Kazoku Cinema, Chunhyang and Postmodern Korean Cinema

Hyangsoon Yi
University of Georgia, hyangsyi@uga.edu

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jgi/vol5/iss2/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.
Kazoku Cinema, Chunhyang and Postmodern Korean Cinema

Hyangsoon Yi

This article examines the salient characteristics of two representative postmodern Korean films from the late 1990s: Park Chulsoo's Kazoku Cinema (1998) and Im Kwon-Taek's Chunhyang (2000). Im and Park are veteran filmmakers who developed their directorial careers in the mainstream commercial film and television industries. In the 1990s, however, they decided to turn from the conventional mode of cinema to a more experimental form of film. These shifts resulted in a series of self-reflexive films. Kazoku Cinema is structured in terms of a film-within-a-film. Park’s metacinematic treatment of the movie-making process for a dysfunctional Korean-Japanese family showcases his effort to break away from the dominant tradition of the illusionist, well-made film in Korean cinema. Im’s Chunhyang unfolds the famous folk tale of Ch’unhyang as a film embedded in a modern stage performance of p’ansori. Alternating between the fictional world of the heroine’s love story and the p’ansori performance in the contemporary proscenium theater, Im’s film highlights the role of music in the cinema and especially the multigenre traits of p’ansori. These innovative films are the two old masters’ earnest responses to the rapidly changing local film culture in the late 1990s in the wake of globalization.

Introduction

For the last two decades, Korean film has received considerable international attention, both critical and commercial. Noting the effective combination of artistic and entertainment values in contemporary Korean film, Chris Berry describes it as the “full service cinema” (2003). Since the late 1980s, Korean filmmakers have eagerly pursued new subjects and forms. It is during this period that a series of political upheavals finally catapulted the country into a full-scale democratization process, inspiring artist circles with fresh visions and opportunities. Korean film’s remarkable transformation since then has boosted and at the same time, capitalized on the broad-scale, transnational spread of Korean popular culture called “Hallyu” (Korean Wave).

Understandably, recent discussions of Korean film tend to concentrate on a new generation of directors who have strived for stylistic innovation, generic diversification, and market expansion. These groundbreaking filmmakers are represented by among others, Hong Sangsu, Park Chanwook, Bong Joonho, Kim Kiduk, and Lee Changdong who are widely recognized in international film...
festivals and art-house film circuits. A strong spotlight is also cast on a group of young, ambitious directors lately, including independent filmmakers who have served as catalysts for overhauling the industrial structure, modes of practice, and aesthetic orientation in the wake of the controversial reduction of the screen quota.

While fully acknowledging the contributions of the newcomers in the industry to the vitality of contemporary Korean film, this article intends to shift a critical focus to two prominent old timers, Im Kwon-Taek and Park Chulsoo, who attempted to redefine their art during the dynamic transition of the national cinema to a more globalized cultural institution. The specific works to be analyzed here are Park’s Kazoku Cinema (Kajok sinema, 1998) and Im’s Chunhyang (Ch’unhyangdyŏn, 2000). These films, while employing the conventional mode of storytelling as a structural scaffold, often break down the wall between diegesis and nondiegesis. They thereby undermine cinematic illusionism, which has long dominated Korean film. These veteran filmmakers’ playful attitudes toward the possibilities of the cinematic medium and especially their common concern with reflexivity and intertextuality reveal their changing views on life, art, and society. Permeated with postmodern ideas and techniques, Park’s and Im’s responses to the changing local film culture in the late 1990s surely anticipated formal experiments vigorously undertaken in today’s Korean cinema.

**Kazoku Cinema as a Metacinema**

Before directing Kazoku Cinema, Park worked for nearly two decades in the commercial film industry and for a major television broadcasting company, gaining fame as a master of melodrama. In 1994, however, he declared a departure from both sectors and founded Park Chul Soo Film with the aspiration to “create world-class” films with “experimental and artistic qualities.” The general direction of his independent filmmaking is intimated by his confession that “I am tired of playing the role of a story-teller.” Park’s rejection of the “well-made” movie subsequently materialized in a variety of manners in 301/302 (301,302, 1995), Farewell, My Darling (Haksaengbugunsinwi, 1996), Push! Push! (Sanbuin’gwa, 1997), Kazoku Cinema (1998), Bongja (Pongja, 2000), and Green Chair (Noksaek ŭija, 2003). In these works, Park deemphasizes a tightly
organized plot which is based on the conventional notion of causal links. More episodic in structure and thus more susceptible to textual ambiguities, these films are clearly contrasted with Park’s feature films from the pre-independence era that are faithful to the principle of verisimilitude.

Particularly noteworthy among the above experimental pieces are *Farewell, My Darling* and *Kazoku Cinema*, in which the director adopts metafictional techniques as a way of integrating the filmmaking process with the film narrative. These two films center on a family reunion which is interrupted by a film crew shooting the family gathering as a staged event. *Farewell, My Darling* is set in a traditional funeral. The carnivalesque rural wake provides a liminal space in which the meaning of the family in contemporary Korean society is scrutinized and reconstructed ritualistically. As a passage rite, the funeral forces the family in mourning to confront contradictory elements in its Confucian patriarchal order and redress its overall structure. In this way, *Farewell, My Darling* exposes the erosion of traditional values in the rural community and traces its course of adaptation in changing times.

Park’s interest in the subject of family and his formal playfulness continue in *Kazoku Cinema*, the film released in expectation of the Korean government’s historical lifting of its long-held ban on importing Japanese cultural products, including films. *Kazoku Cinema* is based on the Korean-Japanese writer Yu Miri’s award-winning novella of the same title. Yu’s autobiographical narrative revolves around irreconcilable conflicts among the members of a broken Korean-Japanese family. The narrative unfolds from the eldest daughter Motomi’s first-person point of view, which is tinged with a weary, helpless sense of resignation.

Yu’s literary text lends itself easily to cinematization. This is partly due to the motif of filmmaking at the crux of Yu’s plot. Also, the author relies heavily on visual images in sketching tension and distance among the characters. Park concurs with Yu that the estrangement among the Hayashis represents the disintegration of the family as a meaningful social unit in today’s individualistic and materialistic world and that their alienation is a widespread condition of modern family life rather than a situation unique to Korean-Japanese households. This explains why he chose Yu’s novella for a project “about my family, our story.” Between *Farewell, My Darling* and *Kazoku Cinema*, Park’s concern with family issues has widened from national to transnational spheres. Park maintains that a dysfunctional family, approached as a malaise of modernity, befits a comedic rather than tragic genre and a black comedy at that.
From a formal perspective, what attracts our attention to *Kazoku Cinema* is the prominence of its self-referentiality. Park keeps much of Yu’s original storyline in his adaptation, but he has shifted its focus from a portrait of the troubled family to diverse methods for constructing and presenting their bizarre reunion in cinematic terms. As a result, the processes and implications of film production and consumption emerge as the most striking features of Park’s cinematic version of Yu’s “Kazoku Cinema.” This new emphasis is borne out by added scenes that are not present in the literary source: a shooting sequence at the father’s house and the family’s theater preview of their movie.

As a metacinema, *Kazoku Cinema* portrays diverse aspects of filmmaking, from the pre- to post-production stages: actors’ script reading, rehearsal and makeup sessions, and their NG’s and ad-libs. Various kinds of shooting and editing techniques are also introduced. In addition, Park shows the typical errors of technical staff, such as a shortage of film stock in the middle of shooting. The consequence of such a mishap is instantly transmitted to us as the screen darkens for seconds while the staff members’ agitated speeches are clearly audible. Another anecdote about the crew’s inattentiveness involves the interference of doorbell sounds with the location shooting inside Motomi’s apartment. Other details of filmmaking interspersed in Park’s text include slate clapping, film editing, color treatments, audio mixing, sound-image synchronization, and so on. As illustrated by the family picnic in the last segment of the film, behind-the-scenes technical support even requires a creation of an artificial storm with a compressor and a powerful fan. Filming demands meticulous preparations, but a finished product is just as much contingent upon circumstantial parameters, both natural and human. Park admits that *Kazoku Cinema* itself blends the scripted and impromptu dialogues and action (Yi, H., personal communication, October 25, 2002).

In *Kazoku Cinema*, reflexivity constitutes narrative content as well as form. Park tackles reflexivity more intensely in this film than in the previous one. In *Farewell, My Darling*, for example, Ch’anu’s documentary crew is nearly invisible, and their equipment is equally unnoticeable. The screen is occupied by kaleidoscopic scenes of the wake, which are visually and emotionally quite engaging. By contrast, in *Kazoku Cinema* Park assigns as much screen space to the fictitious director Katayama’s crew as to Motomi’s family who act in Katayama’s film. Unlike in *Farewell, My Darling*, however, Park does not appear
as a character in Kazoku Cinema. Instead, he delegates his directorship to Katayama in the same fashion that Ch’anu plays his double in Farewell, My Darling. Conceptually, Katayama’s documentary is embedded in Park’s Kazoku Cinema. Perceptually, however, Park’s and Katayama’s visual texts frequently overlap on the screen in such a way that we, the audience in the theater, are sometimes left unable to determine which of the two we are presented with. The confusion augments as the characters themselves ask one another if the camera is on, even though we do not see Katayama’s cinematographers on the screen.

Park’s skillful maneuvering of the framing device and reflexive techniques in general resonate with a postmodern epistemological conundrum. Kazoku Cinema is neither a documentary nor a fiction, as its characters themselves admit. Katayama’s project purports to reconstruct the Hayashi family’s life experiences. But once the filming starts, they all realize that their fictional existence cannot replicate their real lives and that no precise correspondence exists between them, either. As is expected, their acting often departs from the script. History and story, and reality and fiction cannot be thoroughly severed from one another in art, even in representational art. Alternately oscillating between and espousing both the conventional narrative film form and self-conscious avant-garde modes, Kazoku Cinema forces us to review the criteria for genre classification. The blurry demarcation between reality and illusion urges a perceptive spectator to dwell on its moral ramifications as well. This theme is communicated through Motomi’s autistic brother Kazuki, who mechanistically but poignantly repeats a statistical report on how people tend to habitually lie.

Kazoku Cinema revisits the familiar theme of life as drama but adds a postmodern touch by associating it with the omnipresence of the camera. Opening and closing with a close-up of a movie camera, Park’s film stresses that contemporary urban life does not allow us freedom to escape from the gaze of the camera and from voyeuristic curiosity. For evidence, suffice it to point out the power of the Polaroid camera, Fukami’s accomplice in his fetish for women’s hips. Before this odd sculptor’s camera, even the quite reticent heroine Motomi, who loathes acting in her family movie, ends up performing; yet, she is reduced to only a body part. A woman’s fragmented body image once again takes center stage when Motomi’s mother awkwardly poses her naked torso for mammography as if she would act before a movie camera. Whether it is Motomi’s narcissistic “pleasure in being looked at” or her mother’s self-conscious surrender to the scrutiny of an X-ray machine, Park’s black comedy exploits our
deprived subjectivity in the ubiquity of unscrupulous imaging devices (Mulvey, 1999, p. 835). In Yu’s novella, Motomi’s mind’s eye controls the narration, but in Park’s film, the camera eye substitutes. The camera is not a passive tool but an active gazer. The movie camera in the opening shot directly aims its lens at us and thereby objectifies us. Our exiting from the theater at the end of the film is also prefigured by the closing sequence, in which the camera tracks the family’s departure from the movie house after screening their own movie.

Although Park highlights the omnipresence of the camera in contemporary culture, he does not confer omnipotence on it. This conclusion is drawn especially from the bleak ending of the film, which instead of bringing a resolution to the family discord, presents a new trouble: the father’s mysterious disappearance. For the Hayashi family, the documentary-making occasions a cathartic reenactment of their trauma. But it fails to eliminate their hostilities or heal their wounds. The camera cannot be a problem-solver. In Kazoku Cinema, filmmaking is handled more or less as festivity. The same analogy is made in Farewell, My Darling between a funeral and a festival. For Park, then, filmmaking is a ritual, which like a funeral, is performed within a finite temporal passage. Cinematic production and its products come to an end. But life cannot have a preconceived final closure; it goes on, to borrow a cliché. The missing father and all sorts of suspicion about his dubious motives signify the impossibility of a happy ending for Kazoku Cinema, which is designed to mirror life as it is lived, in defiance of the false illusionism of the conventional film.

**Chunhyang as a P’ansori Film**

While metafiction was Park’s preoccupation as an independent filmmaker, Im pursued possibilities of mixed media in Chunhyang and Painted Fire (Ch’wihwasŏn, 2002). In order to understand the significance of the two works, it is important to place them in the context of Im’s long filmmaking career. Im is a prolific director who has made 100 pieces in divergent commercial genres of the mainstream film industry for half a century. There are several crucial turning points in his directorship since the early 1960s. One of them occurred toward the end of the 1970s, when his acute agony over the “cheap entertainment values” or “lies” of his films turned him to the “serious issues of our lives” (Im, 2002, pp. 247-248). This incident sheds light on the significance of Mandala (Mandara,
104 | Journal of Global Initiatives

1981), which some critics count as one of the foremost contributors to the advent of the Korean New Wave (Rayns, 1994; Wilson, 1994). And yet, a genuine pathbreaker in Im’s artistic development and also for his distinguished position within the national film community can be located in Sopyonje (Sŏpyŏnje, 1993), which set a box-office record, “heralding the revival of South Korean culture” (Cho, 2002, p. 136).\(^1\) In the international arena, Im’s fame and visibility came decisively with Chunhyang, as it became the first Korean film commercially distributed in American theaters. This historic event was followed by another round of publicity surrounding the Best Director Award he received for Painted Fire at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival.

Im’s serious adventures with film’s formal properties, especially his attempts at a crossover between film and other arts began in the mid-1990s. Im introduced p’ansori to the screen in 1993 with Sopyonje, and three years later he integrated animation into the visual text of Festival (Ch’ukje, 1996). Of particular importance among Im’s works from the mid-1990s is Sopyonje, which kindled public interest in p’ansori and the lives of p’ansori singers. The enthusiastic domestic reception and spectacular financial success of this film paved the road for Chunhyang, another one of Im’s endeavors to transplant p’ansori in film but with a conspicuously different aesthetic conception. Im says that he discovered the beauty of p’ansori around 1978 or 1979 and began to form an idea for a “film about p’ansori.” His immediate goal for making Sopyonje was to “demonstrate that our beautiful and moving p’ansori is as great as—if not superior to—any other music” (Im, 2002, p. 258).

As Im’s recollection suggests, his understanding of p’ansori at the inception stage of Sopyonje was confined to its emotive appeal as music and to his response as a listener. Therefore, “the most important objective” in his directing “was visually to complement the beauty of the singing and transfer it to the audience clearly” (Im, 2002, p. 259). This statement explains Im’s relatively simple manner of interpolating the characters’ p’ansori practices and performances as elements of action and on-screen diegetic music. In other words, the sound-image match in Sopyonje is designed to achieve optimal plot advancement and maximal emotional stir. A vivid example of this is found at the climax of the film, when Songhwa and her estranged step-brother Tongho recite a number from the Song of Shim Ch‘ŏng in their tension-filled reunion.

If Sopyonje is a film about p’ansori, Chunhyang can be called a p’ansori film. In the latter, the traditional story-singing art fulfills multiple functions based on
its generic complexities. First of all, it serves as an extradiegetic voiceover, narrating and commenting on segments of the story.\textsuperscript{12} P'ansori furthermore covers all three types of film sound: speech, music, and background noise. A great number of dialogues in Im's film are taken from the p'ansori version of the folk tale: the \textit{Song of Ch'unhyang}. Some speeches are quoted verbatim and delivered through lip synch between a character and the master singer Cho Sanghyön. For instance, Cho's song lyric is choreographed with Ch'unhyang's lines when she expresses her despair and outrage at the news of Mongryong's lines when she expresses her despair and outrage at the news of Mongryong's impending departure for Seoul. This method is more dramatically employed later when the new magistrate Pyön interrogates Ch'unhyang. Halfway through the audio track of this sequence, her voice recedes and Cho's vocal track is put on in tune. The two voices run together on and off as Ch'unhyang speaks her words and Cho sings them. Soon afterwards, Cho's voice takes over Ch'unhyang's speeches entirely.

In \textit{Chunhyang}, Im's use of p'ansori for background noise deserves special mention. In the early part of the film, when Pangja, ordered by his master Mongryong, is on his way to Ch'unhyang's house, his light, rhythmic walk is comically synchronized with the lyric and beat of the song. The amazing effect of the image-word-sound tuning is credited to the vocal artistry of their p'ansori performer. Cho's songs for Pangja's action showcases the audio effect called "micky-mousing."\textsuperscript{13} When Mongryong, Wolmae, and Hyangdan are walking across a public cemetery to visit Ch'unhyang in prison, Cho supplies onomatopoeia for natural and supernatural phenomena, such as a gusty wind, pouring rain, ghostly flickers, and howling animals as a way of engendering an eerie nocturnal mood. Mimicking atmospheric noises with the trained voice is an integral part of a p'ansori singer's technical accomplishments.\textsuperscript{14}

In spite of these relatively minor instances of incidental music and sound effects, p'ansori in \textit{Chunhyang} is on the whole not subordinate to the visual narrative. On the contrary, music is in a dominant position vis-à-vis the plot and picture. Ch'unhyang's torture scene attests to p'ansori's control over the narrative content. If this sequence were shown in its entirety, its length would correspond roughly to the duration of the famous "Song of Ten Strokes." The amount of time allotted to the beating scene on the screen, then, would far exceed its practical communicative values measured in terms of plot development. The simple message of Ch'unhyang's plight would be repeated ten times in the pattern of a
soldier’s thrashing followed by the heroine’s protest. Although each stroke is unique for its verbal pun, its visual counterpart is bound to become monotonous. This is likely why the camera cuts to the singer in the extradiegesis after the fourth beating, diverting the viewer’s attention to the p’ansori performance itself. This transition epitomizes the way p’ansori punctuates the pace and rhythm of the film’s visual narrative in Chunhyang.

P’ansori’s regulating force over pictorial cues in Chunhyang can also be elucidated in terms of the different rhythmic cycles of traditional Korean music. The fast cycle, chunjungmori, is associated with humorous scenes which involve low comic characters, such as Pangja, and the two soldiers sent for Ch’unhyang by Magistrate Pyŏn. Contrasted with chungjungmori in comic sequences, the slower-paced chungmori matches distressful or sorrowful moments. The visual messages are accordingly low-keyed and languid so that their movements become consonant with the chungmori rhythm of the original p’ansori singing. A good example is the lovers’ separation scene.

Music’s superior position over image is possible in Chunhyang because of Im’s double layering of the text. In the classical narrative film, music usually constitutes part of a sonic background or atmosphere whose primary purpose is to enrich the affective dimension of the story. Music thus plays a secondary role in film, often remaining “unheard melodies” (Gorbman, 1987). This hierarchy, however, is reversed in Chunhyang due to Im’s ingenuous structural arrangement. Temporally, Im’s text alternates between a live musical recorded in the modern theater and a motion picture set in a premodern fictional universe, but in its spatial design, the former is superimposed upon the latter. Hence, p’ansori operates as both a narrative and a metanarrative in Chunhyang, whereas its role is circumscribed in Sopyonje to character attributes and action components.

In Chunhyang, p’ansori is paradigmatic of film as a comprehensive art and of film viewing as a total aesthetic experience. P’ansori is a multigeneric art which comprises literary, musical, theatrical, and pictorial elements. In Chunhyang the diegesis is conjured up by the performer’s narration and singing in the extradiegesis. The film’s visual narrative depicts what is taking place in the imagination of a p’ansori audience sitting in a modern proscenium theater. A good p’ansori performer is one who can create images on the audience’s mental screen, with his/her artistic techniques. P’ansori consists of storytelling (aniri) and singing (ch’ang). At a superficial glance, therefore, p’ansori performance
appears to proceed only in two modes, literary and musical. But its performative context requires two additional expressive modalities: visual and theatrical. The performer’s voice whether it is for narration or singing, should function like a “paintbrush” which depicts the meanings of the words. This pivotal aesthetic principle of visualization is called *imyŏn kūrigi*. Meaning “painting an inner side,” this principle can be understood as “the vocal metaphor of the picture within” (qtd. Park, C. E., 1998, p. 17).

Along with the “painting” ability, theatrical gestures cannot be overlooked in the *p'ansori* singer’s successful communication with the audience. Shin Chaehyo, a seminal patron of *p'ansori* in the 19th century, emphasizes “presence,” “narrative,” “voice,” and “gesture” as the four fundamental rules of *p'ansori* (Pihl, 1994, p. 97). “Presence” underlines the *p'ansori* performer’s acting ability, which, together with “gesture,” reinforces the “inherent theatricality” of *p'ansori* (Pihl, 1994, p. 99). Although the *p'ansori* performer’s dramatic gestures are more minimal and symbolic in comparison with those of Western opera singers’ , the existence of the theatrical term “pallim” (dramatic gesture) reiterates the trait of *p'ansori* as a performing art.

In addition to *p'ansori*’s multigeneric aesthetics, the fluidity of Im’s camera and the prevalence of long shots offer other grounds for approaching the diegesis of *Chunhyang* as the *p'ansori* audience’s visual fantasy. Throughout the film, Im makes a sharp contrast between the relatively static shots of the *p'ansori* performers and the free-flowing scenes of the Ch’unhyang tale. In the inner story, tracking and craning shots, dollies, and panning are abundantly found. The camera’s smooth and seamless movement is well exemplified when it glides over and through the walls and gates of the labyrinthine architectural compounds of a traditional Korean village. Im’s camera also zooms in and out noticeably. This unencumbered visual style resembles the unbound spatial imagination of the audience. It also suits the tendency of a folk tale to move forward swiftly from one event to another and from one place to another rather than lingering on characters’ psychological vicissitudes.

Im’s heavy use of long shots for the diegetic world also enhances the dreamy quality of his visual language in *Chunhyang*. Long shots deepen a sense of distance between Ch’unhyang’s world and that of the modern-day spectators. They are effective in articulating the ambiance of an event. Im’s composition of outdoor shots tends to furnish ample room for natural scenery as an appropriate
context for dramatic action, while drawing attention to the balance and harmony between human figures and their scenic backdrop, as in traditional landscape painting.

Im’s mobile camera for the diegesis drastically differs from its more rigid movement for the p’ansori singer and his drummer in the extradiegesis. The opening sequence shows the two performers on the stage from the angle of the theater audience. As the film develops, the camera work becomes more cinematic in that it is not fettered by the audience members’ limited position as observers of the center stage. The singer’s face appears as a close-up on the screen. The camera also moves to the back of the performer and captures for us the increasingly ecstatic responses of his audience.

All these structural complexities of Chunhyang demand active spectatorship. As we experience a music film, so Cho’s audience experiences a musical. However, the division between the two types of audience is somewhat tenuous, for we are inclined to exercise a double consciousness with regard to Cho’s stage performance and to the narrative film. In a similar vein to Park’s manipulation of the characters and spectators of Kazoku Cinema, Im plays the trick of linking the audiences inside and outside of the film world. The increasing amount of ch’uimsae, the audience’s verbal interjections in the p’ansori performance which Im blends in Cho’s vocal track, fosters a sense of immediacy, as if we were participating in a live p’ansori performance. Simultaneously, however, the recorded interjections also remind us of the mediated nature of our contact with the master singer filmed on stage. The elaborate textual organization of Im’s film entails moments of self-reflexivity. When the screen switches from diegesis to extradiegesis, the visual narrative freezes. This stoppage foregrounds the fictitiousness of the narrative film.

Im’s use of the p’ansori stage as an intermediary space between fiction and nonfiction imparts larger thematic implications by questioning a black-and-white view of life and society. When Wölmae forgives the depraved figure Pyôn in the last scene of the film by relating that without him, there would not have been the virtuous Ch’unhyang, she points out that good and evil forces are intricately meshed with one another in their workings in society. As Wölmae’s final line suggests, Im’s film as a whole emphasizes the ways in which various dyadic terms are intertwined: the upper and lower classes, the past and present, the theater and film, and even low and high arts. P’ansori began as a folk art performed by the outcast kwangdae. Its elevated status today as the nation’s intangible cultural
treasure is corroborated by Cho’s performance in modern stage facilities with a “fourth-wall.” To a certain respect, p’ansori’s ascendancy to a canonized high art parallels the grand epithet recently given Im: the “national director.” Im is always attracted to earthly folk material such as p’ansori, whose vivacity is fully exhibited in spontaneous, communal performative conditions. The folk roots of Im’s art are indeed confirmed by his choice of Chang Sŭng’ŏp’s life rather than the illustrious biographies of official court painters, for Painted Fire.

Wit and Wisdom for Postmodern Korean Cinema

Both Im and Park made shifts in their film styles in the 1990s, but the artistic visions they have pursued diverge from each other. Their differences are lucidly seen in the ways they have coped with the pressure of globalization. As is illustrated by his movement from Farewell, My Darling to Kazoku Cinema, Park attempted to address transnational subjects and themes. His concern lay in the changing values of contemporary Korean society as it was integrated into the larger global village. From this perspective, Japan was no longer a neighbor from which Koreans should distance themselves in aversion. Instead, Park maintains, we should make efforts to dismantle the barriers of history between the two nations and probe issues they are commonly faced with. Park’s pioneering use of a digital camera in Bongja, the film he directed following Kazoku Cinema, can be understood along the same line, as a spirited acceptance of changing technology and a changing world order; he embraced them as an impetus for expanding the horizons of his artistic experiments beyond the expectations and demands of the domestic film industry.

Im holds a different view in regard to the function of the cinema in the global age. Since Sopyonje, he has searched for stories and situations that “only” Koreans can offer to the world audience. He states that he made a film about p’ansori because “our culture was being toppled by Western culture” (Im, 2002, p. 258). This seemingly self-defensive remark was made at the height of pressure from Hollywood distributors to open up the Korean film market. Although many of Im’s works treat traditional Korean society, one should refrain from rashly concluding that his preference for “uniquely” Korean cultural themes is nationalistic. Rather, it should be contextualized in his broad idea of the film’s role in society. Im believes that the cinema can preserve culture--its institutions,
products, customs, values, and attitudes. This vision of film apparently derives from his profound faith in the camera’s recording capacity. Im’s endeavor to capture the disappearing tradition accounts for his return to the unfinished story of Songhwa and Tongho in *Beyond the Years* (Ch’ŏnnyŏnhak, 2007), which completed his *p’ansori* trilogy itself.

Whether they remain in or outside of the film establishment presently, it cannot be denied that the two veteran directors have braved the vortex of the historic rejuvenation of Korean cinema. Their rich experiences in the industry offer invaluable insights to the younger generations of filmmakers. From a historical perspective, their active presence in the film community throughout the transitional period of the national cinema has generated several positive effects. Above all, it helped allay the apprehension that the majority of successful Korean directors during the 1990s and early 2000 were inexperienced and untested by time and thus that the prospect of Korean cinema was uncertain and insecure.¹⁹

Im’s and Park’s enduring careers have also served as sources of wisdom, if not solutions, for those troubled by commercialism. Despite its unprecedented creative energy, the Korean film industry has raised profound concerns about the increasing concentration of capital on mass-entertainment pieces. Of course, even seasoned filmmakers such as Im and Park cannot be free from financial anxiety. Motomi’s mother in *Kazoku Cinema* sums up this problem bluntly:

For them [movie-goers] to feel it worthwhile to have come to the theater, you have to make it so that the audience will have hope that the family will get together again. Why would they bother to come see a movie that doesn’t even have that? Don’t you think so, Mr. Director? You have to make it that way for the film to be worthwhile for yourself, too, and to make money.

The conflict between artistic integrity and popular appeal, according to Park, has haunted him. This eternal dilemma notwithstanding, Park at least wished to produce good films for the globalization of Korean cinema, and more importantly, for his own “rebirth.” Similarly, Im’s soul-searching moments have left indelible marks in his masterpieces, such as *Sopyonje*, *Chunhyang*, and *Painted Fire*.

As pointed out earlier, Park’s and Im’s thematic and stylistic innovations signaled the growing influence of postmodernism on Korean cinema. Among a variety of symptoms of postmodernism in Korean cinema, imaginative reinterpretation of history, emphasis on visual pleasure, and playful wit are widely discerned among
the films put out in the past decade. In recent years a number of young Korean filmmakers have turned to history for creative inspirations. The fresh surge of interest in premodern figures and events has given rise to a new trend of historical films called "p'aeksyŏn mubi" (faction movie). Some of the representative works of this category include: Yi Jaeyong’s Untold Scandal (Sŭk’aendŭl--Chosŏn namnyŏ sangyŏljisa, 2003), Lee Joonik’s Once upon a Battlefield (Hwangsanbŏl, 2003) and The King and the Clown (Wang ūi namja, 2005), Kim Taeu’s Forbidden Quest (Ŭmnan sŏsaeng, 2007), Chang Yunhyŏn’s Hwang Chini (Hwang Chini, 2007), Kim Mijŏng’s Shadows in the Palace (Kungnyŏ, 2007), Chŏn Yunsu’s Portrait of a Beauty (Miindo, 2008), Yu Ha’s A Frozen Flower (Ssanghwajŏm, 2008), and Kim Yonggyun’s The Sword with No Name (Pulkkot ch’ŏrŏm nabi ch’ŏrŏm, 2009). As many of these films proved to be commercially successful, the trend of faction movie continues in 2010: Lee Joonik’s Like the Moon Escaping from the Clouds (Kuriim ūl pŏsŏnan tal ch’ŏrŏm), Ch’oe Tonghun’s The Taoist Wizard (Chŏn Uch’i), and Kim Taeu’s The Servant (Pangjajŏn).

One striking aspect of the above historical and period films that invites attention is their tendency to introduce radical ideas of gender and sexuality. Motifs of homosexuality and cross-dressing typify such a tendency. Remote from the dominant social norms and sexual mores of the present time, the nation’s past functions as a convenient channel for facilitating uncommon and often sensational ideas, values, and lifestyles into the mainstream society today. This kind of enterprise draws a criticism that it encourages the distortion or amnesia of history for the sake of ticket sales at the box office. Despite their disregard of historical authenticity, however, these films at least reflect Koreans’ changing attitudes toward gender roles and sexual orientations as their society is becoming more open to individual differences.

What prevails in the current cinematic imagination on premodern Korea is a ludic spirit, not the ethos of historicism or the weight of ideology. In this sense, the vogue of faction movies sheds light on the artistic legacy of Im’s and Park’s bold experiments, deepening our understanding of the old masters’ pioneering minds from a decade ago. Without a doubt, Park’s and Im’s formal innovations have pushed the aesthetic boundaries of contemporary Korean cinema. They are survivors of the oppressive socio-political climate and dire economic conditions that have plagued generations of Korean filmmakers. While inheriting various
old legacies of the industry, these weather-beaten directors were groping toward a different cinema at the critical moment of transition in Korean society and culture. As the results of such endeavors, Kazoku Cinema and Chunhyang confirm their spirited challenges to uncharted paths, providing useful insight into the fresh visions for the future of Korean national cinema.

Notes
1 The article is based on two manuscripts: “Rediscovering Traditional Korean Culture through Film” which was presented on October 22, 2009, at the Kennesaw State University Year of Korea Lecture Series; and “Old Masters and New Cinema: Korean Film in Transition” which was presented on October 26, 2002, at George Washington University’s Ninth Annual Hahn Moo-Sook Colloquium in the Korean Humanities. Part of the latter manuscript was printed in Kim-Renaud, Y.-K., Grinker, R., & Larsen, K. (2003), pp. 17-27.

2 The term “Hallyu” literally means the “Korean Wave.” The term was first used in 2001 by the Chinese mass media, referring to a rise in popularity of South Korean pop culture products and stars (qtd. Lee, K., 2008, p. 176).


4 Retrieved October 3, 2002, from Park Chul Soo Film: www.parkchulsoo.co.kr

5 The project of Farewell, My Darling was first conceived in 1986, but it was concretized years later when Park’s own father died. Hence, this film is autobiographical in many respects. Ch’anu, the character played by the director and even given his surname “Park,” is an experienced film director making a documentary of his father’s funeral.

6 For an in-depth analysis of Farewell, My Darling, see Yi, H. (2007).

7 This lifting took place in 1998.

8 Retrieved October 3, 2002, from Park Chul Soo Film: www.parkchulsoo.co.kr

9 Retrieved October 3, 2002, from Park Chul Soo Film: www.parkchulsoo.co.kr

10 According to Park, he makes a passing appearance in one of the early shooting scenes in Motomi’s room, but this is hardly noticeable in normal viewing circumstances (Yi, H., personal communication, October 25, 2002).

11 The film’s popularity led to the publication of Sopyonje Movie Book, the first of its kind in the history of Korean cinema. For the cultural and historical significance of this book, see Cho, H.-J. (2002), pp. 135-136.

12 Gerard Genette defines “extradiegesis” as “external to (not part of) any diegesis” (Prince, 1987, p. 29). This term is often treated as synonymous with “nondiegetic.” In this article, however, “extradiegesis” indicates the space where Cho’s p’ansori performance occurs. A distinction between “extradiegesis” and “nondiegesis” is necessary to differentiate sounds originating from Cho’s theater space and those from outside it. The former is described as “extradiegetic,” and the latter is marked as “nondiegetic.” The scene of Mongryong’s first nocturnal call on Ch’unhyang is accompanied by the sounds of a traditional Korean zither kayagum as background music. This is a rare but quintessential example of nondiegetic music in this film.
Ilmicky-mousing is "the split-second synchronizing of musical and visual action." This term derives from its frequent use in animation films (Brown, 1994, p. 16).

For the onomatopoetics of pansori, see Park, C. E. (2003), pp. 204-208.

In a sense, Chunhyang illustrates Edwin Panofsky's idea that film's possibilities lies in "spatialization of time" (Panofsky, 1999, p. 281).

In its interart design, Chunhyang is similar to a music video, except that the film stands solidly on narrativity.

In the ch'ang edition of the Song of Chunhyang, it is Mongryong, not Wolmae, who remarks that Pyon occasioned the revelation of Chunhyang's faithfulness. For Mongryong's full line see Kim, K. (1981), p. 303.

Lee, H. (2005) argues that Im's interest in traditional Korean culture as the subject of his film is more for a global audience. Aimed at the international film market, films such as Chunhyang reflect the identity politics of redefining "Korean-ness" in the global age.


Kim, K. H. (2010), for instance, describes this problem as the "end of history."

References


