration of patriarchy. Even directors considered key auteurs, such as Kim Ki-young, Yu Hyun-mok, and Lee Man-hee, all made melodramas. (Although later directors such as Jang Sun-woo and Park Kwang-su did not make melodramas, can we really say their films are completely untouched by emotion?) Melodramas boomed in the 1960s, also known as the heyday of the Korean film industry, in response to audience expectations that Korean film quality would finally reach new heights after the invention of sound films. The melodramas of the 1960s were characterized by either Cinderella-style happy endings or Ophelia-style tragedies, and featured either modern women in traditional families under the influence of the Korean War or love stories between the rich and the poor created by Western capitalism. Of course, tragic endings were by far the more common. Perhaps it is cruel that tragic melodrama evokes stronger empathy and that these films comfort the public with their real-life problems. In a story with a happy ending, problems are resolved, albeit hypocritically. On the other hand, in a tragic story, the main character tries to escape their contradictions either by isolating or destroying him or herself. The origin of this conflict comes not from class difference but from the restoration of patriarchy. When capitalist society allowed women to work, feudal society under crisis demanded the restoration of patriarchy. In fact, even today, Korean melodrama strongly advocates the restoration of patriarchy and demands women's voluntary sacrifice and acquiescence in the process, sometimes subjecting them to adultery or pregnancy outside marriage. This draws a clear line between their degraded bodies and pure spirits (Here, women's careers become a very sensitive topic, as seen in the hostess melodramas of the 1970s initiated by *Wedding Dress in Tears*). The judiciary of a modern country does not protect those who make voluntary sacrifices and acquiesce. This absence of legal protection is the happy ending that re-

assures men after the restoration of all their power. There is not a single film in which a woman divorces her husband, bankrupts him, and leaves him with another man to start a new life. Unfortunately, modern women's utopia is never realized in melodramas. On the surface, the films may have simulated utopia, but this was just a way of bringing them back into the family circle. Believe it or not, in terms of ideology, *My Sassy Girl* (Kwak Jae-yong, 2001), which depicts a girl in the Internet era, is no different from *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyung-mo, 1956), which is set after the Korean War ceasefire of 1953.

### **Horror Films, Social Repression and the Return of the Grudge: Who Is Coming Back?**

Turning to horror, action and comedy films after defining melodrama leads us to realize that these three genres are variations on the melodrama. First, I will discuss horror films. Korean horror movies are different from 1950s Hollywood B movies, German expressionist films, and Japanese horror films. Nor are they like classic horror film's icons such as Dracula or Frankenstein. Korean horror films rarely depict supernatural phenomena, aliens, monsters, killers, zombies, or lunatics (Few of the Korean horror movies that have imported such scary beings have gained popularity). Instead, the ghost in Korean horror films is a spirit who died with regrets or as a result of injustice. Most are female. (Oddly, it is hard to find male ghosts like Shakespeare's ghost of Hamlet's father in Korean horror movies.) They come back to haunt their murderers or plead their case. As they usually lived a life of repression in a patriarchal family as a daughter-in-law or a daughter forced to sacrifice, and return to haunt their husband or father, this makes the genre a variation on the melodrama.

*A Public Cemetery below the Moon* (Kwon Chul-hwi, 1967) is a perfect example. An *ex-gisaeng* (female entertainer) called Wol-hyang marries into a wealthy family, but she cannot overcome class difference and eventually dies as a result of her mother-in-law's abuse and lies. She comes

back from the grave, not to take revenge but to win her love back from her husband by dispelling suspicion. Although horror films were made every summer, they never became a mainstream genre. The public felt uncomfortable about them. Moreover, Confucian culture found screaming in public and enjoying such films very vulgar. Film reviews and journals paid little attention to horror movies. In addition, government suppression and media control suspended the production of horror films entirely during the 1980s. Twenty years of censorship forced the public to turn away from horror movies. Korean society was already full of sorrow.

It is significant that the horror film *Whispering Corridors* (Park Ki-hyung) did not appear before the summer of 1998, which was the inauguration year of the Kim Dae-jung administration marking the true end of the era of military dictatorship. However, this film did not stray too far from Korean traditional ghost movies and the return of the repressed. After its big success, four sequels had been made by 2005. The greatest achievement of the movie was bringing the horror genre back to the public and confirming to the public that they could enjoy the genre. The most prominent phenomenon in the Korean film industry in the 21st century is the production of horror films every summer as a mainstream genre. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to say for certain that horror films have stepped out of the shadow of melodrama and its patriarchal ideology. In other words, the horror genre has only been reproducing the melodrama without displaying its deeply buried intent to overthrow social structures.

### **Action Films: Nostalgia for Paternal Authority or Worship of and Obedience to Power in the Post-War Era**

If the horror film is a female melodrama emphasizing family reunion, the action film is a male melodrama emphasizing social restructuring. The Korean action genre has no connection to the Hollywood gangster film or film noir. It is more like a Korean version of the Japanese



*Whispering Corridors* (Park Ki-hyung, 1998)

---



*Gallant Man* (Kim Hyo-chun, 1969)

---



*General's Son* (Im Kwon-taek, 1990)

---

*yakuza* gangster film by way of the Hollywood western. However, Korean action films usually have emotional heroes, but they are nothing but street punks. They are vindicated in the films, but illegal in the real world. Action films started to bloom in the late 1950s with director Chung Chang-wha (Hong Kong name: Cheng Chang Ho) and they unfolded against the backdrop of actual social history rather than developing independently as a genre. They depicted militants fighting for independence under Japanese colonization, refugees after the Korean War, or gangsters who were forced on the streets amid modernization. Most of the successful action films in the 1960s are so similar that they seem like a series. Action stars such as Jang Dong-he repeated the same persona from one film to the next, and tropes such as friendship and betrayal of men and sacrifice in the name of loyalty that even overruled love were also constants.

There were three aspects to this phenomenon. First, by centering on men the films accentuated brotherhood and expressed a yearning for strong fathers. Living in a fast-paced world, they wanted to go back to a conservative society where a strong father made all the important decisions and gave the orders. That is why Korean action films are extremely loyal to group structures and rules. Betrayal was considered the worst sin. And yet, is not betrayal the only way of leaving a gang? The Korean action film is a genre of irony and the abandonment of social justice. That is why film gangsters choose to commit even greater sins to avoid the worst sin, which leads to sacrificial death. In that moment of choice, action films reach a sentimental climax. Of course, they are unable to deal with anything that lies beneath that sentimental choice. This is also the moment of confirming the impotence of Korean men in the face of modernization.

The second aspect of the Korean action film is the worship of the powerful regardless of any judicial judgment. The Korean saying “the fist comes before the law” is the fundamental sentiment that lies beneath Korean action films. This saying also conveys distrust of so-

cial justice and the attempt to resolve an issue by force rather than by justice in the face of collusion between interested parties. This is the fundamental emotion of the generation that came to the city in the post-war era only to be evicted out onto the streets again. The Korean people lost their homes twice. Half the Korean people lost their homes as a result of the division of the nation after the Korean War. Some others lost their homes because of the destruction of agricultural society in the name of modernization. Instead of offering opportunities, cities exploited these people's cheap labor to accumulate more wealth. Social conflicts and contradictions generated in this process are portrayed with violence in the action film. The most prominent and distinctive characteristic of the Korean action film is the emotion of homelessness. A case in point is the *Gallant Man* series (1969~1970), in which men from all corners of the country come together to fight against injustice. The different dialects in the film gave energy to the action genre and led the series to become a big hit.

The third aspect of the Korean action film is the display of male power in the face of crisis. Action films often consider physical strength built by intensive training as a form of spiritual elevation. The female workforce grew rapidly in the 1960s and men's social dominance started to come under threat. Quite a number of women started to take over from men as head of the household. As more and more women replaced men in society, men were forced out of jobs. Korean action films are nostalgic for the powerful men of the past. Therefore, the twisted values of feudalism and Confucian ideology were almost inevitably included in action films.

However, with the import of the Hong Kong martial arts films *Dragon Inn* (King Hu, 1966) and *One-Armed Swordsman* (Chang Che, 1967) after 1966, Korean action films started to focus on martial arts techniques, losing their national identity. The culmination of a new style of action films in the 1970s came with Lee Doo-yong's *Manchurian Tiger* (1974). Even these, however, were merely clumsy copies of Hong Kong ac-

tion films, particularly Bruce Lee films. Korean filmmakers' collaboration with Hong Kong's Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest nearly destroyed the genre in Korea, as is indicated by the total absence of notable action films in the 1980s. Im Kwon-taek's *The General's Son* (1990) restored the action film. The film was the most successful film that year and it made the action film a popular genre again. Mysteriously, however, these action films were a return to the gangster films of the 1960s. Kwak Kyung-taek's *Friend* (2001) was a big hit based on nostalgia. Ryoo Seung-wan is a rare case of a director who defined himself as an action film director and made efforts to revive the genre. In this process, male power is restored repeatedly and with melo-dramatic sentimentalism (Yoo Ha's *Spirit of Jeet Keun Do - Once Upon a Time in High School* [2004] is a good example). That is why action films, despite continued efforts, remain buried under the weight of reactionary memories.

### **Comedies: Laughter without Humor, or Hybrid Genre**

Korean comedy is a hybrid genre without its own identity. There is no traditional slapstick comedy in Korean cinema, probably because there is no tradition of the circus in Korea (both Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton were circus performers). In fact, slapstick comedy evolved out of the circus, but the circus that came to Korea with modernization did not connect with the cinema. Instead, comedy films started in Korea after the invention of sound. The genre developed under the influence of Japanese petit bourgeois comedy (*shomin geki*) films. That is why almost all of the 1960s comedy films portray petit bourgeois families. The stories are variations on melodramas, only with happy endings and a bright and cheerful atmosphere. The boundary between melodrama and the comedy film was vague at the time. Most of the audience sought catharsis through tragic stories and regarded comedy as low class. Partly, this was the result of the impact of shinpa melodramas on the uneducated public, but more importantly, it was due to the shortage of good comedy films. Most of all, Korean comedy films



*Two Cops* (Kang Woo-suk, 1993)

---



*My Wife is a Gangster* (Jo Jin-kyu, 2001)

---



*Foul King* (Kim Jee-woon, 2000)

---

lacked satirical spirit. And this was not the fault of cinema itself, but the result of the censorship that suppressed the Korean cinema for a long period of time. Moreover, even that short history of comedy films came to an end when the small cohort of comedy actors moved over to television with the opening of broadcasting stations in the late 1960s. After that, comedy only continued on television as comic soap operas and single-act plays for almost twenty-five years. If I were to pick a comedy film of the 1980s, I would have to go with *Byun Kang-swoi* (Um Jong-sun, 1986) and the variations on it, which constituted a very peculiar form of traditional erotic film.

Kang Woo-suk brought comedy back into Korean films by teaching the audience how to laugh with the comedy-action mix in *Two Cops* (1993). It is quite significant that comedy came back to Korea with the bubble economy. Laughter seemed to connect the public to the films. Comedy films actually took their place in Korean cinema as late as the 1990s. However, these comedy films leant on melodramatic emotions. If the mainstream 1960s comedy film was a kind of domestic melodrama, in the 1990s it was a variation on the romantic melodrama. Therefore, it seems almost impossible to expect Korean comedy films to produce the sting of satirical laughter at the world. Moreover, it is still too difficult for Korean comedy films to beat television comedy dramas, which have enjoyed a long history. (Is there a comedy film comparable to the television drama, *My Name is Kim Sam-soon*?) Even today, comedy films have not yet found their identity. They are still a hybrid of various genres, trying to produce laughter by playing on other genres—think of *Marrying the Mafia* (2002), *Kick the Moon* (2001), or *My Wife is a Gangster* (2001). At the same time, the comedy genre is trying to find its own potential (Here we can think of *No. 3* [1997], *The Foul King* [2000], or *Barking Dogs Never Bite* [2000]). In this sense, comedy has just begun to write its own history.

## **And.....**

Of course, Korean cinema also features a variety of other genres. Underneath Korean popular culture lies the life of the Korean public on the peninsula, struggling through the modernization of the country. However, Korean film genres only treat this topic conservatively by way of social restructuring. In addition, as most of these genres were imported, distortions and changes seem to have been inevitable. Thus, it is difficult to conclude that the popularity of certain Korean films is an exact reflection of modern history. Korean genre films need more reflective introspection to achieve historical vitality. Only then will they become truly popular, and it is not yet the right time.