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The Japanese Colonial
Period, Heyday of Silent Films

1926-1934



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- 1, *Airang* (Na Woon-kyu, 1926)
- 2, Na Woon-kyu
- 3, Lee Pil-woo
- 4, *Bloody Horse* (Hong Kae-myung, 1928)

A History of Films that no Longer Exist

In Korean cinema historiography, the time between the mid 1920s and mid 1930s is widely acknowledged as the heyday of silent films, and the following observations are based on this premise. However, this historic fact deserves our full attention because nobody currently studying Korean cinema history has ever seen the silent films made at that time. Only a few films stills have survived from this period, because of hardship, Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, and the time of the military regime.

Despite this misfortune, the films made during this period can be discussed thanks to Lee Young-il, a Korean cinema historian. His *Korean Cinema History* (1969, revised 2004) and *Lee Young-il's Lectures on Korean Cinema* (2002) are essential reading for any domestic or foreign film scholar who wants a deeper understanding of Korean cinema.

According to the records, about 140-150 films were made during the Japanese colonial era, some eighty of which were released between 1926 and 1937. They were quite remarkable not only in quantity but also in quality. One has to go through piles of documents to try and bring these films back to life. Such efforts lead to research not simply on the value of these documents as records, but also on various historical aspects of the early Korean cinema in terms of technology, audience acceptance, controversy and legal issues, and industry.

The Characteristics of Korean Silent Films: The Conflict between Nationalism and Colonialism

There are two aspects to the battle between Korean nationalism and Japanese colonialism in the cinema. One is Na Woon-kyu's *Arirang* (1926), which surprised and thrilled the nation. The other is the political oppression and censorship exercised by the Japanese authorities. A newspaper report described Japanese film policy as "twisting the arm, severing the leg, and complete disorientation. You cannot tell what it was originally at all" (*Donga Ilbo* newspaper, 5 February

1928).

It is truly remarkable that a 26-year-old man's first film shook the whole nation, creating a huge milestone in Korean cinema. It is even more striking if you consider that Koreans only started making their own films nearly thirty years after Western films were introduced to Korea and Japan colonized Korea. Those films faced brutal censorship from the beginning.

What film to make was a fundamental question for early filmmakers venturing into the new world of cinema. As Lee Young-il observes, "There was a clear and uncompromising conflict between the Japanese and Chosun producers. The latter always tried to adopt national independence as the core value of their films and imbue them with Korea's unique sentiments and customs" (2002, p. 18). In the midst of this struggle, much hope for Korean Cinema was suppressed and crushed, which makes Korean film history different from that of others.

Na Woon-kyu made a breakthrough in the difficult situation. The main character of his film, *Arirang*, is a mad intellectual. The film was an answer to the search for a filmmaking style. People in those days considered *Arirang* as the first Korean film masterpiece, and it inspired many young people to enter the film business. A great number of silent films were produced in such a short period of time because the public's interest in film was growing. Interestingly, the heyday of the silent cinema ended with Na's death in 1937.

Controversial Issues in Korean Silent Films

Silent films of the time portrayed new types of people in Korean society. The public, who were facing drastic changes in the world, enthusiastically welcomed those expressing poignant sorrow in a melodramatic setting, known as *shinpa*. Some female characters in *shinpa* films abandoned Confucian ideology and were open to free love, divorce, and remarriage, defying the patriarchy that dominated society. The male elite, however, responded with a mixture of blister-

ing contempt and fear. The typical stories and formulaic characters of these melodramas have had a deep impact on Korean films and television dramas to this day.

In those days, socialism provided a common ideological basis for the independence movement among many of the educated elite. Its influence on the cinema resulted in the production of *The Wandering* (Kim Yu-young, 1928), the first film of its kind in Korea. Only five socialist-type films were made throughout the Japanese colonial period, because of difficulties dealing with two archenemies—the Japanese imperial government and capitalism. Therefore, socialism was felt less in filmmaking than in reviews and critical debate.

Entering into the 1930s, the number of professionals in technical areas such as cinematography, sound recording, and film developing grew rapidly. Among them, Lee Pil-woo is one of the most noteworthy figures in Korean cinema history. He was born the son of a clock shop owner and played with a slide projector when he was little. Later he became famous as a cinematographer during the silent film era and taught many followers, including his siblings. He was also a pioneer of the Korean sound film, shooting the country's first talkie, *The Story of Chun-hyang* (Lee Myung-woo, 1935), by developing his own sound production technology in cooperation with Japanese engineers. After the release of *The Story of Chun-hyang*, silent films continued to be made, both because of technical limitations in production and screening and the lasting popularity of *byunsa* (silent film narrators). Lee Pil-woo remained as a godfather of Korean cinema technology even after liberation from Japanese colonial rule, as he took charge of constructing a government-funded studio.

The Japanese imperial government systematized its censorship of Korean cinema by passing the “Motion Picture and Film Censorship Regulation” in 1926. As Japan launched its military assault on China at the beginning of the 1930s, production activities in Korea became more limited, and censorship created a crisis atmosphere in Korean cinema.

The Expansion of National Cinema

Japanese oppression caused between twenty and thirty Korean filmmakers and actors to flee to Shanghai, then the Hollywood of the east. They were so active in the film world there that they appear in Chinese cinema history books. Among them, the actor Jin Yan (金焰) was known as the “Film Emperor of Shanghai.” He starred with Chinese actresses such as Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉) in the city’s finest films. Lee Pil-woo wrote detailed reports about the Shanghai film studios of the 1930s (*Chosun Ilbo* newspaper, 21~24 January 1930).

The Second Pusan International Film Festival (1997) showed *Between Sky and Earth* (1951), by the unknown director, Heo Young. A film buff, Heo had decided to make films at a time when most Korean directors had given up filmmaking, even if it meant he had to follow the Japanese army and make pro-Japanese films. He remained in Indonesia after the Second World War and established a cinema-theque, a production company, and a film academy, living a second life as “Dr. Hu Yung,” father of Indonesian cinema.

These cases demonstrate a need to expand our understanding of national cinema during the silent film era. (Kim So-hee)

Motion Picture and Film Censorship Regulation

Film policies in Korea during the Japanese colonial period took an aggressive cultural approach to serving the expansion of the Japanese empire. During the earliest days of the Korean cinema from 1897 to 1923, when western films were dominant, there was no systematic framework or policy in Japan or Korea. The main thrust of film policies, if there was any, was to regulate a new entertainment place, the movie theater. Film censorship in the presence of the police was conducted on an irregular basis. Neither the Japanese imperial government nor the Japanese Government-General of Korea produced an organized system for monitoring this new medium then. Such relative non-interference began to fade as the 1920s progressed.

The Japanese Government-General of Korea created a Motion Picture Department in April 1920 to enhance its propaganda for Japanese imperialism inside and outside of Korea. This led to an increased ideological assault on Koreans through films. The department operated education programs to justify Japanese rule over Korea at hotels, schools, and town halls across the peninsula. It also unified the scattered management of show business under the authority of the Japanese Government-General of Korea by enacting the “Entertainment and Entertainment Venue Regulation” in 1922, the “Motion Picture and Film Censorship Regulation” in 1926, and the “Motion Picture and Film Control Regulation” in 1936.

Systematic control over motion pictures was established after the Gyeonggi-do Police Office announced the Entertainment and Entertainment Venue Regulation in 1922. Censorship of films seemed to be in place, but the regulation was only effective within Gyeonggi-do and designed to regulate not films but theaters. The Japanese Government-General of Korea felt a need for legislation to provide it with authority to take unified and systematic control over Korean cinema, which resulted in the enactment of the Motion Picture and Film Censorship

Regulation on 5 July 1926.

The first provision of the regulation stipulates that any film that fails to pass censorship is banned. According to the most problematic third provision, a film can only be released when the censorship bureau acknowledges that the film cannot damage public security, morals, and health. These criteria were too comprehensive and ambiguous to evaluate. Furthermore, the fifth provision specifies that even a film that has passed censorship can be limited for exhibition or banned if it is found harmful according to the criteria. Whether the film is censored or not is at the discretion of the Japanese Government-General of Korea in accordance with the eighth provision. The Motion Picture and Film Censorship Regulation was a product of the will of the Japanese imperial government to subjugate Korean thoughts and sentiments as it sensed the growing influence of film over the public.

As a result, only three out of eight reels of *Bloody Horse* (Hong Kae-myung, 1928) survived censorship and about 994 feet of *A Ferry Boat that No One Owns* (Lee Kyu-hwan, 1932) was cut. The title of Na Woon-kyu's *Going across the Dooman River* had to be changed to *Looking for Love* (1928). As a measure of the brutality of Japanese censorship, 24,982 meters of film was scissored from the total 18,949,911 meters of films censored in 1927. (Jay Kim)

Shinpa Films and Modernity

The *shinpa* or melodrama genre and style provided a practical solution to the problem of what kind of film Korea would make in the early days of its cinema. It was 1916 when the press first used the term *shinpa* to introduce the activities of Im Sung-Ku's Hyeokshin-dan troupe, after which it circulated among the public. Im introduced theatrical *shinpa* to Korea, having mastered its narratives, structures, and performance style while working for Japanese *shinpa* troupes. The Japanese