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Humanities

Post-Burden or New Burden Korean Cinema?: Outside Looking in at the Latest Golden Age, 1996-?

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Abstract

*This work-in-progress examines the paradoxical nature of what I call Korea's "post-burden" cinema – a present-day film industry that has survived Japanese colonialism, American occupation, civil war, prolonged dictatorship, rapid industrialization, economic crisis and severe censorship. For nearly a century filmmakers have learned and practised their trade under these challenging social, political, cultural, economic and industrial constraints, and outlived them. This paper uses a case study of *The President's Last Bang* to illustrate the divergent freedoms that have enabled representative commercial, art-house, independent and animation filmmakers to transcend national and cultural borders by telling previously-forbidden stories and breathing a universal but distinctive Korean-ness into their narratives and characters. Yet, although it backfired, the startling censorship in 2005 of Im Sang-soo's *The President's Last Bang* points to a new set of burdens confronting the national film industry's future.*

Post-Burden Cinema

Recent flourishing scholarship concerning the rising success of the contemporary South Korean cinema has attempted to (re)inscribe Korea's film history into a history of national cinemas plagued with gaping holes. Studies in English such as Lee and Choe (1998), Lee (2000), James and Kim (2002), Kim (2002), Min, Joo and Kwak (2003), Kim (2004), McHugh and Abelmann (2005), Shin and Stringer (2005), Yi (2005), Yecies (2005), Jin (2006), Kim and An (2006) and Yecies (2007) provide fresh understandings of this cinema boom – from both Korean and Western perspectives. Other studies such as Yim (2002) focus on the complex relationships between cultural identity and cultural policy, while Shim (2006), among others, examines the global phenomenon of *Hallyu*: the Korean wave. These groundbreaking studies familiarize us with how at home and across parts of the globe the South Korean (hereafter Korean) cinema has experienced unprecedented growth or what Chris Berry (2002) calls a "full service cinema", which embraces "a full range of modes of production and consumption".

Since the late 1990s, Korea has gained global recognition for excellence in the realms of implementing film policy, developing creative industries, protecting culture and experimenting with film genres and narrative conventions – all of which have helped filmmakers to breathe a universal understanding into their narratives and characters while maintaining a clear Korean sentiment. Undoubtedly significant support from the government – namely through the Ministry of Culture and Tourism – and the expansion of the Korean Film Council (KOFIC, previously known as the Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation) has played a crucial role in promoting commercial and art-house films, developing training programs and production facilities, and increasing the public's film and media literacy. Of course, the easing of restrictive film policy, restructuring of the entertainment monopolies controlled by the *chaebols* (major family-run conglomerates), rise of new industry investment (venture capital) heralded by major vertically-integrated companies such as CJ Entertainment, Mediaplex, Lotte Cinema and Cinema Service, proliferation of cinema venues, boom of domestic and international commercial and film festival audiences (and fans), protection (at least until the halving in July 2006) of the Screen Quota System, and emergence of an army of on-site workers willing to work extremely long hours for low wages – you know, for the love of production – congruently and/or subsequently also have made a significant contribution to the past decade's consistent growth. Combined, these factors have impacted on the revitalization of the national film industry and newfound popularity of Korean films at home and abroad. The government in 2007 has earmarked an unprecedented \$690 million US Dollars (\$640 billion KRW) over the next five years to help make Korea one of the top filmmaking nations in the world. To me this goal harks back to the Kim Dae-jung government's *Cyber Korea 21* (1999-2002) program, which aimed to make Korea a knowledge-based society and Koreans the best computer users in the world. Mind you, the Korean cinema is about to enter a whole new era too. The Roh Moo-hyun government's new filmmaking initiative, if successful, will make Korea one of the most advanced digitally-equipped film and media industries in the world. This is no small task. Yet, there is still much to learn about the hurdles the film industry has to overcome in order to expand and continue reaching domestic and international achievements and accolades in the wonderful days ahead.

This work-in-progress examines the paradoxical nature of what I call Korea's "post-burden" cinema – a present-day film industry that has survived Japanese colonialism, American occupation, civil

war, prolonged dictatorship, rapid industrialization, economic crisis and (supposedly) severe censorship. For nearly a century filmmakers have learned and practised their trade under these challenging social, political, cultural, economic and industrial constraints. This paper uses a case study of the “historical-fictional” film *The President's Last Bang* to illustrate the divergent freedoms that have enabled representative commercial, art-house, independent and animation filmmakers to transcend national and cultural borders by telling previously forbidden stories and breathing a universal but distinctive Korean-ness into their narratives and characters. Although it backfired, the startling censorship in 2005 of Im Sang-soo's *The President's Last Bang* points to one of the many new burdens confronting the national film industry's future, including cannibalistic competition among domestic films, loss of lucrative pre-sales to Japanese distributors, exploitative labor practices, and yes, a residual form of censorship evidenced by the experiences of Im Sang-soo and others.

The President's Last Bang (2005) is perhaps one of South Korea's most controversial commercial entertainment feature films ever made. Can I ask how many people in the audience have seen the film? The opening credits' English subtitles (on the 2005 DVD version) say it is based on a true story. In one interview, Director Im is quoted as saying that the story was his personal, truthful account of the events of that night (or at least part of it), which he based on his own thorough research of the incident (Bertolin 2005).¹⁰⁰ The story imagines what authoritarian President Park Chung-hee's last night on earth (26 October 1979) might have been like before he was assassinated by Kim Jae-kyu, the Director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). The film brings the audience on an intense journey as KCIA Chief Kim (masterfully played by Baek Yun-shik) decides that “tonight is the night” to off the president – in the name of “democracy”. For the first half of the film we are brought intimately close to KCIA Chief Agent Ju (Han Suk-kyu) and KCIA Agent Colonel Min (Kim Eung-soo) as they decide to follow Director Kim's plans (to kill the President at a small dinner banquet) and to prepare their loyal men for the assassination's aftermath, which almost certainly will lead to their deaths. A fierce, bloody gun battle ensues between President Park's bodyguards and KCIA agents after shots are fired and President Park's blood is splattered at the banquet dinner table. The second half of the film portrays the resulting chaos among Park's military ranks as they jockey for position and attempt to keep some semblance of authority and order.

It is highly recommend you see *The President's Last Bang*, if you have not done so already, because it offers an intriguing perspective on the Park Chung-hee era (and my brief description does not do the film justice). The Kino Video DVD (North American) version prominently displays the following quote from Premiere film critic Glenn Kenny: “A nasty, profane, and utterly bracing black comedy”. Kenny compares *The President's Last Bang* to Stanley Kubrick's renowned and ultimate political spoof *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Alternatively, Darcy Paquet's (2005) review on *Koreanfilm.org* acutely observes that Im's film offers a lesson about how history is made, or rather changed, as characters Kim, Ju and Min strive to change the fate of Korea's political and thus social and cultural history, which is no laughing matter. I share Paquet's reading of the film and, like him, applaud Im's daring approach to such a controversial issue and political legacy – especially concerning the film's numerous innuendos about President Park's fondness for the Japanese colonial period. The collaboration question is alive today.

On 31 January 2005, only three days before the film's scheduled public release, the Seoul Central Court mandated that the film be censored. This move was prompted by litigation filed by Park Ji-man, the son of the late President Park. According to one media report on *Dong-a.com* (January 31, 2005), Park Ji-man argued the inclusion of footage of actual protest marches and of President Park's funeral ceremony in the opening and closing credits blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction.¹⁰¹ For Im and producer MK Pictures, the final choice was to cut or be cut from publicly screening the film (or at least pay approximately \$30,000 USD in fines for each and every time the pre-censored version of the film was commercially screened in cinemas or on TV). The filmmakers were intimidated and were left with no choice but to acquiesce to the court's decision; they immediately appealed the verdict.

What aroused such a draconian reaction in an era of newfound freedom of expression? After all, the Constitutional Court decided in October 1996 that it was unconstitutional for the government's appointed review committee (the Performance Ethics Committee) to censor a film by cutting it. Was it the English title's risqué double-entendre use of “bang” to mean “sexual intercourse”? Was the story's semblance of call girls willing to give President Park – in the words of one of the characters – “what he wanted” and “what made him happy” problematical for South Korea's national security? Was the film's excessive use of guns, violence, vulgar language and the gory splattering of the President's blood potentially harmful to minors in the audience? Did the opening scene of bikini-clad women exposing their

¹⁰⁰ For another fascinating interview, see: Crawford, J. 2005. Shoot to Kill: Im Sang-soo Gets Down and Dirty With Politics in ‘The President's Last Bang’: World Cinema coverage presented by San Francisco Film Society. *indieWIRE.com* (October 12, 2005) http://www.indiewire.com/people/2005/10/shoot_to_kill_i.html (accessed May 2, 2007).

¹⁰¹ http://english.donga.com/srv/service.php3?biid=2005020157128&path_dir=20050201 (accessed May 1, 2007).

supple breasts offend Korean culture and taste? Was it the depiction of students, democracy leaders and other alleged communist sympathizers being humiliated and brutalized in the KCIA torture chambers? Or simply put, was director Im's deconstruction or perceived dishonoring of Park's mythical aura too audacious in light of the high profile political position Park's daughter Park Geun-hye occupies today (at the time of writing) as chairwoman of the centre-right opposition party, that is, the One-Nation Party in Korea?

Though the narrative elements described above probably created hullabaloo for many people – particularly for those who hold the memory of Park dear to their hearts – the major controversy surrounding *The President's Last Bang* was fuelled by what was snipped from the film. Im was ordered to delete nearly four minutes of documentary footage because of Park Ji-man's litigation. Despite the hacking, Im's visually-stunning film was invited as an official selection to the Cannes, New York, Toronto and Telluride film festivals, which became international opportunities to protest his censorship. The completed film simply contained black screen time where the deleted scenes initially would have appeared.

Anecdotally it seems all of the fuss promoted the film in unimaginable ways, making the censorship, that is, the repression of a politically-charged and "taboo" script, backfire. According to an article on *Pressian.com*, a political news website based in Seoul, Kim Ha-yeong reported (February 1, 2005) that members of the Korean Motion Picture Association (KMPA) and Director's CUT (young directors group) were outraged by the court's brutal suppression of freedom of expression.¹⁰² The backlash was intensified in print and by word-of-mouth across the globe by reporters, critics, academics, industry people and cinephiles who homed in on the international declaration of protest symbolized by the black screen time in place of the cut scenes. Published news stories, interviews and film reviews divulged details about the censorship case, thus adding fuel to Im Sang-soo's reputation as some kind of cine-agent provocateur. Although *The President's Last Bang* did not make it into the top ten highest box office-grossing Korean films in 2005, it along with Im's other revered films, has helped him become widely-recognized as one of the so-called new Korean cinema's maverick filmmakers.¹⁰³ Had the court fully-agreed with Park Ji-man's plea to ban the film entirely, the contemporary Korean cinema would not be blessed with one of its most provocative films, which the Seoul Central Court believed audiences would not interpret as a story based on true events. For the Court, *The President's Last Bang* was a fictional spoof lampooning Kwak Kyung-taek's *Friend* (2001). One might wonder here if they had seen the film at all.

MK Pictures appealed the Court's decision, and in August 2006 they were successful at overturning the ruling. The deleted documentary footage was restored, but MK Pictures was forced to pay Park Ji-man about \$106,000USD for slandering his father's character (Paquet 2006). This punitive damage is hardly comparable to the hurdle producers had to overcome in January 2005 when their co-distributor, CJ Entertainment, withdrew their distribution commitments and venture capital (about 20% of the total budget). The ramifications surrounding the film and its court case evidently spooked CJ Entertainment.

The case of *The President's Last Bang* is significant in the overall context of the roaring success of South Korea's recent commercial entertainment cinema because it encapsulates the paradoxical nature of what I have labeled Korea's "post-burden" cinema. The treatment of *The President's Last Bang* questions whether or not the Korean cinema is really free from censorship. Well, it seems it is not. As Park (2002) observes, government censorship still exists because the appropriate laws have yet to be modified. Herein lies the paradox. In terms of film policy, the Producers Registration System (PRS), which Aegyung Shim discusses in detail in her paper "Lessons from the Past: Cinema of Perseverance Under Park Chung Hee, 1961-1970", was abolished by laws made in 1984 and enacted in 1985. Before 1985 only licensed producers could make films. After 1985, production limitations were relaxed, though Im (2006) states that films with overt communist ideology or anti-government themes were still prohibited from being produced and/or screened. Interestingly, erotic films were permitted partly due to liberalizing attitudes about sex – hence the long-standing incidence of rape scenes and "hostess" genre films in the Korean cinema. In 1988 after Roh Tae Woo was elected president, script censorship was eliminated (from the production stage). Around this time, filmmakers enjoyed newborn freedoms of expression, that is, they were able to engage with stories that fueled social debates as a result of the government's larger wave of *laissez-faire* attitudes towards political and social commentary in the media. A "new wave" of feature filmmakers such as Park Kwang-su, Chang Sun-woo, Lee Chang-ho, Bae Chang-ho, and Park Jong-won attracted international attention with films that told previously-prohibited stories. Flash-forward several years, and Kim Hyeong-jun, the co-producer of *Silmido* (2003), declares on BBC News' *BBC.CO.UK* (October 24, 2003) that it is precisely the liberalization of censorship that has enabled his film – a factual account kept

¹⁰² http://www.pressian.com/scripts/section/article.asp?article_num=30050201094815&s_menu=%B9%AE%C8%AD (accessed May 1, 2007).

¹⁰³ Im's filmography, which is rife with confronting issues of sexuality, infidelity and youth street life, also includes: *Girls' Night Out* (1998), *Tears* (2000), *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (2003), *The Old Garden* (2006), and *A Good Woman in Paris* (in production in 2007).

secret about trained commandos who were supposed to be sent in 1971 to North Korea to assassinate President Kim Il-sung – to be made.¹⁰⁴

According to Paquet's overview of censorship 1995-2002, other high-profile instances of censorship cases include: Yu-min Kim's *Yellow Hair* (1999), which contained a *ménage à trois* sex scene; Jang Sun-Woo's *Lies* (1999), which initially portrayed vulgar conversations between two high school girls as well as a scene involving the sexual excitement of poo; and Park Jin-pyo's semi-documentary film about a 70-something couple having sex and performing fellatio in *Too Young To Die* (2002). These films were either forced to cut "objectionable" scenes, blur naughty bits, and/or were initially banned from public screening. Let us also remember the case of human rights activist Suh Joon-shik, who in November 1997 was arrested for "violating" the Law on Records and Video Tapes and Korea's National Security Law after he failed to submit human rights film festival entries for direct government censorship before the public festival screenings. Amnesty International, which covered his complex story in 1998 on their website advocated for Suh Joon-shik's indictment to be removed.¹⁰⁵ In early 1998 Suh was eventually released on bail and he has since played a leadership role in the SARANGBANG Group for Human Rights organization. His case demonstrates that direct government intervention in alleged pro-communist film-related issues was observable for much longer than conventional Korean film histories tell us. There are other cases of foreign films having had to be cut before being approved by the ratings board, but there is too little time in this paper to delve any deeper.

Apart from the affliction of censorship, additional concerns such as the internal cannibalism of market share among domestic films, loss of lucrative pre-sales to Japanese distributors, and exploitative labor practices still loom large. First, Bong Joon-ho's *The Host* (2006) throttled the domestic market when exhibitors agreed to screen it on an unprecedented number of screens, choking off a plurality of opportunities for a majority of the 100-plus commercial features made in the same year. Needless to say, filmmakers whose films were devoured by *The Host* were unimpressed. The film was so popular among Korean audiences that it broke all historical box office records by surpassing the \$13 million mark of nationwide admissions. Although *The Host* and *King and the Clown* (2005) helped lead the industry to a never-before-seen local market share of 60%, the domination of *The Host* on domestic screens incident prompted Ms. An Cheong-sook, Chairperson of the Korean Film Council (KOFIC), to publish an editorial lauding the importance of a diversity of commercial/popular and artistic Korean films.¹⁰⁶

Second, the Korean film industry has begun to witness a decline in lucrative pre-sales to Japanese distributors, who in 2005 committed about \$60 million US dollars to select Korean productions. Between 2003 and 2005 Japanese distributors such as Nikkatsu and Shochiku (two of the oldest major Japanese studios/vertically integrated film companies) were fronting as much as \$3-\$8 million US dollars for the exhibition rights of individual Korean films. In turn, Korean producers used this precious cash infusion to complete their films. In spite of this trend, in 2006 the same Japanese distributors backed off to a mere total \$10 million US dollars in pre-sales among all their Korean films because it became too difficult to recoup their investment from Japanese audiences. In short, the popularity of Korean films in Japan is fading. Korean films with big budgets are definitely starting to feel the pinch.¹⁰⁷

Third, exploitative (bordering on illegal) labor practices still loom large. The fact is that over the past decade the film boom in Korea and the glamour of the cinema have attracted people from across all fields who were willing to work for relatively next to nothing just to be on a set or in an editing room – not to mention the mushrooming number of university graduates from domestic and international institutions looking for work. The industry, including all of Korea's copious film festivals, has been plagued with unfair/irregular/unequal wages, including an absence of a minimum wage and proper overtime pay,

¹⁰⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/entertainment/film/3211195.stm> (accessed May 3, 2007).

¹⁰⁵ See "Republic of Korea (South Korea): On trial for defending his rights: the case of human rights activist Suh Jun-sik." *Amnesty International* (May 1, 1998). <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/engASA250181998> (accessed May 4, 2007).

¹⁰⁶ See "*The Host* and *Time*... Two Faces of Korean Film." Editorial by An Cheong-sook. *Korean Film Observatory* No. 19 (Autumn 2006): 5. Kim Ki-duk's *Time* (2005) provided an extreme comparison to *The Host* because Kim's decision not to distribute *Time* in Korea made a clear protest statement about the lack of status and recognition of the independent and art film (or at least his films) in Korea. Seoul-based art film distributor/importer and (small) exhibitor SPONGE's last-minute decision to pick up *Time* is the sole reason this Kim Ki-duk film was publicly screened in Korea at all.

¹⁰⁷ For additional details, see: "[Film] Japan's interest in Korean films wanes: Korean film companies see huge drop in profits." *The Hankyoreh* (June 10, 2006) http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_entertainment/130992.html (accessed April 28, 2007); and Paquet, Darcy. "'Korean wave' breaks as film exports slump." *Variety Asia Online* (January 18, 2007) <http://www.varietyasiaonline.com/content/view/625/1/> (accessed April 29, 2007).

unreasonable (extremely long) working hours, limited medical/health and retirement benefits, etc. It is hard to believe what some people are willing to go through to be a part of the Korean cinema.¹⁰⁸

Finally, it is worth mentioning that illegal downloading and weakening secondary markets (DVD/video sales, TV, cable/pay-TV, and foreign sales) are also exacerbating the new burdens facing the industry.

Concluding Thoughts

As many of us may know, the film industry in Korea has begun to adopt business models of the Hollywood enterprise, such as high concept, big budget, special effects and marketing campaigns (spin-offs, tie-ins, merchandizing, licensing, taglines, product placement and online supplementation) in order to survive and resist Hollywood's global dominance. These new strategies undoubtedly have been implemented in tandem with the impressive growth and international recognition of the Korean cinema. Fascinating as this may be, the Korean film industry has yet to catch up with the same regularized labor practices used for years by the US and other countries' film industries. The challenges facing Korea's film industry raise difficult questions about the new set of burdens that must be championed before a new decade of growth can be achieved.

This time and these issues are pivotal because they will dictate the future direction of the whole of the Korean film industry. Will the film industry continue to become more like Hollywood with its long-term and glorious history? Or, will the Korean cinema fade into the ranks of other popular national cinemas, joining the likes of Japan (1960s), Hong Kong (1970s) and China (1980s)? I don't profess to have all the answers, but at least there is an identifiable need for filmmakers, activists, policy-makers and scholars to re-think this post-burden era as part of a larger continuum of burdens and problems worth solving. If Korea can overcome this test then the Korean cinema can truly become a post-burden cinema. Perhaps there is still time for discussion and thoughtful reflection.

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¹⁰⁸ KOFIC reported that on April 18, 2007 some progress had been achieved in relation to these critical labor-management issues. However, the efficacy of continuing negotiations remains to be seen. See: Lee Young-jin. "Labor-Management Agreement Finalized." *Korean Film Observatory* No. 22 (Cannes Edition 2007): 5-6.

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