

# 04

Liberation and  
the Korean War

1945~1953



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1. Yun Bong-gil the Martyr (Yoon Bong-choon, 1947)
2. Breaking the Wall (Han Hyung-mo, 1949) Poster
3. Viva Freedom! (Choi In-kyu, 1946)
4. The Adventure of Tolttori (Lee Kyu-hwan, 1946)

The liberation arrived suddenly when the atomic bomb devastated Japan, whose motto was “death and no surrender (本土玉碎)”. Following Emperor Hirohito (迪官裕仁)’s unconditional surrender, Japan’s rule of Korea finally ended. On 15 August 1945, Koreans shouted with joy and excitement over the liberation.

Hope was everywhere, because they could rebuild the country. However, with the Korean peninsula coming under foreign control again, their joy did not last long. In accordance with the Yalta Pact, the 38th parallel was established as the boundary between the Soviet (northern) and American (southern) Korean zones of occupation, which came as a great shock to Koreans. The Cold War was over, but the political conflicts between the US and the USSR, the world’s two superpowers, intensified around the Korean peninsula.

### **Korean Films During the Liberation Era**

Some argue the post-liberation era corresponds to the three-year period from the liberation (1945) to the establishment of the South Korean government (1948). Others insist that the liberation era should be the five-year-period from the liberation to the outbreak of the Korean War (1950). We accept the latter view, because both the liberation and reconstruction of Korea need to be taken into consideration when we talk about the Korean film industry during the post-liberation era. However, the post-liberation period will be further divided, with the establishment of the South Korean government as the watershed.

The first part of the post-liberation era witnessed a big rise in so-called “liberation films.” With cameras, sound recording and developing equipment in ruins, the cinema was in bad shape. However, that did not stop Korean filmmakers from throwing themselves into film production, expressing the joy of the liberation as well as their national pride. This naturally led to films dealing with independence movement leaders such as *The Chronicle of An Jung-geun* (Lee Ku-young, 1946) or *Yun Bong-gil, the Martyr* (Yoon Bong-choon, 1947). A series

of feature films portraying the joy of the liberation or the excitement of rebuilding the country was also produced. *Viva Freedom!* (Choi In-kyu, 1946) was one of the most representative feature films of the era.

The second part of the post-liberation era saw aggravated ideological conflicts between leftists and rightists. Unfortunately, the Korean peninsula was divided, with the Republic of Korea in the South and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the North. Films made during this period reflected the atmosphere of the time, dealing with anti-communism or portraying the tragedy of national division symbolized by the 38th parallel. The year 1949 alone saw films such as *The Reality of the North Korea* (Lee Chang-geun), *The Collapsed 38th Parallel* (Yoon Bong-choon), *Breaking the Wall* (Han Hyung-mo), *A Fellow Soldier* (Hong Kae-myung), and *For the Country* (Ahn Jong-hwa).

In the second part of the post-liberation era filmmakers also pushed the envelope despite poor production conditions. *A Diary of Woman* (Hong Seong-ki, 1949) was the first 16mm color film in Korea. Choi In-kyu's *Pasi* (1949) was all shot on location on the island of Heuksan. Noh Pil's *Pilot An Chang-nam* (1949) was an aerial film. Yu Dong-il made the musical film *The Blue Hill* (1948). Yoon Dae-ryong's *A Public Prosecutor and a Teacher* (1948) is well known for its *shinpa*-style narrative, with a *byunsa* using a microphone to provide voices for the characters in the film. The melodrama *A Hometown in the Heart* (Yoon Yong-kyu, 1949) received fulsome praise from film critics.

All these films used technical changes to pioneer new directions, which resulted in various new genres. This suggested that filmmaking was recovering from the technical setbacks that had made kino-dramas and 16mm silent films reappear in the early post-liberation era. Overcoming such difficulties, the Korean film industry found itself reinvigorated.

## **Korean Movie Theaters Dominated by American Films**

After the liberation, American films, distributed by the Central Motion Picture Exchange (CMPE), dominated Korean screens. The CMPE had a monopoly on exporting and distributing American films from the eight major US film companies. With more than a hundred American films being screened annually in Korean movie theaters, American films had more than fifty per cent of the local film market. They included *In Old Chicago* (Henry King, 1938), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), and *Random Harvest* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1942). This represented a huge success, given that there were only sixty-one Korean films made over the five years after the liberation—four in 1946, thirteen in 1947, twenty-two in 1948, twenty in 1949, and two in the first half of 1950. Another noteworthy point is that there was a remarkable increase in the number of documentaries and cultural films as well as newsreels.

With the liberation ushering in the era of US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), newsreels were sponsored by the USAMGIK as part of an effort to publicize US global policies as well as the policies of the USAMGIK. They included films introducing the United States, materials on the horrors of war and its legacy, and others about democratic activities in South Korea, which were intended to support the South Korean government.

Meanwhile, Korean directors busied themselves producing cultural films, such as *The Topography of Jeju Island* (Lee Yong-min, 1946), *The Rose of Sharon* (Ahn Chul-young, 1948), and *The Town of Hope* (Choi In-kyu, 1948). Among Korean documentaries of this period, *Liberation News* (1946), *Chosun Olympic* (1947), and *The Korean Textile Co.* (1949) are noteworthy.

## **The Chosun Film Union**

The Chosun Film Union (CFU) played a dominant role in the Korean film community during the post-liberation era. The organization was established on 16 December 1945 and worked actively to improve

Korean cinema. When the South Korean government was established in 1948, the CFU ceased its activities and was then forgotten. Given that leaders of the group such as Choo Min, Seo Kwang-je, Kim Han, and Kang Ho were all former members of the KAPF movement under Japanese rule, it is fair to say the CFU was left-wing. The KAPF was a famous left-wing group under Japanese rule. However, the fact that the CFU also had pro-Japanese filmmakers as its members (in particular Seo Kwang-je) indicates that the organization was not a radical group. While the CFU was led by left-wingers, its members were primarily film professionals.

The CFU was in conflict with the USAMGIK. It was because the group followed the official guidelines and direction of its left-wing superior authorities—the Democratic National Front (DNF) and the Chosun Cultural Federation (CCF)—while the USAMGIK banned the activities of left-wing groups. If there had been nothing more to the CFU than its ideology and cause, its status would have been significantly weakened. However, the organization actively participated in raising concerns about and providing solutions to controversial issues facing the Korean film industry. For example, the CFU insisted that the government should take a leading role in developing the domestic film industry, accused the Central Motion Picture Exchange (CMPE) of monopolizing film distribution, asked for the abolition of regulations hobbling the film industry, and also requested the cancellation of heavy taxes on artistic events. This enabled the CFU to take a central role in the Korean film world.

### **Korean Filmmakers and the Korean War**

The Korean War brought severe hardship. With their lives in ruins and their families scattered, Koreans were devastated. Amid such overwhelming tragedy caused by the fratricidal war, filmmakers went to the front and shot historic war footage. They also made films while staying in the refugee cities where people sheltered from the war. During the war, the army sponsored combat documentaries and

newsreels. The biggest achievement of the army film crew was *An Assault of Justice* volumes 1 (1951) and 2 (1952). Feature film production continued despite the difficult conditions. They included *A Bouquet of Three Thousand People* (Shin Kyung-kyun, 1951), *The Evil Night* (Shin Sang-ok, 1952), and *The Street of Sun* (Min kyung-sik, 1952). The rapid development of the film industry when it moved down to refugee cities like Busan or Daegu and the technical advances used to overcome harsh conditions constitute the “legacy” of the Korean War in the cinema. (Cho Hye-jung)