Sounds of Celluloid Dreams: Coming of the Talkies to Cinema in Colonial Korea

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Sounds of Celluloid Dreams: 
Coming of the Talkies to Cinema in Colonial Korea

Brian Yecies

Abstract

Conventional reports often hint at how Koreans gained film industry experience and training in Korea and Japan during the 1920s and early 1930s under Cultural Policy reforms. Yet, few studies consider the full range of influences that motivated their contributions to a local vibrant popular entertainment industry and to the global transition to sound. This article attempts to reassess the story of cinema in colonial Korea by offering new insights into the productive and destructive characteristics of colonial modernity. The exhibition of talkies from Japan and the West (primarily the United States)—as early as in 1925 and more regularly after 1930—inspired Korean filmmakers and technicians to experiment with sound technology in a way similar to others around the world. Producing a small number of talkies on “locally-made” equipment enabled them to reach out to millions of cinemagoers and to contribute to a “golden-age” of cinema—rather than simply “collaborating” with the Japanese. In the process, they constructed new spaces for the expression of Korean nationalism. In the process, they constructed new spaces for the expression of Korean nationalism, colonialism, and modernity particularly for those who dreamt of bringing colonialism, colonialism, and modernity particularly for those who dreamt of bringing nationalism, colonisation and modernity. The story of cinema in colonial Korea and the role of cosmopolitan lifestyle found in a film production center such as Seoul, Tokyo, Kyoto, Shanghai, Los Angeles, as well as Harbin and Harbin in Manchuria.

Keywords: Korean cinema, colonial Korea, film policy, Hollywood, motion pictures, talkies, colonial modernity

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Introduction

Between the mid-1920s and late 1930s, national film industries underwent phenomenal changes in the production, distribution, and exhibition of sound films. During this global transformation, enormous capital was wagered on the development and adoption of “modern” technology. Hundreds of new cinemas were built; thousands were wired with sound equipment—that is, speakers, amplifiers, and electric motors—and some were ruined during the Great Depression. The silent period began fading, and although somewhat chaotic and uneven, engaging in sound production became a symbol of adventure and progress.1 Fundamental, but not uniform change in all countries and languages was principally driven by a Western, namely, U.S. and European carpet.2 Yet, hundreds of local sound recording and projection innovations flourished around the world. Often labelled as underdogs in film trade magazines in a kind of “talkie war,” these alternative systems helped to wire thousands of cinemas in suburban locations that the big electric firms either could not reach or simply had no interest in reaching.2 Developments in Korea (and Japan to a greater extent) were similar, although they took place much later than in the United States and Europe. They also gave rise to local responses to these global trends, in fact, much

1. “Sound production” meant recording on either phonograph discs (sound-on-disc) or on the same filmstrip as the visual images (sound-on-film). “Sound films” included a variety of forms: all-talkie, part-talkie, sound-effects, synchronous music, and asynchronous music.
2. Between June 19 and July 22, 1930, the German Tobis-Klangfilm and American Western Electric-ERPI and RCA Photophone companies assembled at the Paris Picture Sound Conference. Through the “Paris Agreement,” signed on the last day of this gathering, they divided the world into an exclusive German, an exclusive U.S., and a “neutral” sales territory, which included Japan and its colonial regions. Detailed conference minutes are held in the Academy of the Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Library Archives (hereafter cited as AMPAS) in the MPIA General Correspondence Files, MS Reel 111, 1929-30. Nowell-Smith and Ricci (1998) and Higgins and McInroy (1999) also offer extensive discussions of this U.S. and European cartel.
earlier than previously believed. However, in Korea, the exploration of new possibilities in sound production emerged from within a complex colonial environment.

This article argues that the advent of the talkies in colonial Korea helped Korean filmmakers and technicians create a fertile ground for the surprising success of domestic sound films. Instead of maintaining a simplified nationalistic argument in which the cinema is seen as a Japanese-dominated, modern institution, this article shows how Korean pioneers of sound-cinema endured a difficult political, cultural, and economic climate with a number of mixed motives, as well as internal and external influences. While the crux of the film industry was firmly controlled at the center, the history of cinema in colonial Korea is more dynamic than a tale of “good” Korean films and filmmakers versus propaganda films made by “collaborative traitors.” Sound cinema, and film production in general, became a node of cultural construction—similar to that of radio—in which Korean filmmakers simultaneously contributed to both a national and a supra-national cinema as they actively negotiated, challenged, and reaffirmed Korean culture and later Japanese or “imperial” culture through film.4 The all-Korean, and part-Korean/part-Japanese films that they made infused a significant productive energy into the formation of a modern popular culture in Korea within and despite the political and cultural boundaries of colonialism.

Primary documents and oral history reports from this period demonstrate that most filmmakers were aware of the cinema’s significant ability to affect audiences, which were abounding at home as well as across the Japanese Empire. In 1932 alone, annual cinemas were in Korea reached heights of 6,500,000, that is, an average of about one in every three people.5 Additionally, the percentage of actual meters of foreign films (primarily U.S. films) exhibited in Korea in 1932—amounting to 63 percent—overwhelmingly exceeded the total length of Japanese and Korean films exhibited in Korea. The inverse was true in Japan, where about 70 percent of all films screened were domestic and 30 percent foreign.6 The Government-General’s eventual desire to overturn the imbalance of foreign versus “domestic” films had an enormous impact on the local film industry in Korea, precipitating a film boom. By 1937, the artistic value of Korean films such as Na Un-gyu, Yi Gyu-hwan, and Yi Myung-u’s Omongnyeo (1957), An Seek-yong, Yi Gise, and Yi Myung-u’s Sun Cheonggyeon (The Tale of Sim Cheong, 1937) and especially Yi Gyu-hwan’s Nageune (The Wanderer, 1957)—which was made by the Korean Sung Dong Film Co. and “supervised” by the Japanese Shinkō Studio’s Suzuki Shigeyoshi—had begun to attract the attention of audiences in Japan and Manchuria. Based on its commercial success, and the fact that it was considered by the Japanese film industry as the “first outstanding work from Korea,” Shinkō had planned to export Nageune to Europe and the United States.7

A number of domestic sound, as well as silent, productions made during this period were “national films,” including some (excessively sentimental melodramas based on popular novels and romantic stories, involving the wealthy and the misfortunes of the poor,)8 These films seemed to appeal to an intense sense of Korean nationalism.

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5. One of the few comprehensive reports into the film industry in Korea in English can be found in Langdon (1984). In the early 1930s, William R. Langdon was the American Consul-General in Seoul. He regularly reported on film industry developments for the U.S. Department of State, which then relayed this information to Hollywood studio executives and trade publications such as Variety. Film Daily
6. Film Daily Year Book 1937 (1938, 1280).
7. Ots (1938, 49-50); Iwatsuki (1939, 64). Both Ots and Iwatsuki were well-known Japanese film critics and members of the International Cinema Association of Japan; Iwatsuki was also one of the editors of the Cinema Year Book of Japan and, according to Anderson and Ritchie (1982, 76), a pioneer in the use of film subtitles.
8. Films produced by the socialist Korean Artist Proletarian Federation (KAPF) are archetypal films in the sense that they were “Korean” films made by Korean filmmakers and all-Korean crews. They were “nationalistic” films stimulated by the appearance of Arirang (1926), the most famous silent and nationalistic resistance Korean film. Well-known KAPF films include: Wandering (Yurangi, 1928); Street of Darkness (Hange, 1929); The Dark Road (Onno, 1929); Underground Village (Whechon, 1931); and Wheel of Fire (1931).
because they could be read as a subversive metaphor for the struggle against Japanese colonialism. No matter how these films are read today, and their state of colonial subjugation at the time, Korean filmmakers and technicians sought and received crucial assistance from Japanese filmmakers and film companies. They gained formative experience by working with all-Korean production crews and Japanese filmmakers in Korea, in addition to training (apprenticing) with big film studios in Japan. In 1930, three out of twelve feature films were "co-productions," employing either a Japanese film editor or a cinematographer along with a Korean cast and crew. In 1931, the number of co-productions increased to five (out of fifteen feature films made) with some using Japanese directors, actors, and screenwriters alongside Korean casts and crews. While detailed economic data concerning film production in colonial Korea is difficult to obtain, it seems the only way to survive was to follow Japanese investors who controlled a significant percentage of the overall film business. Hence, Koreans gained invaluable experience working on a combination of their own and Japanese films—all while living according to the Joseon Governor-General's assimilationist catchphrase of "ninety million fellow countrymen."

In the larger picture, industry and commerce in general were on the rise at this time. Governor-General Saito was charged with altering the image of the Japanese Empire after the March First Independence movement in 1919. He aimed to relax (or at least give the appearance of relaxing) Japanese administrative control over Korean cultural and artistic activities. Writers, actors, filmmakers, and the

11. This slogan appears in a speech given by Governor-General Ugaki at the Conference of Imperial Middle School Principals in Seoul on September 11, 1934. See Ugaki (1934).
12. For a discussion of the rise and development of commerce in Korea, see Cummings (1997).
13. For more insight on the impact of Saiko's Cultural Policy reforms, see Eckert et al. (1990, 276-304).
ritualistic repetition of legends about the making of Chunhyangon (The Tale of Chunhyang, 1935)—the “first successful” sound film.\textsuperscript{15} Even recent flourishing scholarship, which addresses the cinemas of both North and South Korea, collectively brushes over the pursuit of sound and its integral links to Korea’s larger cinematic history.\textsuperscript{16} While a small number of Japanese film industry trade materials from this period touch upon films and filmmakers in Korea, a majority of English-language studies by experts in Japanese cinema history rarely include colonial Korea in their central studies.\textsuperscript{17} Time and time again conventional studies simply point to 1935 as the year when talkies in Korea seemingly emerged out of the ether.\textsuperscript{18}

Yet, archive documents and industry trade reports tell a different story about when and how the talkies came to Korea. The motion picture industry in Korea (and Japan) began pondering a switch to commercial sound in the mid-1920s, as was the case in other countries such as the United States, Australia, Britain, France, and Germany. Demonstrations of De Forest Phonofilms (sound-on-film), which took place in Japan in 1924 and Korea in 1925, had planted the seeds of the then-novel transition. In late February 1925, as a one-time-only event, four Phonofilms were screened at the Uinilgwan cinema in Seoul. These documentaries and part-talkies belonged to a huge range of approximately 1,000 short sound films produced by the American De Forest Phonofilms Company. These screenings, which were co-sponsored by the major newspapers Maeil Sinbo (Daily Report) and the Gyeongseong Ilbo (Gyeongseong Daily), included President Coolidge, Taken on the White House Grounds (1924), a violin performance, and a political demonstration in Washington Square.\textsuperscript{19} It seems that the political nature and expressive power of these early sound films—particularly the first U.S. presidential film recorded with sound—made an impression on Korean film pioneers, whose experiments are discussed shortly.

Intellectual debates about so-called modern sound technology began appearing in Korean newspapers shortly after sales engineers from both the German Tobis-Klangfilm and U.S. Western Electric-ERPI companies gave equipment demonstrations in the region in 1929 and 1930. Clearly few exhibitors could afford to lease or buy one of these high-end Western systems.\textsuperscript{20} Nevertheless, discussions about the impact of sound on society and the art of filmmaking continued, with a particular emphasis on other countries’ trials and tribulations in the coming of the talkies. One typical article in the Chosun Ilbo in 1931 discussed how the U.S.S.R. and Germany had been researching and developing sound film technology since 1926. The entire Soviet film industry was reportedly converting to sound due to the overwhelming popularity of talkies.\textsuperscript{21} Other recurring series of articles published under the columns “Modern Knowledge” (hyeonodae jisak) and “Film Knowledge” (yeonghwa sangskit) presented historical overviews of talkies in the United States and Japan, citing specific examples of how sound effects were being used. Critic Yi Chang-yong appreciated the novelty of hearing (and seeing) a cat meow and a door slamming, but believed the expression of the spo-

\textsuperscript{15} See, for example, Yi Hyo-in (1992); Jo (2000); Jo (2003); and Kim Mee-hyun et al. (2002).

\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Lee (2000); James and Kim (2002); Min, Joe and Kwak (2003); and Kim (2004); McIlvagh and Abelmann (2005); and Shin and Stringer (2005). Most historical accounts of Korea’s modern history also suffer from this oversight as even Cummings (1997) lacks a discussion of the nation’s encounter with film and media culture.

\textsuperscript{17} See, for example, Richie (1971); Melled (1975); Anderson and Richie (1982); Saté (1987); Richie (1990); Noletti and Deser (1992); and Bernissi (2001).

\textsuperscript{18} The thorough and important discussion of the byegono or live film narrator in colonial Korea in Mullan (2007), for instance, is reduced into replicating this simplification.

\textsuperscript{19} Yu (1997).

\textsuperscript{20} In mid-1928 Shochiku Studio—the largest of the “big five” production and distribution companies in Japan—had ordered multiple Western Electric sound recording and projection systems. Shortly thereafter, the Western Electric Company Orient Ltd. opened regional offices in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Fukuoka, Sapporo, and Harbin and Dairen (both in Manchuria), and in Seoul. Western Electric equipment, which included import duties and a compulsory ten-year service contract, cost theatre owners and exhibitors up to approximately $5,000.

\textsuperscript{21} “Sobileen yeonghwa-ui halbeong yeonghwa-ui gwa halbeon” (The Development of Talkies in the U.S.S.R.), Chosun Ilbo, October 18, 1931.
ken word to still be a problem (at least at time of his writing in 1931). He found the overt disavowal of talkies by Charles Chaplin—whose films were extremely popular in Korea—as a telling sign of the questionable future of talking in motion pictures. These types of articles reminded readers about the technology’s then-limited abilities to reproduce and amplify sound in ways that human ears were used to hearing. Despite having been a popular fad at the time, the quality of early motion picture sound was generally poor. Low admission prices barely seemed to compensate for this nascent technology. Hence, it took more than a few talkie demonstrations in the mid-1920s to introduce the idea of sound films to the public.

By the end of 1928, fewer than 10% of an estimated 15,000 U.S. cinemas had been converted to sound, and just over 75% of U.S. cinemas had been wired for sound by the mid-1930s. By this time, equipment costs had begun to come down and public opinion regarding sound films had begun to change after the quality of amplification improved. It looked as if sound was becoming an irreversible change in the American and European film industries. From the start, this adoption of sound by film industries around the world seemed to intrigue members of the Korean film community. For Yi Chang-yong, the thought of producing sound films was completely out of reach for the Korean film community, which could not even dream about obtaining, let alone using, imported sound equipment. Nonetheless, Yi Chang-yong looked forward to savoring American and European talkies at the earliest possible opportunity; he was generally excited by their spectacle. Other Korean filmmakers/critics questioned the idea of converting from a silent to a sound cinema and had contradictory feelings about the changeover.

In the early 1930s, Yi Gyuhwan was working as Suzuki Shige-yoshi’s assistant director at Shinko’s studios in Kyoto when it released the smash sound-on-disc hit What Made Her Do It? (Nani ga kanojo o sō saseta ka?). During this time, Yi Gyuhwan wrote a series of newspaper articles about sound technology that considered the talkies as potentially modernizing and as a step for industrial evolution for filmic expression. He seemed enamored with how Hollywood directors and studios were engaging with the coming of sound. His articles attempted to show how novel and popular talkies were in Japan while pointing to their infancy across the empire. Although Yi was writing from Japan, the level of detail about sound technology in this series of articles made him appear to be an expert on the topic. It was a clever strategy to ingratiate himself with the whole of the Korean film community in advance of his return to Korea and possibly open new opportunities for studying directing in the United States.

His newspaper articles more than likely proved invaluable in 1932, when he made The Boat with the Boatman—a silent film that is considered a quintessential nationalistic film for its portrayal of the difficulties that Korean farmers experienced under Japanese colonialism. Although it no longer exists, the fact that The Boat Without the Boatman was made without sound speaks volumes about the accessibility to and viability of sound recording technology in Korea at the time. Though Yi praised and advocated sound technology and the talkies in his articles before his return to Korea, he could not in fact afford to make his debut film with sound. This was the gap he experienced between reality and the theory behind the pursuit of sound. Nevertheless, Yi Gyuhwan’s contribution to the coming of sound was not in vain because the knowledge and ideas he introduced inspired other practitioners such as Yi Pil-u and his brother Yi Myeong-u to gain more industry experience and training. Although Yi

27. It seems new films from the colonial period are being discovered all the time. In mid-2007, nine reels of An Jung-hwa’s Cheonggok-ari sipparo (Crossroads of Youth; 1934) were discovered in Korea. After eight months of being restored, a preview of this black-and-white silent movie was exhibited at the Korean Film Archive in March 2008. At the time of writing, Cheonggok-ari sipparo is the oldest known Korean film in existence, predating the currently present 1936 melodrama Minjong (Sweet Dream) by two years.
Gyu-hwan did not begin his career as a director of talkies he remained at the cusp of new film industry trends. Yi Gyu-hwan’s long career at the landmark 1955 version of Chunhyangjeon, which stands out with his landmark 1955 version of Chunhyangjeon, which kick-started the 1950s/1960s “golden age” of Korean cinema.

For Yi Chang-yong and Yi Gyu-hwan, as well as many others at the time, sound recording and projection technology were incredibly advanced in the modern past. Even so, talkies had a long way to go before reaching the modern level of high-quality entertainment. Both Yi and Yi level of high-quality entertainment. Both Yi and Yi doubted whether the Korean film community could maintain its ability to experience the presence of sound because of its severely limited access to only silent sound film. Sound may have been sweeping over the U.S. film industry, but it experienced a very slow start in Korea.

As one might expect, talkies first appeared in the capital, Seoul. And then spread to smaller cities. Seoul by far had the largest number of cinemas and total seating capacity as well as the most advanced American and Japanese sound equipment, not to mention the country’s most modern roads, railroads, post-offices, telegraph and telephones, banks, electric-power plants, hospitals, hotels, phone exchanges, and luxurious restaurants and schools. Seoul was evolving into a city of the future. And a city of opportunity in the Japanese Empire. Seoul was the realm of entertainment and popular culture. Six out of eleven of the realm of entertainment and popular culture. Six out of eleven of Seoul’s most prestigious cinemas—which catered to Japanese audiences with Japanese features, shorts, and animated cartoons from Japan—were wired with the Nippon Sound System (manufactured by Japan Wireless Telegraph Company and Telephone Co.), Seoul’s other five flagship cinemas, mostly frequented by Koreans, principally screened foreign (American, British, French, German, and Russian) and Korean films on American sound projection equipment. Hollywood, with its own films, controlled as much as 65 percent of the market—because it could. Film policy in Korea, which facilitated Hollywood’s dominance, took longer to catch up with the more restrictive policy in place of Japan proper. Busan, Pusan, Incheon, and Incheon also had multiple cinemas, but only one in each city, where mostly Korean audiences watched foreign films on U.S. sound equipment. Admission prices differed across Korea at this time. Tickets for general cinema seating in Seoul cost from 40 to 60 sen (approximately 11 to 17 U.S. cents). Small discounts were given to students and larger discounts (up to 50%) were given to those who accompanied the young not only into the realm of Korea’s popular entertainment industry but also into that of documentary and cultural films (i.e., Army and Navy, Tourist, Educational, Sports, Manners and Customs, Sanitation, Science, Art, Politics, Music), flowing out of Japan.

Between 1926 and 1936, or what has been called the first golden age of American cinema in Korea, Hollywood films overwhelmingly dominated the Korean market with its silent films and talkies. A regular supply of American films, which were imported first to Japan, accompanied the gradual but persistent spread of U.S. sound technology.28 During this period, Fox, Famous Players-Lasky-Paramount, and other studios distributed their films through local distributors. The average price of a Japanese sound projector such as the Nippon Sound System cost from 5,000 to 5,500 yen (approximately US$80 to 1,370).

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Warner Bros.—First National, Universal Pictures, independent agent J. H. Morris and others representing Columbia, MGM, RKO, and United Artists—all controlling members of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPPDA)—had distribution and offices and agents operating in Seoul. During this decade, more than 6,700 American feature and non-feature films were submitted to the Government-General of Joseon’s film censorship apparatus. Musicals and gangster films were two of the most prolific genres. As early as 1930, an ongoing supply of American sound films began arriving first in Japan and then Korea—imported by the local MPPDA offices mentioned above. Colonial Korea was unquestionably a key territory for Hollywood (and a smaller number of European distributors)—all of which were agents for Western modernity as a set of cultural attitudes closely linked to advanced technology. This plethora of foreign films (as well as a small number of Japanese films) more than likely inspired Korean filmmakers to make and exhibit sound (and silent) films of their own. This is precisely what occurred in the early 1930s, when a Korean production company tried to make the first Korean talkie.

Korea’s Untold Talkie Story: the Modernization of Tradition

Conventional wisdom tells us that sound began in 1933 with Chunhyangjeon—a film that brought a moment of vitality to a depressed local film industry by providing a breakthrough during the colonial period. Chunhyangjeon is remembered as “Korea’s first successful talkie” in the same way that The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine (1931) is considered “Japan’s first successful talkie.” However, in 1930, there was a spark of modernity among Korean filmmakers when Yi Pil-u—who was born in Seoul in 1897—and Na Un-gyu—the best-known director, actor, and star from Korea’s silent cinema industry—radical-

On behalf of the Korean film community, Na Un-gyu and Yi were eager to capitalize on the talkie fad and use the production to herald the coming of modernity for Korea and Korean culture. Despite this enthusiasm, funding problems persisted and the making of Secret Story failed.\textsuperscript{40} Yi Pil-u and Na Un-gyu eventually had a falling out. Although Na Un-gyu died before he could make another talkie film as famous as his silent Arirang, he did write and direct another sound film called Arirang Part 3 (1936) while working for the Korean Hanyang Film Studio.\textsuperscript{41} Both Yi Pil-u and Na Un-gyu were convinced of the timely opportunity (in terms of training, experience, expertise, and funding) for Koreans to make their own talkies—no matter how popular they might or might not be.\textsuperscript{42} They must have felt the end of the silent era to be near.

The exact order of Yi Pil-u’s next activities prior to the making of the famous Chunhyangjeon in 1935 is somewhat cloudy. However, in 1931, it seems Yi Pil-u kept the talkie dream alive by traveling to Shanghai to observe the exhibition of sound films and to acquire as much knowledge as possible. Commercial sound and talking films had been exhibited in Shanghai since February 1929. Yi probably desired to see and learn about the U.S. Movietone sound-on-film recording system, which Fox news crews were operating there.\textsuperscript{43} Shanghai was a major center for film production and distribution in

\textsuperscript{40} More attention to the attempted making of Secret Story is needed elsewhere. Suffice it to say that at best, Secret Story was proof of the concept for generating new sources of Korean entertainment programs for the Gyeongdong Broadcasting Company (KBC), which was established in 1927. According to Robinson (1998), sales of radio receivers to Koreans were on a significant rise at this time. This also involved a strong link to the popularity of phonograph records. According to Mallingslay (2007) phonograph sales also experienced steady growth during the colonial period. The phonograph recording of Secret Story was in fact made and still exists today as part of a compilation of Korean songs on a commercial CD.

\textsuperscript{41} Although Na Un-gyu made only a small number of sound films, many of the titles of the silent feature films in which he directed and/or starred remained sound: Sanpyeong the Mute (1929); Song for My Home Town (1932); Carmen (1933); and Sound of the Bullets (1933).

\textsuperscript{42} See Na Un-gyu (September 1932).

\textsuperscript{43} Way (1990, 5).
China and one of the best places for Yi to learn how to resolve some of the technical obstacles he was facing. After his return from China, Yi stayed in Japan at his own expense to further study sound production, at which time he made considerable contact with the Tsuchihashi brothers, who were innovating a sound film recording system (based on RCA equipment developed in the United States) for Shōchiku. The Tsuchihashi system was made famous at the time because of the commercial success of Shōchiku’s talkie The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine (1931). Yi Pil-u’s valuable contacts in the Japanese film industry enabled him to negotiate a “technical cooperation contract” with one of the Tsuchihashi brothers. Most likely this involved: (1) the sharing of numerous publications (readily available in Japanese and English) that contained detailed descriptions and schematics of various sound systems; (2) the acquisition of new and old spare parts; and (3) general advice about constructing sound recording and projection equipment. However, knowledge and technical know-how were only part of the equation for success. Desperate for funding, Yi imported Fritz Lang’s first talkie M from Japan for exhibition in Seoul. His fascination with film noir, coupled with the critical acclaim M has received over the years, further suggests that Yi was ahead of his time by focusing on this selection. According to his own testimony, Yi rebuilt a projector for the sound projection of M, but the film failed because it was not commercial enough. In addition to the difficulty Korean audiences had in understanding the German dialogue. There is no record of Yi using a live film narrator to make the film more accessible to audiences in Seoul. Apparently, Yi’s modified projector had proven to be useless as well.

Throughout the early 1930s, Yi Pil-u worked among some of the best of Japan’s film people, who were at the cusp of the technological conversion to sound. He brought back to Korea new skills and ideas as well as his thirst to understand the cinema’s phenomenal changes. It is unclear whether Yi Pil-u returned to Korea for patriotic reasons, if he reached a plateau with training in Japan, or if he was able to secure new funding opportunities in Korea. However, his overseas experiences fed his passion to contribute to global motion picture trends. He became obsessed with sound and used every chance to ingratiate himself with like-minded people. He followed paths that enabled him to gain experience in Osaka, working for two major Japanese film production companies—Nikkatsu and Shōchiku—where he became friends with film production technicians and amateur radio enthusiasts. His connections and experiences would become valuable when returning to sound production in Korea with the making of Chunhyangjeon in 1935. Yi Pil-u’s life story, as told through interviews, suggests he was modern in terms of a cultural hybridity in that he followed the trends, that is to say, “Western” trends in dress and music. At the same time, he actively constructed a local face or specifically-Korean contribution to a new and modern type of cinema that lie within the constraints of colonial domination. In this way, his personal lifestyle was related to the modern technology he engaged with.

Between 1931 and 1935, the Korean film community continued to contribute to Korean cinema by making silent films. While there are no other Korean sound films known to have been made during this time, the American distribution exchanges continued promoting and distributing both sound-on-disc and sound-on-film films. Approximately twenty-one percent of the films exhibited in 1933 were talkies. In 1934, the number of talkies nearly doubled to forty percent of the total number of films screened, and in 1935, more than doubled again to eighty-five percent of the market. Some of the exhibited talkies included: Warner Bros.-First National’s (Vitaphone) On with the Show (1929) and Top Speed (1931), Universal’s Outside the Law (1930) and Dracula (1931), United Artists” all-talking documentary Around the World in 80 Minutes with Douglas Fairbanks (1931),

Fox’s (Movietone) Oscar-winning Bad Girl (1931) and Young as You Feel (1931), as well as other Chinese talkies produced in Shanghai. William R. Langdon, the American Consul-General in Seoul, closely followed developments in the film industry. He was pessimistic about the likely longevity and stamina of talkies in Korea, even though the exhibition market was experiencing the transition to sound in a recognizable way. As far as one can tell, the majority of imported films were older and damaged from overuse, projectors were substandard compared with those used in the United States, and speaker volumes (while muffled in the best of cases) were lowered to create a more favorable environment for the byeonsa or live narrator’s performance during film screenings. Hence, one could say that Korea was an important dumping ground for second-run Hollywood films.

The byeonsa was an important Korean art form and method of cultural expression, which delayed the zenith of sound films in Korea (and Japan). When performing before American, European and Japanese films, byeonsa explained narratives and changed their voices for each character, offering emotional and sentimental interpretations of foreign dialogue. Top byeonsa performers attracted fan clubs and regular followers. Hence, popular byeonsa competed with foreign talkies being screened in Korea’s largest cities. Yet, in some ways, byeonsa were simultaneously beneficial for both American distributors and Korean audiences, because the presence of the live narrator elided the need for subtitles. This practice made it possible for distributors of Hollywood films to diffuse their products so widely throughout Korea for so long. The popularity of Hollywood films in Korea owed a great debt to the byeonsa tradition. Spoken language was easier to follow than written Korean or Japanese. After the talkies came, byeonsa had to ask for the sound volume to be turned down in order to better project their voices. Talkies also competed with other sources of live sounds such as musical accompaniment—as they did in most countries—which offered background music for the byeonsa performances. Because byeonsa and the talkies vied for audience attention, sound films were not initially as popular in Korea (or Japan) as they were in English-speaking countries. In short, Koreans, like the Japanese, had a proclivity toward live film narrators who made the talkies seem less impressive, less important, and possibly less necessary, especially since recorded, mechanical dialogue was a long way from being projected as loudly and clearly, and as entertainingly as live voice.

For filmmaker and critic Yi Gyu-hwan, importing foreign talkies, screening them in original but foreign language, but then using a Korean byeonsa was equivalent to making a tasteless bowl of bibimbap (rice with mixed vegetables). According to Yi, Korean filmmakers were not modern enough to engage with sound, even as filmmakers in the United States and other Western countries were. Perhaps ironically, the belated adoption and diffusion of sound technology and the proliferation of American sound films in Korea was one of the biggest incentives for the local experimentation and production of Korean talkies. Screen quota regulations, propagated as early as August 1918 and strengthened significantly on January 1 1937 by the Government-General of Joseon, had begun to call attention to, and to address the dominance of Hollywood films in the region, thus encouraging the production of more “domestic” films. In the mid-1930s, after Governor-General Uyagi initiated a higher exhibition quota of Korean and Japanese films, which blocked foreign—and primarily American—films, exhibitors with wired cinemas began waiting for more local (Korean and Japanese) sound productions. The time was ripe for the local contribution to sound.

**The Politics of Interpretation: Chunhyangjeon**

Although the attempted completion of Secret Story in 1930 is a significant failure that speaks volumes about the passion to use sound-on-

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50. According to the 1937-38 Motion Picture Almanac (1938, 1179-1175), a key international film trade publication, the Government-General had been planning to raise a “cinema control plan” from 1935, which would ensure the screening ratio of Japanese and Korean films to U.S. films would rise from one-third to more than half.
disc technology, it was not until the production and exhibition of the “first Korean talkie”—Chunhyangjeon—in 1935 that proved Koreans could construct their own spaces of cultural expression within colonial rule. The film was more than a sign of nationalistic resistance; it opened up a different pathway that brought together Korean production crews and Japanese financial backing. Chunhyangjeon was produced by the Gyeongseong Film studio, which had an all-Korean staff, with funding from a Japanese entertainment entrepreneur. While it is difficult to know if the project’s Japanese investor was fully aware of the nationalistic implications for financially supporting Chunhyangjeon, it seems that his status as a Japanese national would have eased the film’s review before the censorship board. Still eager in 1934 to bring sound to the Korean cinema, Yi Pil-u contacted a Japanese colleague with whom he had worked at the Shochiku studio and asked him to bring a recording machine to Korea. Yi purchased the recording machine for 1,200 Korean won, used his accumulated skills to modify it, called it the “P.K.R.” system and used it to make Chunhyangjeon.

The story of Chunhyangjeon was a well-known traditional folk tale loved by Koreans and hence was a smart choice to adapt into a talkie. Based on a popular 400-year-old love story (novel) from the Joseon dynasty, it reflected the intimacies and uniqueness of Korean culture and society. The film is a love story between Monyong, a noble scholar, who is secretly married to Chunhyang, the daughter of a gisaeng, or female entertainer for the court and the aristocratic class in the Joseon period, who were generally considered to be part of the lowest class in Korean society. The story unfolds around a corrupt official and a covert envoy sent by the king to inspect and evaluate regional officials. The heroine of the story keeps her fidelity toward her husband, even though she is forcibly seduced and threatened by Officer Byeon, the corrupt official. Monyong later reveals his identity, saves Chunhyang, and punishes Officer Byeon for his maladministration. In 1923, a silent version of Chunhyangjeon, which was directed by a Japanese filmmaker, had proven itself a box office hit. Every bit of the 1935 sound version of Chunhyangjeon implicated a sense of nationalism expressed in Korean, which ironically, the Government-General of Joseon and its censorship apparatus had allowed. It and other “national films” made before and after Chunhyangjeon provided spectators with glimpses of Korean landscapes, ways of life, and some of the new changes brought about by state-sponsored industrialization. Although the folk tale was several hundred years old, it possibly provided a metaphor for the Korean struggle against colonial and military authority. Under the plot of a love story, the corrupt official and a secret envoy as a savior for Chunhyang and the village people might have been read as a metaphor for Korea, its aggressor, and hope for independence. With this in mind, Chunhyangjeon was highly symbolic as the first successful talkie because of the intense nationalistic response it had the potential to inspire among Koreans.

The Chunhyangjeon advertisement (as seen in figure 3) announced that the film was released at theDansungsina Cinema on October 4, 1935. The headline reads: “A Great Story. . . . The World Has Been Waiting for This. . . . The Premiere of the First Korean Talkie.” The cast and crew are also listed. When Chunhyangjeon was released, audiences rushed to see it for novelty’s sake, which helped it to break box office records. The film became a sign that Korean sound productions could achieve success and recognition from local

Fig. 3. Chunhyangjeon. Advertisement. Chosun Ilbo, October 4, 1935.

audiences, suggesting promise for future productions and box office takings. The success of Chunhyangjeon was evidence that a sound film could be made within an industry that lacked modern facilities and huge numbers of engineers and production assistants.

For An Seok-yeong, a Korean film director and prominent film critic writing for the Chosun Ilbo, the film was a “shock” because no one knew if it could be done. He questioned whether or not Chunhyangjeon’s success would lead to a rise in production and distribution of Korean films because he was unsure if there were enough sound recording engineers, actors with speaking experience, and editing specialists to build an ongoing sound industry. All the same, An Seok-yeong hoped for a day when more young people would enter the film business, making all Koreans proud of their accomplishments. Yi Myeong-u, the director, initially saw the project as an ambitious plan because of the lack of facilities and underdeveloped technology in Korea at the time. Nevertheless, he and his brother, Pil-u, wanted to accomplish as much as possible. Although advances in sound technology in Europe and the United States by this time had in sound technology in Europe and the United States by this time had

Invest in and employ the new technology on a broad level. After all, Korean filmmakers were still trying to perfect their silent filmmaking skills. For Bak Gi-chae (1935). another writer for the Chosun Ilbo, the mere making of an all-Korean talkie under colonial rule was more significant than any of the film’s technical limitations because it added a new life to the Korean film community and society at large. Even those who did not have the means to see the film probably would have heard about it by word of mouth.

While Chunhyangjeon was a box office smash partly due to its novelty appeal—as was true for The Jazz Singer (1927) in the United States and The Neighbor’s Wife and Mine in Japan—the acting performances and technical achievements left a lot to be desired. Productions efforts were commendable, but the presentation of the background, costume, and characters remained underdeveloped. In addition, the talkie’s subject matter was not as fully expressed as in the silent version of the same story. Moreover, the pronunciation of the Korean dialogue was not clear. The film may have failed to live up to the high expectations of it as “Korea’s first talkie,” but Korean audiences were quick to forgive its lack of quality. It was a cultural triumph to hear Korean spoken from Korean actors on the silver screen, which partly legitimized a national identity under colonial rule and the influence of Western media. The awkward and clumsy-sounding words were understandable given the early exploratory stages of talkies in Korea. Chunhyangjeon: received high praise from other newspaper critics despite its technical imperfections. After watching Chunhyangjeon, Indol (a.k.a. Seo Hang-suk), a cultural critic writing for the Donga Ilbo, expressed feeling like someone who had finally eaten kimchi after being fed up with eating too much lamb. According to reviews by Indol (1935), Korean audiences loved to watch Chunhyangjeon regardless of the film’s quality. The film’s nationalistic appeal was unquestionably reflected in this critical reception.

Still, other Korean critics were pessimistic about making local talkies, choosing to reject the modernization of the arts. According to the well-known novelist Sim Hun, Koreans were not ready in the mid-1930s for the new spectatorial practices required to enjoy talkies. Nor did he feel there was a need to hear Korean language on the screen purely for novelty’s sake. He accepted the fact that talkies were popular in Korea, but saw this modern filmmaking tool as part of a technology bubble advancing too rapidly to control. Perhaps he was a perfectionist like Charles Chaplin, who believed sound tainted the beauty and art of silent films; in any case, Sim Hun clearly supported more traditional lines of thinking regarding cultural practices. The coming of sound to Korea looked as if it were skipping key stages in the general development of the technology—that is, the production, distribution, and exhibition of sound-on-disc films—that most other countries had experienced. Moreover, it seems the film industry in Korea had only just begun to perfect the art of silent film.
making. For Sim Hun (1936), making talkies required precise scientific and technical know-how, which he believed Korean screenwriters, cameramen, engineers, and actors lacked. Essentially, he saw the Korean film community as a bunch of young school children having just learned to read aspiring to a childhood fantasy of writing adult books.

Although Chunhyangjeon no longer survives, there is a rich legacy of newspaper and magazine articles and editorials, as well as advertisements, still photographs and interviews with members of the production crew. The success of Chunhyangjeon led to a continuation of talkie productions as other filmmakers followed in its footsteps. The all Korean-staffed Gyeongseong Film Studio also made Hong Gil-dong jeon Part II (The Tale of Hong Gil-dong) in mid-1936. It was a part-talkie backed by a Japanese producer and directed and written by Yi Myeong-u. Yi Pil-u recorded the sound. It was released on June 10, 1936 at Dansungsia Cinema in Seoul.54 According to Kim Gwan, a critic writing for the Chosun ilbo, Hong Gil-dong jeon Part II also was flawed because of its poor audio quality.55 However, once again, it seems that the Yi brothers were ahead of their time. It can be said that Yi Pil-u’s P.K.R. sound-on-film system was still being perfected, showing the Yi brothers’ commitment to making more sound films. Other filmmakers/critics such as Song Yeong believed Korean talkies had not yet reached their full potential. They were not as good as they could be because they largely contained Western themes (free romance, capitalism, etc.) with Korean costumes, presenting a superficial level of Korean culture. At the same time, Song (1936) wished his fellow filmmakers had made talkies with iconographic Korean images such as women’s silhouettes in doorways, along with sounds such as ironing (laundry) rods, commonly-heard thumping sounds, as well as sad sighs and laughs.

55. See Kim G. (1936). Kim was displeased that foreign music—a symphony by Beethoven—was used (instead of traditional Korean music), which he believed made the story harder for Koreans to follow and relate to.

Fig. 4. Yi Pil-u and the film crew on the set of Hong Gil-dong jeon Part II (circa 1936). Courtesy of the Korean Film Archive.
unwanted equipment was passed off to those who could not afford the latest models.

Conclusion

Korean film makers and technicians working under the difficult cultural and financial climate of the colonial period understood the ideas behind industrialization and modernity, despite the fact that some of the ideas were brought by the Japanese and the prominent distribution of thousands of American (and European) silent and sound films. Individual, and at times shared, experiments with sound enabled a diverse group of Koreans to do more than dream about contributing to a modern, popular culture—they did whatever they could to gain production experience and training and to make films—while responding to the demands of the colonial regime. Permitting Koreans to gain commercial film production training and experience under the Cultural Policy reforms launched by Governor-General Sai-Tō Makoto after 1919—or at least not entirely preventing them from doing so—encouraged the development of a “golden age” of silent Korean cinema. In addition to feature film projects, non-commercial work became available after 1920, when the Government-General established a Motion Picture Corps under its Central Council General Investigation Section as part of the administration’s larger aims of promoting the colonial Korean project to Japan and beyond. This affiliated office with the same importance (on the same level) as the Communications Bureau, Railway Bureau, Monopoly Bureau, Customs House, and Law Courts.

56. Most Korean film scholars agree that a “golden age” of silent films occurred between 1926 and 1934 (Yi 1969; Lee and Choe 1998; Heo 2000; Kim and Chung 2001; and Yi 2002). This period is considered “golden” in terms of the quantity and quality (technical and artistic achievement) of films made and the problems and issues faced by film practitioners. According to Yi Jee-ni (1969, 84), about eighty films were produced between 1926 and 1935. This number was over half of the total estimated productions made before liberation in 1945.

57. Government-General of Joseon (1936, 42). According to flow charts depicting the organization of the Government-General, the Central Council’s Investigation Section (after its Board of Information was merged with the Suicide Section) was an included in the list of films, which attempted to display the spirit of Japan and Korea as one country, includes: See Ong-i’s Troop Train (Curyong yeolcho, 1938), Fisherman’s Fire (Seodo, 1939), Homeless Angel (Uhmomsan cheonna, 1941), An Seok-yeong’s Volunteer Soldier (Jusanggyeong, 1941) and Baik Chul-chun’s Struggle of Joseon (1943). These were “pro-Japanese” films that contrasted significantly with the “national films” from the late 1920s and early 1930s. In the case of the Troop Train and Volunteer Soldier co-productions, Korean technicians such as Yi Pil-u, Yi Myeong-u and others still played central production roles.
preneurs and/or all-Korean-staffed production crews. Modern sound technology was used as a tool to bring cultural modernity to other Koreans by making films utilizing spoken language—efforts many Korean film historians see as attempts to articulate national feelings against oppression by colonial authority. Yet, on a more pragmatic level, they also may have sought to compete with some of the American talkies that had already been screening for a number of years with American sound projectors.

With the advent of sound, Korean filmmakers and technicians appeared to embark on a journey that involved a number of overlapping mixed motives. From even the most basic revisionist standpoint, the sum total of their reasons reaches far beyond nationalist concerns. A more dynamic range of reasons behind why nationalist goals. A more dynamic range of reasons behind why

filmworkers and technicians worked so hard in such times: 1) to pursue political goals; 2) for fame and greater opportunities to work and train in Hollywood; in other parts of the Japanese Empire and possibly in Hong Kong; 3) in other parts of the Japanese Empire and possibly in Hong Kong; 4) for simple economic gain and/or the larger pursuit of a better life; 5) for the love of creating more comfortable or cosmopolitan lifestyle; 6) to make entertaining commercial films; 7) to make audiences for the 1919 March First movement; 7) to collaborate in a general sense on Japanese co-productions that could lead to better funding opportunities for more Korean films; 8) to find venues for more Korean films; 8) to find venues for more Korean films; 9) to find venues for more Korean films; 10) to escape the confines of the colonial environment in either a literal or figurative sense.

Making Chunhyangjeon was a momentous achievement in terms of available technology and limited production facilities. One might even now say that Chunhyangjeon’s success surprised the Government-General of Joseon, especially since there is no evidence to suggest the colonial administration helped fund it or many other Korean productions. Earlier attempts in 1930 to make the sound-on-disc

talkie Secret Story is even more surprising. Although endeavors to generate funds for Secret Story may have fallen on deaf ears, the production was an outright attempt to forge a contemporary consciousness, that is, to bring modernity to Korea, and to participate in global trends. Although Na Ung-su and Yi Po-u failed to complete Secret Story, theirs is a significant case worthy of study because it demonstrates that pioneers in the Korean cinema attempted to catch up with the global transition to sound. They absorbed the state’s assets in any way they could—all while conforming to tighter film regulations and pretending to be docile to the Japanese authorities. Ultimately, a national film industry was developed through the spread of modern sound technology, which originated from a combination of telling Korean stories and later cooperating on a small number of propaganda feature films. Korean film pioneers may not have been in total harmony with the state’s agenda of modernizing the empire, but they surely knew how to increase their opportunities and express themselves in various ways.

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