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The Korean Cinema Renaissance
and Genre Films

1963-1971



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- 1, *Eunuch* (Shin Sang-ok, 1968)
- 2, *Women of Yi-Dynasty* (Shin Sang-ok, 1969)
- 3, *The Story of Chun-hyang* (Lee Sung-ku, 1971)
- 4, *Early Rain* (Jung Jin-woo, 1966)
- 5, *The Barefooted Young* (Kim Kee-duk, 1964)
- 6, *The Seashore Village* (Kim Soo-yong, 1965)

The Film Industry and Genre Films

The first Motion Picture Law, enacted in 1962, shaped the film industry during the 1963 to 1972 period. Furthermore, it was a period in which both quality and quantity flourished, and a diverse range of between one and two hundred films were produced every year. It was truly the renaissance of the Korean cinema. In 1969, 233 films were produced and 178 million tickets were sold, a record not surpassed until 2005.

During the 1950s, the technical problems and inconsistencies that had followed the 1945 liberation of Korea from Japanese rule were resolved. The 1960s was a time of industrial revival that saw the diffusion of new technologies, including color and wide screen. During this period, cinema became the main public entertainment form, and there were five to six admissions per head of population annually. Auteur directors including Kim Ki-young, Lee Man-hee, Shin Sang-ok, and Kim Soo-yong produced one masterwork after another.

Although this flourishing scene marks the 1960s as a kind of renaissance, it was a complex phenomenon. To some extent, output was driven by government policies and laws, and the films produced were colored by the anxieties of modernization. Between the end of the Korean War and 1962, Korean films were produced in conditions of social and political instability. Then, after 1963, there was a diversification of genre films that coincided with both social and film industrial transformation.

The 1960s can be characterized as the era of the genre film. This was because the increase in output created a critical mass enabling the discernment of generic patterns and an accompanying critical discourse. During rapid modernization and industrialization after 1963, Korean cinema prospered in a dynamic relationship with an engaged audience. On the other hand, the films were also the products of government support, which included the system of awards for producing quality films, the centralization of production, and the foreign film import business. Almost all directors of the 1960s made films

within the framework of genres, including the auteur directors active in the 1960s, such as Shin Sang-ok, Lee Man-hee, and Kim Soo-yong. Examining the invention, evolution and disappearance of genres during this period gives an insight into the shifting flows of modernity.

Two Types of Genre, One Social Outlook

Korean genre films after 1963 can be divided into two types. One type evolved out of the old melodrama, period films, and comedy genres. The second consists of new genres, including action thrillers, youth films and literary films. Earlier period films appealed by offering emotional comfort in the midst of rapid modernization. However, in the late 1960s, there were films that were either decadent or in search of new stories like *Eunuch* (Shin Sang-ok, 1968) or *Women of Yi-Dynasty* (Shin Sang-ok, 1969). As modern life became ordinary rather than exotic, the familiarity of traditional period films represented by films such as *The Story of Chun-hyang* lost its comforting function. Instead, the tears of *shinpa* melodramas flooded the scene.

From the mid to late 1960s, the government suppressed popular opposition to the Korea-Japan agreement and the sending of troops to Vietnam. It also expanded its authority through modernization and economic development, entrenching the regime. In 1966, television broadcasting went nationwide (except for a few areas) and urban life began to change with the introduction of leisure culture. The modernization process mixed relief at the end of absolute poverty and the sense of helplessness in the face of contemporary politics. The Korean cinema boomed to an annual output that exceeded two hundred films in the late 1960s. Awareness of urban life energized new films with a modern sensibility, including *Homebound* (Lee Man-hee, 1967), *Mist* (Kim Soo-yong, 1967), and *The General's Mustache* (Lee Sung-ku, 1968). These films expressed doubts and frustrations about modernization in their narrative use of wide screen.

On the other hand, the movie screens were taken over by love triangle tragedies and the self-tormented love of women in pain. The suc-

cess of *Love Me Once Again* (Jung So-young, 1968) revived the *shin-pa* melodrama as an expression of the public's despair. In 1969, more than 96 per cent of films were made in color to compete with television, stepping up commercialism with the visualization of colorful *mise-en-scène* consisting of bright and vivid screens filled with multi-colored props and women's clothing.

This trend to commercialism can also be seen in the way genre films copied hits and the tendency to entice audiences into theaters with lurid and sensational themes. The genre films of the mid to late 1960s—whether melodramas, comedies or modernist films—all expressed the same social outlook. For example, the laughter at gender reversals in transvestite comedies and the gender role changes in other comedies were both preludes to a conservative restoration of traditional gender relationships.

This perspective also applies to youth films and action thrillers, which were introduced from the early to mid 1960s. Youth films became popular when the young people who consumed and longed for Western culture took over the urban space surrounding the Academy Theater in Seoul, where many youth films were screened. Although they raved about the stars and showed youthful passion about tragic love and social aspirations in films like *The Barefooted Young* (Kim Kee-duk, 1964) or *Early Rain* (Jung Jin-woo, 1966), they could not find a position in real life to realize their own "youth." The fact that most of these films were adaptations of Japanese screenplays indicates that the youth of the 1960s substituted their thirst for something new with proxy satisfaction and consumption.

A new generation of directors gave the 1960s action thriller a commercial boost with heroic action scenes of men flying across Manchuria, to Japan and Hong Kong. Despite stylistic innovation and new narrative elements, these films were criticized for their poor plots. The cinematic techniques that produced thrills come out of an extremely modern system requiring control and structure, but the Korean action thrillers were "all action but no thrills." Although they had

men showing their mettle around the globe, poor plotting undercut the heroism of their protagonists, and they did not last long. In contrast to melodramas, the main audience for the action thriller film was male. This is also true of the swordsman film. Swordsman films drew on the legacy of the Hong Kong swordsman films, the James Bond series, and spaghetti westerns, all of which did remarkably well at the box-office in Korea during the 1960s. This trend was followed by Korean-Hong Kong co-productions that lasted until the 1980s, forming regional links. As more and more films were released, swordsman and action films were also shown along with the horror films in second-run theaters on the margins of the cultural scene. The genre films boom of the 1960s resulted from industrial demand, its expression of the social mood, as well as the Motion Picture Law and policies.

The Motion Picture Law and the Industrial Structure

The Motion Picture Law was enacted in 1962, and revised three times in this period—in 1963, 1966, and 1970. Despite these many revisions, it retained its basic principle of trying to harness films to nationalist development. The contradiction between protecting and fostering film production companies while controlling the films themselves can be seen in the combination of the double censorship of both screenplays and completed films with the policy of central control over import and production, which was maintained into the mid 1980s. The primary elements of the central control policy were the industrialization of film production companies according to the level of their facilities and the linking of film production and import through central control mechanisms. Furthermore, it included the adjustment of the number of films released according to the production and import quota system. Until it was abolished with the fifth revision of the Motion Picture Law in 1984, the double censorship system led to the cutting of many scenes in Korean films and kept them under the microscope for either public indecency or violating

the anti-communist law. As the right to import foreign films became difficult to obtain, some people borrowed other registered people's names to get the right to import films and others made literary, enlightenment, or anti-communist films, for which they were supported by policy.

The literary films boom that started in 1965 with *The Seashore Village* (Kim Soo-yong) was driven by a desire for recognition of "excellence" relying on the power of the literature. Despite the notable achievements of these literary films, one cannot forget that selection as quality films was the primary motivation behind their production. Another kind of quality film during this time was the anti-communist film, which depicted the Korean War as a plot to invade South Korea by the North Korean puppet regime, and the espionage agents sent to the south as immoral people who aimed their guns even at their own parents for the sake of their ideology. "Enlightenment" films were designed to publicize aspects of government policy. Both anti-communist and enlightenment films were made in great numbers even after the Yushin ("revitalizing reform") regime of 1972 that further strengthened authoritarian government. They were used to secure foreign film import quotas and sometimes not even released in theaters. Consequently, the policies that began in the 1960s constrained the natural evolution of Korean cinema genres and distorted the industry's structure.

The industrial structure of the Korean cinema from the late 1950s to the mid 1990s was based on the interrelationships between local distributors in the six regional markets across the nation and around twenty licensed film production companies. Korean film production was financed by pre-sales to local distributors who profited from local earnings later. Despite criticisms that this structure prevented the recirculation of box-office income into future productions, it played an important role in the structure of investment in and production and exhibition of Korean films. However, its function weakened in the 1970s when the film industry became stagnant.

In the 1960s, the genre system was intertwined with the oppressive

mood that accompanied modernization and the policies of the time. Nevertheless, many films were made, movies were popular, and they represented magnificent artistic and directorial achievements. Therefore, the films in this period are particularly worthy of further analysis.
(Kim Mee hyun)