

Introduction

Since 1999 South Korean films have drawn roughly 40 to 60 percent of the Korean domestic box office, matching or often even surpassing Hollywood films in popularity. Before this period of success, from 1988 to 1998 the domestic market share of Korean films was only around 15 to 25 percent. It skyrocketed to 40 percent in 1999, and has stayed around the 50 percent mark since then, peaking at 64 percent in 2006.¹ During the first half of 2013, the market share of Korean films reached 56.6 percent.² This represents one of the highest rates of consumption of domestic films in the world. Since the late 1990s, the Korean film industry has become a successful poster child for various anti-Hollywood movements around the world. How did this “Korean film explosion,” a recent phenomenon, come about?

This book examines the Korean film industry’s success story from the viewpoint of a group of unlikely social actors—Korean independent filmmakers. I say “unlikely” because the success of Korean cinema is usually attributed to film auteurs, who are credited with having created “New Korean Cinema”: innovative in style, socially engaged, yet widely appealing to the public.³ Although the mainly auteur-focused,

text-based analyses (Choi 2010; Kyung Hyun Kim 2004, 2011) of the current New Korean Cinema have been immensely important in the study of the Korean film industry, I believe the discussions of new film institutions and spaces opened up by independent filmmakers are equally consequential in completing the story of the “Korean film explosion.” This book is an anthropological exploration of the social and political contexts in which this explosion of the late 1990s to mid-2000s occurred. In the literature, some attention has also been paid to the socio-political contexts of the rise of Korean films (Shim 2005, 2008; Shin and Stringer 2005; Paquet 2005, 2009), but this book is the first of its kind in its ethnographical investigation of the people and social webs that created this explosion. I argue that the explosion was a product of a wide range of new alliances among social actors. In this book, I present a case in which independent filmmakers played a key role in creating these critical alliances.

THE “KOREAN FILM EXPLOSION” AND NEW ALLIANCES

I left Korea in 1997 for graduate studies in the United States and missed the chance to experience in person the excitement surrounding the election of Kim Dae-jung, a former dissident and the first president elected as an oppositional party candidate since the establishment of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) in 1948. Therefore, when I returned to Korea in 2000 to conduct my dissertation research at the Pusan International Film Festival, I was at once surprised and overwhelmed by the greatly transformed political atmosphere encapsulated in the festival. Korea was not the same place that I had left a couple of years before. When I wrote my dissertation prospectus in the United States, I had intended to research Korean film festival fans and their interest in art films as expressions of their cosmopolitan aspirations and upward social mobility. As I participated in the Pusan International Film Festival as a volunteer/interpreter in order to conduct my ethnographic research, however, I discovered more than a mesmerizing fan culture: an unexpected convergence of political energy and cultural fervor. At the center of such convergence stood *minjuhwasede* or the “democratic generation” filmmakers and cultural producers whose historical and political consciousness was largely

shaped during the 1980s radicalized student culture. As a member of this “democratic generation,” I was intrigued by the fresh intersections of postauthoritarian politics and culture. The following story presents my encounter with a newly formed social alliance at an emerging filmic space.

On October 6, 2000, I was standing with other young volunteers, dressed in matching grey uniforms, at the opening ceremony of the fifth Pusan International Film Festival (hereinafter PIFF), which epitomized newly emergent film institutions/spaces. Pusan, a port city on the southern coast of Korea, became the focus of national attention when PIFF was being promoted as the “center of the Asian film industry.” The Pusan Yachting Center Outdoor Theater, the site of the opening ceremony, was on the waterfront, which made the film-watching experience at the festival “appealing and romantic,” a point emphasized by the local media, PIFF officials, and municipal authorities (PIFF 2000; Pusan Metropolitan City 2003b). Approximately 3,500 people filled the beautifully lit outdoor theater, gently stroked by the autumn breeze from the sea.

The climax of the ceremony came when President Kim Dae-jung’s face was projected onto the huge screen in the outdoor theater, followed by a taped video message from the president. As part of Kim’s congratulatory on-screen remarks, he solemnly emphasized the importance of the Korean film industry as a “strategic national industry,” stating that “the film industry will be the most profitable sector in the twenty-first century.” As his words echoed throughout the jam-packed theater, the audience gave a prolonged standing ovation. His statement reminded me of an oft-quoted finding made by the Samsung Economic Research Center: “Profits generated by exporting 1.5 million Hyundai cars hardly match the profit the U.S. made from the movie *Jurassic Park*” (Kim Hong 1994). This observation, which I heard many times during my research, pointed to the public’s imagination of Korea’s place in the global economy: a strategic shift from a manufacturing stronghold to a nation at the forefront of information technology and the culture industry.

President Kim called himself the *munhwa taetongryöng* (culture president), alluding to the contrast between former presidents, who came from military backgrounds, and himself, a civilian leader. The Chinese character *mun*, as in *munhwa*, means “writing”; therefore, Kim’s sobriquet was meant to point out that he had once been a powerless civilian under military dictatorship, and would now rule by the letter of the law

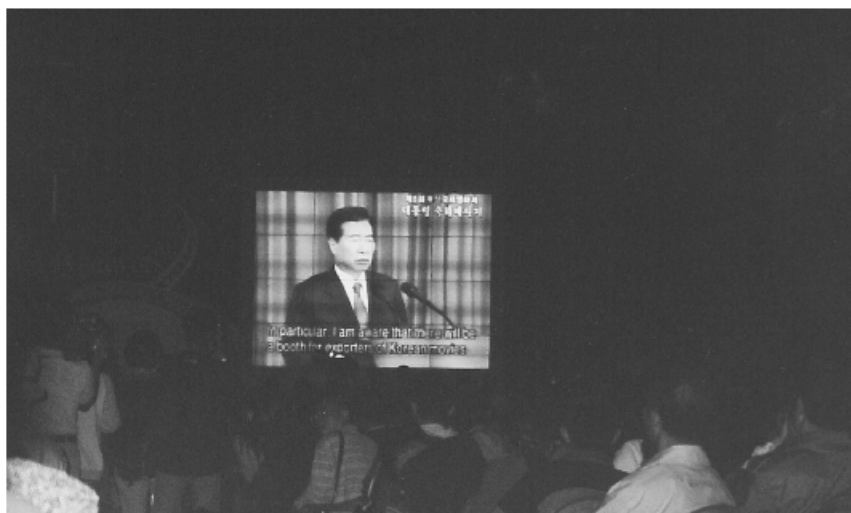


Figure 1. At the fifth Pusan International Film Festival opening ceremony, President Kim Dae-jung's congratulatory speech is being televised. Photo by author.

(and, by extension, culture), and not by force. In addition to championing the pen over the sword, President Kim also promised to promote the cultural sector and artists who had suffered from strict state censorship and restrictions under the former regimes. This title of “culture president” took on a whole new meaning as Kim Dae-jung had to manage the financial-crisis-stricken economy. Starting in Thailand in July 1997, shortly before Kim took office, the Asian economy experienced a shockwave, affecting its currencies, stock markets, and other asset prices.⁴ In response to the financial crisis in Korea, the International Monetary Fund (IMF hereinafter) provided \$57 billion to stabilize South Korea's troubled economy (Byung-Kook Kim 2000: 35). The government under Kim's leadership began emphasizing the profitability, and thus the importance, of the “culture industry” in the fight against the overall lethargy of the Korean economy.

Pusan was not the only site of the so-called film festival fever (*yŏnghwaje yŏlpung*) that had been spreading in South Korea since 1996, the year the Pusan International Film Festival was launched. Until 1996 there were no international film festivals hosted in Korea that were put in such a grand national spotlight. Following the huge success of the

first PIFF, eight prominent international film festivals were successfully launched in South Korea in 1997. Film festivals became a source of excitement both in the media and in the consciousness of Korean citizens. In 2000 PIFF drew 182,000 patrons, by which point it was featuring 211 “art films” from 55 countries during a nine-day span, claiming to have become one of the biggest film festivals in Asia.⁵ Film festivals in Korea have maintained and even increased their allure in the last two decades. Currently there are 28 film festivals hosted in Korea, 14 of which bill themselves as “international film festivals.”⁶

A Pusan local cynically noted that it looked as if South Korea’s cities and counties were replacing the “Hot Pepper Queen competitions” or “Apple Maid contests,” local beauty pageants to promote local produce, with “so-called international film festivals.” The craze with which Korean cities promoted their international film festivals instead of local produce was reported extensively by the media at the time. Many people I met expressed bewilderment over the sudden mushrooming of international film festivals hosted by local governments. Their bewilderment was often spiked by cynicism: “Success breeds imitators. But in places like Korea, imitators will spring up until everybody fails,” noted a PIFF staff member who had grown up in the United States and had worked in Hollywood. This kind of response was shared by the majority of the festival staff who were aware of the escalating competition.

PIFF became a significant cultural event, and local and national politicians did their utmost to gain visibility by attending. In 2000, PIFF’s opening ceremony, for example, attracted Lee Hoi-chang, head of the conservative Grand National Party (*Hannara Dang*). As Lee made a grandiose entry into the outdoor theater where the ceremony was held, I noticed a large entourage trailing his every step. Lee’s entry created a scene that rivaled the film community’s walk on the red carpet, as he and his followers climbed the stairs to their second-floor VIP seats. Among the 3,500 film fans who came to see the opening film *The Wrestlers*, by Indian economist-turned-poet Buddhadeb Dasgupta, sat local politicians, bureaucrats, and central figures in the Grand National Party, in addition to a number of reporters and anxious festival staff. When Mayor Ahn, a prominent Grand National Party member, announced that the festival had officially begun, cheers filled the outdoor theater. Mayor Ahn also made a lengthy speech about Pusan’s many attractions and its four million welcoming citizens. The mayor did not forget to

express his appreciation of GNP leader Lee for attending the opening ceremony.

What I subsequently observed at the film festival, however, suggested not just the national obsession with films, but also the seemingly unexpected alliance between many different social groups in manufacturing such a national obsession. At the opening ceremony, volunteers were holding hands, cordoned off along the red carpet to make room for the entry of mostly recognizable faces: national and international movie stars, film directors, politicians, and local bureaucrats. Camera flashes went off incessantly as fellow volunteers and I were struggling to hold back the photographers who pressed forward with their bodies and cameras to break through the “photo line.”

Several times, however, people’s eyes turned from the well-known actresses clad in glittering gowns to people who were so casually dressed that they stood out from the rest of the guests. I noticed one man in his early thirties, dressed in a worn brown corduroy jacket and wrinkled khaki pants, carrying a large leather messenger bag that looked weathered. A volunteer standing next to me—a perceptive overseas Korean American woman who had flown in to take part in the festival—rolled her eyes and whispered, “That’s just too much.” She was shocked to see such a casually dressed man on the red carpet. Other spectators at this red carpet event kept clapping, obviously with diminished enthusiasm, as he and other occasional unknown and underdressed guests arrived.

The man who violated the dress code was Bae Ho-yong*, a college classmate of mine. I knew him to be a devoted student activist talented in calligraphy and painting. These skills came in handy when writing radical political slogans and drawing stylized political graffiti, which became Ho-yong’s forte. I used to see Ho-yong in the college lobby, sweating over huge banners that seemed to diminish his already modest stature.

From time to time, my brother—also a classmate of ours—would talk about Ho-yong. He had heard rumors that Ho-yong left the activist scene after graduation in the mid-1990s to join a documentary-film production outfit called the Uri Film Collective*. This happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which, to some of the activists, translated into the collapse of an alternative political vision for South Korean society. Many activists altered their career paths, as niches for labor-movement-oriented activists were rapidly shrinking (Cho Haejoang 1994). Unlike other activism-oriented documentary film groups that were still struggling,

the Uri Film Collective was quite successful in transforming its identity. This group, which in the 1980s had produced newsreels for workers unions, was since 1995 producing “socially engaged” documentaries that circulated among film festivals, including PIFF. Uri had also received funding from the Korean Film Council for *kinoko*, a costly process for transferring video to film. Some of its video documentaries—transferred to film and thus regarded as more prestigious—had been released at an art film house in Seoul before they were screened at the fifth PIFF. Ho-yong’s appearance on the red carpet, when Kim Dae-jung was in office (1998–2003), was a reminder of the changing times, as well as a pleasant surprise for me: the works of independent filmmakers, such as those of Ho-yong and others whose political militancy had lost its currency after the onset of civilian rule and the collapse of the Soviet Union, were now shown at proliferating international film festivals.

I recognized Ho-yong and other independent filmmakers at the film festival because I was familiar with several anti-state underground films they had produced in the 1980s and early 1990s. Their radical films addressed oppressive state violence and oppositional movements and were condemned by the state. In the past they were distributed only through social movement networks. But now, sanctioned public screenings were opening up new opportunities for viewership.

I became intrigued by how the films produced by this group of filmmakers—repackaged as “independent filmmakers”—were being circulated and celebrated at PIFF, where national and local politics, film fans’ cosmopolitan aspirations, and the film industry intersected in complex ways. I latched onto this group of independent filmmakers, who operated under an umbrella advocacy group called the Korean Independent Filmmakers Association* (hereinafter KIFA), and this organization became the field site for my research. Over the course of that research, I realized that many of these one-time anti-state activists not only had gained freedom from the state, but had become influential actors recognized by the state, elite film institutions, and corporate sponsors. They entered a much more ambiguous institutional and cultural terrain as their films were circulated at film festivals, art houses, and galleries, catering to an emerging upper-middle-class audience. This book is based on the eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted at KIFA in Seoul, mostly between 2000 and 2005. Brief follow-up fieldwork was conducted in 2008, 2011, and 2013 for updates. I use KIFA as my entry

into understanding how this network of filmmakers opened up new institutional and cultural spaces for film production and consumption in postauthoritarian South Korea.

My first encounter with KIFA made me ask, How do we conceptualize the complex interplay between the postauthoritarian state and the network of independent filmmakers (with their strong activist legacies) at these new sites of cultural production and consumption? As I conducted my research, I came to understand that these new cultural sites/spaces such as PIFF in which KIFA had a strong presence signaled a fundamental change in the nature of socially and politically engaged cultural production. In this book, I intend to deepen readers' understanding of this transformation and invite readers to reflect on the new meaning of activism in South Korea. Furthermore, one of the important goals of this book is to discuss the role of activism and its cultural production in the sudden rise of the Korean film industry. But before I get to the point of discussing contemporary Korean film activism and film industry, let me first examine the historical context in which the practices and ideologies of film activism unfolded.

POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

Recounting several thousand years of Korean history does not suit our purpose here. I will, however, start this summary of Korean political transitions with the fact that Korea has maintained relatively stable territorial borders accompanied by an enduring state bureaucracy and linguistic unity since the establishment of the United Shilla dynasty in the mid-seventh century.⁷ This aspect of Korean history is critical to understanding Korea's strong cultural identity. And when this collective identity came under threat during the Japanese colonial rule of the Korean peninsula (1910–1945), it was mobilized into ethnic nationalist independence movements by various social groups in Korea and Korean exile communities. At the end of World War II, after defeating Japan, American and Soviet forces entered Korea and the Allies divided the country. Therefore, the collapse of Japanese colonial rule was not experienced as the kind of “independent future” many Koreans had long fought for. Concurrently, the leaders of independence movements with vastly different political orientations consolidated their power and became the

founders of the two Korean states, one in the south and the other in the north, backed by the U.S. and USSR respectively. In 1948, the two Koreas were established as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south. In 1950, the Korean War broke out and lasted for three years, resulting in the total devastation of the land and a civilian death toll of more than two million (Cumings 1997: 290). The Korean War is often described by Koreans as a fratricidal conflict that was mainly instigated by foreign powers. After the war, South Korea became a beneficiary of international economic assistance, especially from the United States, which exerted a great deal of economic and military influence. The continuing American presence in Korea, both economic and military, has been perceived as a sign of an enduring neocolonial legacy, especially by revisionist historians and those who came of age during the radicalization of social movements in South Korea in the 1980s. Being cognizant of this historical consciousness will assist readers in fully appreciating the nationalist sentiments expressed in public protests in the late 1990s and the 2000s against Hollywood lobbyists who pushed for undermining and ultimately abolishing Korea's protectionist film policies, which will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

After the Korean War and until the early 1990s, South Korean history might well be portrayed with key words such as authoritarianism, state-driven developmentalism, and suppression of dissent. For readers who are unfamiliar with Korean history, the following summary might provide a useful context. I limit my discussion to political transitions that will come to light in the upcoming chapters.

Rhee Syngman, who obtained a Ph.D. from Princeton, was elected the first president of ROK/South Korea in 1948. As an exiled activist during the Japanese colonial period, he had long been an advocate of Korean independence. However, he vastly diverged from other militant strands in the independence movement by focusing more on lobbying foreign governments through diplomatic channels. He came to power based on his conservative allies, a majority of whom were members of the landlord class and were pro-American. Rhee was successful in obtaining direct U.S. grants, which "accounted for five-sixths of all Korean imports" by the end of the 1950s (Cumings 1997: 306). Corruption under his twelve-year rule was widespread as was political oppression. Under Rhee's administration a National Security Law (NSL) was

passed by the National Assembly in 1948. “Armed with the NSL, Rhee embarked on a campaign of anticommunist witch hunts. . . . All major organizations, including the military, the press, and educational institutions, were subjected to scrutiny and purge” (Eckert et al. 1990: 349). Due to the NSL’s ambiguity, the government was able to use it as a “political tool” to crush any oppositional voices (Eckert et al. 1990: 348). The public, already disheartened by continuing election fraud, became infuriated with the murder of a student protestor by the police in the spring of 1960. The protests that ensued culminated in mass struggles later called the April 19 Uprising, in which 130 students were killed and 1,000 wounded in Seoul alone (Eckert et al. 1990: 355). The legitimacy of the Rhee regime evaporated with the brutal suppression of the April 19 Uprising, and Rhee resigned and left for Hawaii by late April 1960. The public euphoria over his ousting was short-lived, however, since General Park Chung-hee seized control of the government through a coup d’état on May 16, 1961. The Park regime’s legacy is complex, because although student, labor, and free press movements came to a halt under his brutal authoritarian rule, the Korean economy took off. When Park took office, Korea’s annual per capita income was less than \$100; during his tenure it grew twentyfold. However, this economic growth, often dubbed the “Miracle of the Han River,” was built on maintaining low wages for industrial workers. Corporations, which grew exceptionally large under Park’s rule, often achieved this by brutally suppressing labor activism and political mobilization with the full assistance of the authoritarian state. However, Park’s grip on Korea did not last forever. Park Chung-hee was assassinated by his right hand man, the Korean National Security Agency director Kim Jae-kyu, on October 26, 1979. The assassination was welcomed by political dissidents who had protested Park’s *Yushin* Reforms, an intensified and institutionalized form of military dictatorship enacted toward the latter part of his regime.

The period following Park’s assassination, often called “the Seoul Spring,” however, was cut short by Major General Chun Doo-hwan’s coup d’état and the bloody repression of the Kwangju Uprising (1980) in which approximately five hundred citizens demanding the repeal of martial law were brutally killed by elite paratroopers, allegedly with the endorsement of the U.S. government.⁸ The Kwangju Massacre marked a watershed in Korean history as it became a crucial turning point in the Korean public’s view of the American government. Eckert et al. (1990)