NEW KOREAN CINEMA

It informs much of the aesthetic as well as the industrial character of Korean film. Although it is too early to predict the end of New Korean Cinema, it is a fair guess to say that it will retain its distinct character for as long as this confidence continues to exist.

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3. GLOBALISATION AND NEW KOREAN CINEMA

Jeeyoung Shin

South Korean cinema has undergone remarkable growth over the past decade. By substantially improving technical and aesthetic qualities, and by responding to the sensibilities of contemporary Koreans, recent Korean films have distinguished themselves from their predecessors. In so doing, they have rapidly been winning back the hearts of those previously estranged domestic audiences who had once preferred foreign films with better production values, particularly those from Hollywood. With Korean films now capturing almost 50 per cent of domestic market share, and some local hits beating even the most lavish Hollywood blockbusters at the box-office, Korean cinema is currently enjoying unprecedented domestic success.

Equally remarkable is the fast-growing popularity of, and interest in, Korean cinema around the globe. With numerous successes at major overseas film festivals and growing international distribution and consumption, recent years have seen a notable rise in Korean cinema’s visibility in the international film world. Yet, while contemporary Korean cinema is rapidly drawing attention around the world, its popular success is perhaps most apparent in neighbouring East Asian countries where there has been a veritable surge of interest in Korean popular culture, including films, television dramas and popular music. Indeed, the revenue from film exports alone has grown tremendously, from $0.21 (US) million in 1995 to $11.25 million in 2001 (Kim and Kim 2002: 15). This is an impressive accomplishment especially when considering that, only a decade ago, the South Korean film industry was in severe decline. The opening of the local film market to foreign distributors in 1987 had inspired a sharp increase in the number of imported films. With local cinema already limited in its box-office appeal, the domestic market share of Korean films then dropped significantly, reaching its lowest point in 1993.
While suggesting a local cinema’s triumph over the forces of global media, the recent development of Korean cinema invites a number of questions. What is behind the Korean film industry’s astonishing recent growth? How and why has Korean cinema become popular beyond national borders and particularly in East Asia? What implications does the success of Korean cinema at home and abroad have for an understanding of processes of media globalisation? In attempting to answer these questions, this chapter explores the relationship between New Korean Cinema and media globalisation, with a particular focus on the role of Korea’s globalisation drive. First, I show how the South Korean government’s implementation of a globalisation policy assisted and promoted the growth and internationalisation of Korean cinema. While paying attention to some of the major characteristics of recent Korean films, I then examine further the reasons for Korean cinema’s success at home and abroad. My argument is that contemporary Korean cinema is both an effect of and a response to media globalisation, and that localisation, regionalisation and globalisation co-exist in the global media cultural economy.

**SEGYEHWAA AND THE PROMOTION OF THE CULTURE INDUSTRY**

The transformation of Korean cinema over the past decade is closely related to the South Korean government’s open-door policy. In retrospect, it is clear that this transformation was prompted by the serious decline of the Korean film industry in the early 1990s. The Korean government had succumbed to Hollywood pressure to remove local barriers to imported films by opening up the domestic market, with the result that Hollywood studios set up branch offices in Korea so that they could distribute their own films directly to the local market. By comparison, Korean films—poorly funded and lacking comparable entertainment values—were totally unprepared for such unmediated competition with Hollywood. A rapid decline in the domestic market share of Korean films created an enormous sense of crisis among the local film community.

The plight of the film industry parallels the overall Korean economic landscape at the time. In the early 1990s, after a long reliance on a regulated market economy, South Korea found itself fighting a losing battle with outside forces trying to open the domestic market. Outside pressures to open up the Korean market had certainly existed before the 1990s. By the end of 1993, however, Korea faced a global push for market liberalisation owing to agreements reached at the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs. The settlement of the Uruguay Round imposed immense threats to Korea’s domestic economy, which was soon to face direct competition from foreign companies.

The Kim Young-sam (Kim Yong-sam) government (1993–98), led by the first civilian president in thirty years, was endowed with the thorny task of revitalising the Korean economy by enhancing its international competitiveness, as well as with the mandate of democratic reforms. The ultimate response from the Kim administration was to pursue internationalisation and globalisation

armed with competitiveness as a survival strategy in the new world order. Accordingly, the Kim government launched its ambitious top-down drive for globalisation and actively undertook measures for economic liberalisation.

As Samuel S. Kim (2000) notes, no state in the post-Cold War era has embraced globalisation as publicly as South Korea under the Kim Young-sam administration. After a series of initial preparations, President Kim formally announced the segyehwa policy in the Sydney speech of 17 November 1994 (Bobrow and Na 1999). Using the Korean term segyehwa (segye meaning ‘world’ and hwa meaning ‘becoming/turning into’) for ‘globalisation’, Kim’s segyehwa campaign reveals a nationalistic urge for Korea’s advance in a rapidly globalising world. Not discouraged by the poor achievement of Kim Young-sam’s segyehwa-driven administration, the Kim Dae Jung government (1998–2003) sustained a globalisation drive with greater enthusiasm (Samuel S. Kim 2000: 3).

It is worth noting that Korea’s globalisation policy is based on a dual interpretation of globalisation, demanding a parallel development of comprehensive national restructuring and more narrowly focused economic restructuring (Gills and Gills 2000). On the one hand, segyehwa was committed to a fulfilment of national advancement, in all aspects, to the level of the world’s most developed nations. It thus involved a wide range of reforms, encompassing political, economic, social and cultural restructuring. On the other hand, despite the campaign’s emphasis on broad national development, much of its energy was directed toward the rapid internationalisation and globalisation of the Korean economy. This economically oriented globalisation was not simply designed to enhance the Korean economy’s international competitiveness by encouraging Korean companies to operate on a global level. Regarding increasing demands for market liberalisation, it was also meant to improve Korean firms’ competitiveness with foreign corporations in the domestic market.

The zeal of Korea’s economic globalisation also included media and cultural sectors, which were not only facing severe foreign competition at home but also had burgeoning aspirations to the global media market. The Korean government’s globalist approach to the media sector was triggered by recognition of culture as an industry that can produce a huge profit. In May 1994, the Presidential Advisory Council on Science and Technology reported to President Kim Young-sam an eye-opening statistic showing that profits from the Hollywood blockbuster Jurassic Park (US, 1993) equalled the export revenue of 1.5 million Hyundai cars, and it urged him to promote the high-technology media industry as a strategic national industry (H. Kim 1994). Since Hyundai cars are the symbol of Korea’s economic growth, the comparison underscored the need for the active promotion of the culture industry, and thus became a decisive factor in revolutionising the Korean government’s approach to the media industries (Shim 2002: 340).

The Kim Young-sam government soon set out its plans to promote and support the media industry as the strategic industry for the twenty-first century (M. B. Kim 1994). The government’s efforts to promote the local film industry started with
the shift in film policy from control to promotion. Among the earliest major moves was the establishment of the Basic Motion Picture Promotion Law (Yōngsang chinhoŋ kibon pōp) in January 1995. While lacking practical measures, the Law aimed to establish basic conditions to facilitate the advancement of local media culture and the promotion of the media industry by requiring that relevant governmental bodies create conferences, policies and funds for media promotion.  

More importantly, after a process of wide consultation, the Film Promotion Law (Yōnghua chinhoŋ pōp) was established in December 1995 to modify and replace the previous Motion Picture Law (Yōnghua pōp) that had long regulated the local film industry. One of the most notable measures introduced in the new law was the establishment of a Film Promotion Fund (Yōnghua chinhoŋ kūnxo) to support the local film industry. The Film Promotion Law also repealed regulations requiring official approval from the Ministry of Culture and Sports, in advance, for exporting Korean films, and for co-producing films with foreign companies. By making the international co-production and export of Korean films easier, these devices encouraged the globalisation of Korean cinema.

Korea's efforts to promote the film industry also encouraged the entry of large corporations or chaebol into the film business, and they played an important role in enhancing the infrastructure of the Korean film industry. In 1995, as a means to induce large capital from chaebol, the government allowed film productions to receive tax breaks previously limited to manufacturers (Chin 1994). In addition, the impressive market success of Marriage Story (Kylbōhn Iyagi) in 1992, which was partly financed by Samsung, had a large influence on the chaebol's entry into the film industry. By the mid-1990s, large corporations, such as Hyundai, Samsung and Daewoo, actively participated in various aspects of the film business, from production to distribution and exhibition.

Though it was short lived, soon replaced by venture-capital companies after the IMF (International Monetary Fund) crisis in 1997–98, the chaebol's involvement had a significant impact on the Korean film industry. By providing large amounts of capital for film-making, the chaebol's input helped improve the technical qualities of Korean cinema. In addition, by promoting efficiency, the chaebol also helped to modernise the film industry. As a result, by boosting local cinema's competitive edge, such contributions enabled the film industry to survive Hollywood competition, and even to outdo the latter's performance at the box-office.

The project of the internationalisation of Korean cinema became more pronounced with the formation of the Pusan International Film Festival in 1996, Korea's first international film festival. Held annually in the south-eastern port city of Pusan, the festival was originally supported by the Pusan city government, but the central government also began supporting it in 1998 (D. Kim 2000: 25–6). With strong support from the Korean government, and with the enthusiastic participation of the Asian film communities, the festival has become a leading film event in Asia.

While serving as a showcase for Asian films, the Pusan International Film Festival has promoted Korean cinema in several ways. First, its 'Korean Panorama' section has exclusively presented major contemporary Korean films, and its 'Retrospective' section has introduced the work of several senior Korean directors. Second, the festival has acted as a gateway for Korean cinema's advancement abroad (D. Kim 2003). As the number of foreign programmers of major film festivals attending the festival grows, more and more Korean films have also been invited to their festivals. For example, after a retrospective was held on director Kim Ki-yeong at the second Pusan International Film Festival in 1997, Kim's films were invited to many other film festivals including the 1998 Berlin International Film Festival. Third, through their participation in the festival, local film professionals began targeting overseas markets and actively seeking ways to initiate co-productions with foreign companies (D. Kim 2003).

The globalisation of the Korean film industry continued in the years of Kim Dae Jung's presidency. Responding to culture's economic potential, Kim stressed the promotion of the culture industry as a top priority from the very beginning of his administration. His enthusiastic promotion of the culture industry is clear from the establishment of the Basic Culture Industry Promotion Law (Munhwa sanpō chinhoŋ kibon pōp) in February 1999. Kim's government promoted in particular high-value-added culture industries such as film, animation and multi-media, and it established the Korea Culture and Contents Agency (Hanguk munhwa k'ont'ench'uk chinhoŋwón) in 1999 to support animation, music and video games.

If South Korea's efforts to globalise its film industry had initially focused on the improvement of its competitiveness at home, since the late 1990s the promotional endeavour has increasingly aimed at the elevation of Korean cinema's international profile and the growth of international sales. In February 1999, the Film Promotion Law was revised, including a substantial reorganisation of the Korea Motion Picture Promotion Corporation (KMPPC) (Hanguk yōnghua chinhoŋ Kongsa) as the Korean Film Commission (KOFIC) (Yōnghua chinhoŋ Wwŏnhoe). KOFIC consists of a government-appointed civilian board. Following the Kim Dae Jung government's 'support without control' guidelines, however, KOFIC has been allowed greater independence and authority in formulating film policies, even though it is funded by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. While continuing the duties of the KMPPC, KOFIC has strengthened efforts to promote and globalise Korean cinema.

To promote Korean films abroad, KOFIC sets up pavilions at major international film festivals and markets. It also provides translations and prints, and it pays for the production of subtitles for selected films targeting overseas film markets or international film festivals. In addition, KOFIC subsidises travel costs for those film-makers whose films are invited to major film festivals, and it offers cash awards to film professionals who are officially invited to major festival competitions.

As noted above, being a state-led policy, Korea's globalisation drive was motivated by strong nationalist interests. The governmental push to globalise Korea's culture industries was intended not only to improve the competitiveness of
the national economy, but also to promote cultural autonomy and integrity. Remarkably, Kim Young-sam’s unique vision of Korea’s globalisation mandated that globalisation be achieved through Koreanisation. He asserted: ‘Globalization must be underpinned by Koreanisation. We cannot be global citizens without a good understanding of our own culture and tradition . . . Koreans should march out into the world on the strength of their unique culture and traditional values. Only when we maintain our national identity and uphold our intrinsic national spirit will we be able to successfully globalize’ (Y. Kim 1995: 273).

Elsewhere I have noted that this seemingly contradictory demand for simultaneous globalisation/globalism and Koreanisation/nationalism reflects ‘the ambivalence of the politics of cultural identity applied to the culture industry’. The concept of globalisation through Koreanisation provides ‘a perfect ground for the ongoing commercialization and commodification of “traditional” culture by the culture industry, while claiming to protect cultural identity from the threats of cultural imperialism or homogenisation’. (Shin forthcoming) In targeting international markets, including major international film festivals and the art-house circuit, Korean films often employ the strategy of marketing difference based upon a unique identity. The best example of this is the work of Im Kwon-Taek, the most widely known Korean director, who won the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival for Chihwaseon (Ch’ihwasa*n, 2002). More significantly, however, while those films aestheticising ‘traditional’ Korean culture have attracted Western audiences, a majority of Korean films marketed in East Asia, including in Korea, tend to foreground a sense of Asian modernity rooted in hybrid culture.

**DOMESTIC SUCCESS AND HYBRID CULTURE**

Under the government’s promotion policies, the Korean film industry experienced gradual growth, a growth that then accelerated towards the end of the 1990s. Although the Asian financial crisis hit the Korean economy hard, causing a decrease in domestic film production, the domestic market share of Korean films leaped to 38 per cent in 1999 from 24 per cent in 1998 (Yu 2000: 6). Undermining scepticism concerning its sustained success, domestic films captured 49.8 per cent of market share in Korea in 2001 and 48.5 per cent in 2002 (Korean Film Observatory 2003: 18).

The domestic success of Korean cinema was accompanied by a series of local box-office hits. Recent years have seen several Korean films setting box-office records, even outdoing the biggest Hollywood blockbusters. For example, the hit film Shirui (Suiri, 1999) attracted 5.78 million viewers, breaking the local attendance record of 4.7 million tickets for Titanic (US, 1997) (The Korea Herald 2000). Moreover, Shirui’s record has subsequently been broken by two other domestic films: Joint Security Area (Kdongdong kyongbi guyok JSA) in 2000 (Paquet 2001a) and Friend (Ch’iing’u) in 2001, which set a new record of 8.14 million viewers (Paquet 2002). While several factors contribute to the popular success of Korean cinema at home, one of note is a generational shift in the local film community, which has provided opportunities for young, talented film-makers. Enjoying greater freedom of expression under the noticeably loosened state censorship and increased financing brought by the involvement of chaebol and investment companies in film production, the films of this younger generation have brought a much needed vitality to the Korean film scene.

Yet, more importantly, by utilising a style that effortlessly mixes indigenous cultural elements with regional and Western influences, recent Korean films respond to the sensibilities of contemporary Koreans. Like their own domestic audiences, young directors have been deeply influenced by foreign, particularly Western, cultures and media, while they are also responsive to contemporary domestic affairs and politics. As Richard King and Timothy J. Craig note of other Asian popular cultural scenes, successful young Korean directors, in their creative use, appropriation and adaptation of foreign cultural influences, construct ‘new hybrid cultural forms that are appealing and accessible to their audiences’ (King and Craig 2002: 7). These hybrid cultural forms provide an important means for their self-definition, a self-definition that not only distances itself from a xenophobic and moralising adherence to local cultural ‘tradition’ but also challenges Western cultural hegemony.

In short, the recent success of Korean films has in large measure been a result of creative interaction between the transnational and the local media, rather than a regressive insistence on ‘traditional’ cultural heritage or a simple adoption and imitation of foreign culture. Equally important, contemporary Korean cinema also shows that the contact between different cultures results in hybridisation, not homogenisation. The hybrid nature of Korean cinema is a product of the localisation of global media culture. Consequently, New Korean Cinema reflects Jenny Kwok Wah Lau’s acute observation of the new Asia in formation, which consists of not one universal modernity but ‘multiple modernities’ that reject the prescriptions of globalists/universalists and the demands of the localists/indigenists (Lau 2003). Furthermore, as a hybrid cultural form and as resistance to Western economic and cultural hegemony, New Korean Cinema is both an effect of and a response to media globalisation.

**NEW KOREAN CINEMA AND MEDIA REGIONALISATION**

Since the late 1990s, Korean cinema embodying hybrid culture has been popular abroad, particularly in East Asia. Many local box-office hits have increasingly been entertaining regional viewers in theatres, as well as on DVD and VCD (Video Compact Disks), a medium extremely popular in East Asia, or in the form of copies downloaded from the Internet. Those films that have appealed to audiences across borders include The Foul King (Panch’ik wang, 1998), Shirui, Joint Security Area, My Sassy Girl (Yŏpki chŏk-in kŭnŏ), 2001) and Phone (Po’n, 2002). Notably, Shirui also reached the top of the box-office...
in Hong Kong at the end of 1999 (M. H. Kim 2001) and attracted 1.2 million viewers in Japan (Macintyre 2001), while Joint Security Area sold for US$2 million to Japan (Paquet 2001a) and stayed among the top ten hits at the Japanese box-office for eight weeks in 2001 (Paquet 2001b).

The recent success of Korean films in the region is, in fact, part of the craze for Korean popular culture across Asia, often referred to as Hanryu ('Korean Wave'). The term Hanryu was first coined by Chinese journalists to describe a sudden influx of South Korean pop culture, from dance music to television dramas and films, and its fast-growing popularity among Chinese youth in the late 1990s (Jang 2003: 144). Soon the phenomenon extended to other parts of Asia, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam and Singapore. Hanryu is demonstrated by Korean television dramas aired on the main television networks, Korean songs played on local radio, Korean stars featured in local media productions and fan magazines, and Internet fan sites devoted to a shared penchant for Korean popular media and stars.

Several factors contribute to the regional success of Korean popular media including films. First, the rapid spread of existing and new media technologies such as satellites, the Internet and DVD has helped broaden the exposure of Korean media. Increased market deregulation has also favoured the wide regional circulation of Korean media, since it, coupled with the opening of China's vast market, has resulted in the tremendous expansion of the regional media market and the subsequent huge growth in demand for content. Equally important is the relatively weak performance of other film industries in the region, particularly the Hong Kong film industry, which had previously been a particularly energetic force.

Cultural proximity is another significant factor. While many Asian nations are still wary of Western cultural imperialism, a growing proportion of regional audiences is inclined towards Korean films that reflect cultural values closer to its own. According to one Korean critic, Korean television dramas and films present an image of Korean society as highly modernised, but still reflecting Asian traits such as Confucian traditions with their emphasis on family, group orientation and social hierarchy (Jang 2003: 146). A Chinese professor also attributes the local appeal of Korean popular culture to cultural similarity. He notes that although Korean popular cultural forms are recognised as hybrid, or influenced by Western culture, they are easy to relate to because they are based on Asian culture (ibid.: 147–8).

In addition, to overcome the backward image of the East found in the East and in the West, East Asian audiences are consuming Korean media with cultural affinity to promote an Asian sense of modernity. In this respect, the phenomenon of the regional circulation of Korean cinema is an excellent example of 'geocultural markets' (Straubhaar 1997) that are organised around close cultural, linguistic and geographic links within the highly internationalised contemporary world. As Straubhaar (1997) aptly notes, the vitality of regional media shown in the presence of the geo-cultural market demonstrates the co-existence of regionalisation and globalisation in the world media cultural economy.
Furthermore, along with the growing popularity of Korean entertainment media in the region, bilateral cultural exchange between Korea and other East Asian countries has also increased. For example, while Korean stars have been featured in various local media productions, including television dramas, commercials and films in the region, several regional stars from mainland China (e.g. Zhang Ziyi in Musa, 2001) and Hong Kong (e.g. Cecilia Cheung in Failan [P'airan], 2001) have also appeared in Korean media. In addition, there has been an increasing number of co-productions between Korea and other East Asian countries. Bichunmo (Bich’ónmu, 2000) and Musa were co-produced with China, whereas One Fine Spring Day (Bonmalan kanda, 2001) is a Korean/Hong Kong/Japanese co-production, and Three (Ssiri 2002) is an omnibus film co-produced by Hong Kong, Korea and Thailand.

**Conclusion**

The remarkable success of Korean films at home and in East Asia has begun to draw attention from Hollywood companies. Significantly, some of the Korean branch offices of Hollywood films have recently begun distributing domestic films. For example, the local direct distributor of Disney, Buena Vista International Korea/Disney, distributed Il Mare (Siwólae) in 2000 and Bungee Jumping of Their Own (Ponyijómpjwirí báda) in 2001, while the Korean branch of Twentieth Century Fox distributed Calla (K’ara, 1999) (see Mun 2001). Some Korean films were even exported for US distribution, among them Yi Myong-se’s Nouhere to Hide (Injôngsaajong polgol ódá, 1999), Im Kwon-Taek’s Chunhyang (Chunhyangyǒn, 2000) and Yi Jong-hyang’s The Way Home (Chipipú, 2002). Nevertheless, with Korean cinema still relatively unknown to the American public, American companies have primarily been eager to buy remake rights. The films sold for American remakes thus far include My Sassy Girl, bought by DreamWorks SKG, Hi, Dharma (Dalmaya nolia, 2001) bought by MGM, and Marrying the Mafia (Kumun-ui yông’guang, 2002) bought by Warner Bros. (Korea Culture and Contents Agency 2003).

Increased international attention to Korean cinema has also inspired a rise in Korean film festivals around the world. Notable Korean film festivals held in North America include the annual New York Korean Film Festival, which started in 2001, and the 2002 Toronto International Film Festival’s ‘Harvest: South Korean Renaissance’. Korean film festivals also appeared in Europe in 2001, first in London (BBC 2001), and then in Paris (Paquet 1999), as well as in Hong Kong in 2001 and 2003.

After a long and unflattering history of foreign domination and poor international standing, many Korean journalists and critics are celebrating the ascendancy of the Korean film industry in the local and regional media scene. Pointing to the increasing production of blockbuster films that have met with little success and sky-rocketing production costs, however, some question the sustainability of the current success of Korean films, and they worry about the potential lowering of quality that such commercialism might generate. Others remain wary of the continuing popularity of foreign films and media products in Korea, as well as their impact on local culture and people.

The local and regional success of Korean cinema has not yet been challenged. While fostering awe and fascination, however, the continuing popularity of Korean cinema has begun to provoke anxiety in the region. Consequently, to maintain the strength of New Korean Cinema, especially as it struggles against becoming a replica of Hollywood, the Korean film industry must also enhance co-promotion strategies with other East Asian nations. One example of such a strategy is the Pusan Promotion Project of the Pusan International Film Festival, a pre-market for Asian films at which potential co-producers and co-financiers may be found. Through these kinds of efforts, New Korean Cinema can continue to prosper at home and within the East Asian market.

**References**


4. CHUNHYANG: MARKETING AN OLD TRADITION IN NEW KOREAN CINEMA

Hyangjin Lee

The story of a beautiful woman who challenges the social prejudice of her lower-class origin and marries above her social position is a universal source material of romantic tales in many cultures. The Tale of Chunhyang is the Korean archetype of this notion of feminine beauty. Chunhyang appeared in a shamanistic legend in early eighteenth-century Korea. Henceforth, her story appeared in many oral-narrative folk traditions. Through time, her beauty has been variously recreated and refined according to the specific demands and concerns of successive audiences. Furthermore, her story has been remade in almost every medium for popular entertainment in each period, such as P'ansori (Korean traditional operatic drama), Chinese poems, popular novels, stage dramas, Western-style operas, films and television dramas. The various aesthetic orientations of each medium can be seen in the relationship between text and audience as revealed through the various transformations (Chön 1998). The essence of the folk-tale embodies the popular desire of a Utopian society. Her courageous rebellion triumphs over the prevailing class system. The inevitability of the narrative's internal motif and appropriateness of external elements, however, determine the extent of acceptance or rejection by the audience. Therefore, the dramatic variations between the versions clearly reflect the decisive role of the audience as the subjects of the oral tradition through its historical transmission (Chön 2003). The singificance of the tale in Korean film history can be seen in its many versions. To date, there have been more than sixteen works based on this narrative, including three North Korean films. In each version, the traditional beauty appears in different guises, identifying the specific demands of the contemporary audience. What makes the tale an...