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The Sound Film
and Militarism

1935~1945



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1, 2, *The Story of Chun-hyang* (Lee Myung-woo, 1935)
 3, *Heartlessness* (Park Ki-chaе, 1939)
 4, *Narcissus* (Kim Yu-young, 1940)
 5, *You and Me* (Heo Young, 1941)

Between 1935 and 1945—the last decade of Japanese occupation—sound films appeared and the earliest surviving feature films were also made. Eleven have been found in China, Japan, and Russia. They are: *Sweet Dream* (Yang Joo-nam, 1936), *Story of Shim-chung* (Ahn Suk-young, 1937), *Military Train* (Seo Kwang-je, 1938), *A Flower of a fishing village* (Ahn Chul-young, 1939), *Spring of the Korean Peninsula* (Lee Byung-il, 1941), *Homeless Angel* (Choi In-kyu, 1941), *Volunteer* (Ahn Suk-young, 1941), *Suicide Squad of the Watchtower* (Tadashi Imai, 1943), *Straits of Chosun* (Park Ki-chae, 1943), *Portrait of Youth* (Shiro Toyota, 1943), and *Vow of Love* (Choi In-kyu, 1945). These films were only known through historical documents and filmmaker testimony before. Now that they have finally come to light, we can have a better idea of Korean cinema during the years of Japanese colonial rule. However, many of these films propagate Japanese militarism, demonstrating that Korea's early sound films were marred by Japanese imperialism.

The First Korean Sound Film, *The Story of Chun-hyang*

When *Paramount on Parade* (1930), a western talkie using sound-on-disc recording, was shown in Korea in 1930, Korean filmmakers wanted to engage in sound film production, too. However, since they could not even afford sound film cameras, their wish was far from reality, and they had to wait until 1935.

As the first cinematographer and a pioneer in film technology, Lee Pil-woo set his heart on sound film production and visited China and Japan in 1931 to solve technical problems. At that time, Shochiku (松竹) Film Company in Japan succeeded in developing the Tsuchihashi (土橋) system, an imitation of the American RCA system, and made the first Japanese talkie, *Madame and Wife* (Heinosuke Gosho, 1931). After signing a technical cooperation contract with Tsuchi-hashi, Lee screened *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931), which he imported from Japan to raise funds, with a silent film projector. Naturally, the film failed at the box-office in Korea because of the language barrier. Nevertheless, the

sharp increase in sound film imports made the projection system for sound film more and more common.

After buying a Tsuchihashi recorder from Japan in 1934, Lee worked as cinematographer, sound recordist, and lab technician with his brother Lee Myung-woo to film *The Story of Chun-hyang* in 1935. The reviews were negative about the limited amount of dialogue and the decision to skip the sound mixing, and described the film as crude and amateurish. But the crowds flocked into the theaters to see the first Korean talkie.

The Dominance of Sound Film and Increased Co-Productions

Sound became a selling point in the film industry and almost half the films made in 1936 were talkies. The same year saw the release of the first music film, *Songs of Chosun* (Kim Sang-jin). In addition, the third film in the series inspired by *Arirang* (Na Woon-kyu, 1926), which had been a great hit during the silent film era, was made in form of a sound film. Once sound film took over completely in 1937, a whole new generation of the theater actors with good voices took over, such as Noh Jae-shin, Lee Jong-Chul, Moon Ye-bong, and Han Il-song. New directors who had studied directing in Japan and Germany also took control, including Park Ki-chae, Bang Han-joon, Shin Kyung-kyun, Ahn Chul-young, Lee Kyu-hwan, and Choi In-kyu. However, this transformation of the Korean cinema was led not by the development of Korea's own technology but mainly by co-productions. To solve technical problems in cinematography, sound recording, and film developing, Korean companies often called in Japanese engineers or contracted to share the distribution rights with their Japanese partners. This was because sound had become a key to success and a primary factor in rising production costs.

The Korean Cinema Realizes Its Identity

Although Hollywood's Josef von Sternberg saw *Story of Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon* (Hong Kae-myung, 1936) and laughed at the techni-

cal underdevelopment of Korean cinema, Korea's early sound films suggested what post-modern and post-colonial resistance could be. Regardless of increasing collaboration with Japan and ever stricter colonial government control over Korean films during the second Sino-Japanese War, the critics came to realize Korean cinema's identity in the process of imitating and comparing themselves with Japanese and western films. Just as in the early days of the silent era, the start of the talkies sparked a series of adaptations from Korean classics, such as *The Story of Chun-hyang* (1935), *Story of Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon* (1936), and *Story of Shim-chung* (1937). As examples of the rediscovery and subjective resurrection of tradition through negotiation with foreign culture, the film adaptations of classic stories presented "a strategy of colonial hybridity," which, as Homi K. Bhabha has pointed out, "ruins the imperial ruler's demand for the imitation of modernity" (1994, pp. 102~122). Whether a film succeeded in reproducing the beauty of Chosun became a standard that critics kept using. The best films of the kind were Na Woon-kyu's posthumous work, *Ohmongnyeo* (1937), considered as crude but appreciative of Korean folk culture, and *Wanderer* (Lee Kyu-hwan, 1937), a collaboration with the Japanese but rich in local color. The first Korean film festival was held by the *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper in 1938, and the audience voted *Arirang* as the Best Silent Film and *Story of Shim-chung* as the Best Sound Film. This can be seen as the realization of Korean cinema's identity. *Arirang* is set in a rural village, capturing Koreans' unique sentiments and lifestyles, and *Story of Shim-chung* is a film adaptation from a Korean classic with songs from its *pansori* version to bring it alive.

Imperial Japan's Film Regulations after the Chosun Film Decree

A total of twenty-six films were made between 1935 and 1939-ten in 1939, when literary adaptations were dominant. These adaptations included *Heartlessness* (Park Ki-chae) from the original, which was the

first Korean modern novel; *Altar for a Tutelary Deity* (Bang Han-joon) from the popular fiction; *Being Lucky neither at Cards nor at Love* (Lee Myung-woo) from a story adapted from a Japanese novel; and *Song of Compassion* (Kim Yu-young) from its film novel (the contemporary literary genre that attempted to produce literary works resembling films). Because Japan kept a strong leash on Korean cinema during its all-out war, Korean film production plunged after 1940. Forcing all the theaters in Korea to show the Pledge of Allegiance to the Japanese Empire (皇國臣民誓詞), the Flag of the Rising Sun, pro-war slogans before screenings, and propaganda films like *Military Train*, the Japanese Government-General of Korea enforced the Chosun Film Decree in January 1940.

The decree crucially arrested the development of the Korean cinema. Those who refused to cooperate with Imperial Japan left the cinema, but those who remained helped producing Japanese propaganda films to mobilize Koreans for the war Japan was engaged in. Six films in total were made in 1940. Three were cultural films (a general term for educational films, scientific films and documentaries). These were made by The Chosun Cultural Film Association, an organization the Japanese Government-General of Korea sponsored. Their titles were *Dawn of the Mountain Village*, *Light of the Sea*, and *Pure Heart*. Two others were by the pro-Japanese Koryeo Film Association. *Tuition* (Choi In-kyu) and *Garden of Victory* (Bang Han-joon) encouraged integration with Japan and collaboration in the war. The last one, *Narcissus* (Kim Yu-young), was in line with the colonial period's melodramas that compared Korea's fate to the rape of a virgin.

Co-produced Propaganda Films in the Last Years of Japanese Imperialism

In 1941, all distribution companies were forcibly closed and merged into the government-controlled Chosun Film Distribution Corporation. In the following year, film companies followed suit and went under the control of the Chosun Film Production Corporation. Keep-

ing a tight grip on Korean cinema by centralizing production and distribution, the Japanese Government-General of Korea produced only films propagandizing militarism until Japan was defeated in the war. To promote voluntary enlistment, *Volunteer* and *You and Me* (Heo Young, 1941) were made with the full support of the Chosun Military News Department. To encourage the people of Chosun to migrate to Manchuria, *Long Distance to Happiness* (Jeon Chang-geun, 1941) was co-produced with the Manchurian Motion Picture Association. Choi In-kyu, who had demonstrated his abilities with *Tuition*, the first synchronous sound film, directed the pro-Japanese film *Homeless Angel*, which was also released in Japan as the first Korean film recommended by the Japanese Ministry of Education. After the production of the last privately made film, *Singaeji* (Yoon Bong-choon, 1942), all films dubbed into Korean were banned and only films in Japanese (the official national language) were released.

Japanese sympathizers in the Chosun Film Production Corporation such as Park Ki-chae, Bang Han-joon, Shin Kyung-kyun, Ahn Suk-young, and Choi In-kyu worked as directors according to the plans of the Japanese Government-General of Korea right up to the collapse of Imperial Japan. During this period, the Chosun Film Production Corporation produced propaganda films using Korean actors and staff in cooperation with directors and technical experts of Japanese film companies such as Shochiku, Toho (東寶) and Daiei (大映). Examples included *Suicide Squad of the Watchtower* and *Vow of Love*, directed by Tadashi Imai (今井正) and assisted by Choi In-kyu, and *Portrait of Youth*, directed by Shiro Toyota (豊田四郎). Although Korea's long-awaited independence from Japan finally arrived on 15 August 1945, the activities of pro-Japanese filmmakers against the Korean people have never been punished. According to the film policy of the US military administration, now they began to make films about independence. (Kim Ryeo-sil)



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1. *Story of Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon* (Hong Kae-myung, 1936)
 2. *Story of Shim-chung* (Ahn Suk-young, 1937)

3. Uijeongbu Studio