

Korean Women Directors

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Pioneers

It was in 1954, just after the end of the Korean War, that Park Nam-ok decided to make her own movie. At the time, the Korean film production environment was very poor after Japanese occupation, territorial division, and the Korean War. Park started her movie career in the Chosun Film Company after liberation from the Japanese and worked in the Film Crew of the Ministry of National Defense during the Korean War. She made her debut with *The Widow* (1955), a film about the weary lives and desires of war widows. At the time, there was no proper production system, so Park relied on the help of her colleagues to complete this 16mm fiction feature. The first Korean feature by a female director was a box-office flop, but the film was an excellent work about women at the crossroads between tradition and modernity, portraying heroines torn between motherhood and sexual desire. Park did not produce any other movies, but she was revisited in the late 1990s and recognized as a pioneering female filmmaker.

Hong Eun-won joined the film industry during the same period as Park. After working as an assistant director and screenwriter for fifteen years, she debuted as director with *A Woman Judge* in 1962. The film



The Widow (Park Nam-ok, 1955)



A Woman Judge (Hong Eun-won, 1962)
Newspaper advertisement



The Girl Raised as a Future Daughter-in-law
(Choi Eun-hee, 1965)



First Experience (Hwang Hye-mi, 1970)

was based on the death of a female judge, a sensational news event at the time. It shows the heroine as an intellectual woman who tries to juggle her family and her job and portrays the various roles of women who no longer stay at home. Hong also directed *The Single Mom* (1964) and *What Misunderstanding Left Behind* (1966). Choi Eun-hee, who enjoyed great popularity as an actress in the 1960s, also directed period films such as *The Girl Raised as a Future Daughter-in-Law* (1965) and *One-sided Love of Princess* (1967) through Shin Films, her husband Shin Sang-ok's company.

Many movies in the 1970s that deal with women's sexuality interrogate monogyny and women's chastity. *First Experience* (1970), which Hwang Hye-mi wrote and directed, challenged the sexual mores of monogyny. Unlike her predecessors, Hwang is from the generation that received American-style education and their sensitivity was influenced by Western youth culture of the 1950s and 1960s. Hwang joined the film industry as a producer on *Mist* (1967, Kim Soo-yong), based on Kim Seung-ok's *A Road to Moojin*, which is reputed to be the best Korean modernist novel. In *First Experience*, she raised the issue of virginity, which was required of unmarried women. Her theme of modern man's lack of interest in sex and insecurity runs through her movies from *First Experience*, and *When Flowers Sadly Fade away* (1971) to *Relationship* (1972). In the mid 1970s, Han Ok-hee, Kim Jeom-sun, Lee Jeong-hee and Han Soon-ae of the women-only "Khaidu Club" made and presented experimental films.

Korean Cinema Leaps Forward in the 1990s and Women's Participation

There were very few female directors until Korean cinema made a new leap forward in the mid 1990s. Female directors such as Hong Eun-won and Hwang Hye-mi were either dubbed "the only female director" and used in marketing strategies where the rarity of female directors was emphasized, or else treated as supporting staff for male

producers. The latter applies to Lee Mi-rye. Lee was the only female director of theatrically released fictional features throughout the 1980s. She debuted with *My Daughter Rescued from the Swamp* in 1984. Most of the six movies she directed, including *Cabbage in a Pepper Field* (1985) and *Young-shim* (1990), featured teenage girls and boys or college students. Lee wanted to be recognized for her abilities, which meant removing the stigma that her films were the result of her relationship with a network of powerful men.

In the mid 1990s, new ways of nurturing talent started with the changes in the Korean film production system. Women have been particularly active in producing, PR and marketing. New talent has been introduced through short film awards at various film festivals and many specialized film training courses have been provided. It became possible to debut as a feature film director without having first served as an apprentice for a long time in the male-dominated network where deep-rooted gender discrimination existed.

Lim Soon-rye won an award at the Seoul Short Film Festival with *Promenade in the Rain* in 1994 and presented her feature film called *Three Friends* in 1996, launching a new generation of female directors influenced by the Korean New Wave. In 2001, she got rave reviews for directing *Waikiki Brothers*, a film about a band on the road. In *If You Were Me* (2003), an omnibus feature film made as a human rights film project, Lim directed *The 'Weight' of Her*, a short black comedy about the brutal social control of women's appearances. She was also producer on *A Smile* (2003), Park Kyung-hee's debut feature.

As for Jeong Jae-eun, Park Chan-ok and Lee Soo-yeon, their abilities were also recognized at various film festivals when they made short films after studying cinema. Jeong Jae-eun got rave reviews for *Yu-jin's Secret Code* (1999), a short film that portrays the cruel reality of child neglect, and she made her feature debut with *Take Care of My Cat* in 2001. The film portrays four women in a small city outside Seoul who try to fulfill their dreams, and was well received in Korea. In *The Aggressives*

(2005), her focus is also on the younger generation's struggles with reality. Park Chan-ok won attention with her short films, *To Be* (1996) and *Heavy* (1998), and made her feature debut with *Jealousy is My Middle Name* (2002). In this film, she keenly and calmly observed the subtle power relations among men in a way that only the opposite sex can, and won a VPRO Tiger Award at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Lee Soo-yeon's short films such as *La* (1998) and *The Goggles* (2000) won acclaim, and she made her feature film debut with *The Uninvited* (2003), a horror film about a man traumatized by horrible childhood experiences and a woman who loses her baby because of her friend who is suffering from post-natal depression. Park Kyung-hee wrote the screenplay and worked as an assistant director on *Three Friends*, and was then praised for her short film, *From Midnight to Dawn* (1989). Park portrayed a female photographer who faced the danger of going blind in *A Smile* (2003), creating an image of the thinking woman. Park also directed *Seaside Flower*, a short story about a disabled woman, in *If You Were Me 2* (2005), an omnibus feature film made as a human rights film project. Lee Mi-yeon, who worked as a producer for *The Quiet Family* (Kim Jee-woon, 1998) and *The Foul King* (Kim Jee-woon, 2000), directed *L'Abri* in 2002, which dissected relationships between men and women.

These films were not successful at the box-office, because most of them were art films made and distributed on a low budget. However, Lee Jeong-hyang's films *Art Museum by the Zoo* (1998) and *The Way Home* (2002) were very popular. *Art Museum by the Zoo* is a romantic comedy about a woman and a man who happen to live together and *The Way Home* is a family comedy about a grandson from the city and his rural grandmother. There are other directors who have also taken a more popular approach, such as Lee Seo-gun who wrote the screenplay for *301, 302* (Park Chul-soo, 1995) and debuted with *Rub Love* in 1997, Moh Ji-eun of *A Perfect Match* (2002), and Pang Eun-jin of *Princess Aurora* (2005), featuring a female serial killer.



My Daughter Rescued from the Swamp (Lee Mi-rye, 1984)



Three Friends (Lim Soon-rye, 1996)



Art Museum by the Zoo (Lee Jeong-hyang, 1998)



The Murmuring (Byun Young-joo, 1995)
Poster

The Spread of Feminism and Documentary Film

It was also the 1990s when feminist producers and film organizations appeared. The Women's Film Festival in Seoul started in 1997 under the motto of "See the world through women's eyes." Since then, it has been introducing promising female filmmakers. Women in Film Korea was established to improve the status of women film professionals and create a network among them. With a membership of over three hundred, it has engaged in various activities, including publishing on the history and contemporary reality of women film professionals, holding the Women Film Professional's Meeting, giving awards, and raising issues about the treatment of woman film professionals and childcare.

In 1989, "Bariteo," an independent film production group with the purpose of producing feminist films, was established. Byun Young-joo participated and acted as cinematographer on *Even Little Grass Has Its Own Name* (Kim So-young, 1989), a short film about gender discrimination at work, and *My Children* (Doe Sung-hee, 1990), a documentary film about childcare in a poor neighborhood. After directing *Women Being in Asia* in 1993, a documentary about the sex trade in Asia, Byun started producing documentaries about women who had been forced to become sex slaves for Japanese soldiers during the Second World War. *The Murmuring* (1995) was planned from the beginning as a 16mm film for theatrical release. The response was enthusiastic, and the sequels *Habitual Sadness* (1997) and *Habitual Sadness 2 - My Own Breathing* (2000) were produced later. From 2002, Byun started to make feature films. She directed *Ardor* (2002), based on Jeon Kyung-rin's novel, and *Flying Boys* (2004).

Jang Hee-sun made *Making Sun-dried Red Peppers* in 1999, a docudrama on three generations of women. Cho Yoon-Kyung's *Family Project - House of a Father* (2002), Ryu Mi-rye's *Life Goes on* (2003) and Jung Ho-yeon's *Umma* (2005) are also documentary films about the status of women and family issues, incorporating autobiographical elements. Kim Jin-yeol's *Handicapped Woman Kim Jin-ok's Marriage Story* (1999),

Kye un-kyoung's *Pansy & Ivy* (2000) and Lee Young's *Women with Disabilities Empathy* (2002) all feature disabled women talking about their experiences as women. *Parallel* (2000, Lee Hye-ran, Seo Eun-joo), *Rice, Flower, Scapegoat - Film Report by Larnet* (2001, Im In-ae, Seo Eun-joo) and *Always Dream of Tomorrow* (2001, Kim Mi-re) are about gender discrimination in male-dominated workplaces and female workers struggles against it.

The *White Paper on Women Film Professionals*, published by Women in Film Korea in 2001, introduced 146 feature and short films directed by women, and almost 160 Korean films were submitted to the short film competition of the Women's Film Festival in Seoul in 2006. The number of women film professionals and films on women has increased dramatically in the 2000s. However, systematic and conventional constraints against women still exist, and removing these constraints and establishing the status of women as equal and free human beings is still in process.