

Filmmaking on the Edge: Shin Sang-Ok and Choi Eun-Hee in North Korea (1978–1986)

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Two legendary Korean cinematographers, the director and producer Shin Sang-ok (1926-2006), and his wife the actress Choi Eun-hee (born 1926), are well known in Korea. Both of them became rare figures in film history destined to be more renowned for their life than their work. Shin was a maverick in the emerging South Korean film industry of the 1950s and 1960s, an aesthetic and technical pioneer who enjoyed both mass-market success and critical acclaim. He even went on to make seven films in North Korea under the aegis of the then young leader Kim Jong-il. The circumstances of his defection to North Korea remain disputed and seem related to the kidnapping of his wife by the North Korean intelligence from Hong Kong. Several months of imprisonment were followed by years of creative work for the oppressive regime. Both, Shin and Choi succeeded in defecting to the West and eventually returned to South Korea in 1990 after the military dictatorship was voted out of office.

This paper will look closely at the nature of the relationship that existed between the artists and the conflicting regimes throughout the colonial occupation, liberation, civil war and democratisation of Korea. Special attention will be dedicated to their years of life in North Korea and their informal meetings and conversations with Kim Jong-il, which were secretly recorded by the famous filmmaking couple. The autobiographical books by Shin and Choi, which were published in the US and South Korea, will be used as the primary source on their life and views regarding the turmoil of the continuing inter-Korean conflict.

Kidnapping or Defection?

Shin Sang-ok (1926-2006) was born during the Japanese colonial occupation into the family of a prominent doctor of Chinese medicine in Chŏngjin, North Hamgyŏng Province. In 1944 at the height of war in the Pacific, a talented adolescent hailing from a wealthy family, Shin went to Japan to study art. He was admitted in the Tokyo Fine Arts School in Ueno, the predecessor of the National University of Fine Arts and Music in Tokyo. There he quickly fell in love with surrealism and French cinema. However, in April 1945, just months before WWII's final showdown, he returned to Korea. A sudden illness helped him dodge the mandatory conscription to the Imperial Army, sparing his life and talent.

Shin loved film and after August 1945 he made a living by drawing cinema posters. He started his film career as assistant production designer for Choi In-kyu's film "Viva Freedom!" (1946). It was the first South Korean film made after the country achieved independence, and was focused on the anti-Japanese resistance. The film was completed in 15 days but for Shin Sang-ok it became the formative time in which he learnt the basics of filming. Soon he began producing films independently, even the outbreak of the Korean War failed to challenge his enthusiasm. In his first film, "The Evil Night" (1952), Shin raised the issue of colonial past by showing a prostitute who tells the story of her life as a "comfort woman" serving the Japanese soldiers.

Another story of moral downfall filmed on the back-drop of the ruined capital Seoul was Shin's "Flower in Hell" (1958). The leading role of a prostitute, Sonya, was played by director's wife, actress Choi Eun-hee (born 1926).¹ Shot in a resolutely neo-realist mode, this

¹ Choi Eun-hee began her film career in 1947 in the film "A New Oath" and for the next 20 years she was one of the biggest stars in Korean film. For her role in "Flower in Hell" Choi became the winner of a Best Actress award at the 2nd Buil Film Awards, a South Korean film awards ceremony annually hosted by the *Busan Ilbo* newspaper between 1958 and 1973.

film showed the aftermath of the Korean War, where Seoul became a city of destitution and despair. The presence of American troops in South Korea resulted in the development of black markets and a murky underground world, where smuggled goods, hostess bars, and diverse outbursts of violence complemented each other.

Shin Sang-Ok's documentary-like pessimism gave rise to a new trend in the Korean film industry and heralded the first days of the 1960's "Golden Age" in South Korean cinematography. During this period, Shin worked prolifically. Often directing two or more films per year, he earned the nickname, "The Prince of Korean Cinema". During the 1960s, the production company he started, Shin Films, completed around 300 movies, many of which were acknowledged by domestic awards. Shin's early dryness and aggression, which can be commonly found in American *noir* movies of the 1930s, soon disappeared and his films became more static, best expressed in "My Mother and Her Guest" (1961) and in the historical drama "Eunuch" (1968).

During the 1970s, Shin became less active. This was in part due the fact that South Korea's film industry in general was subjected to strict censorship and constant government interference. Shin Films were producing some 40 pictures per year, employing hundreds of filmmaking staff. But most of the films Shin directed during that period ended up being flops. Difficulties with finding venture capital were exacerbated by increasingly intrusive censorship. Shin personally knew President Park Chung-hee and Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil, but by openly raising the issue of censorship in 1976, he upset the dictator who swiftly closed Shin's studio.²

It was also a rocky period in Shin's private life in which he and actress Choi Eun-hee divorced. Nevertheless, Choi continued to participate in some international projects initiated by Shin. In January 1978 she went to Hong Kong to discuss an acting job but was lured to a private boat in Repulse Bay by North Korean agents. The kidnapping operation, as it turned out later, was ordered by the future DPRK leader Kim Jong-il who wanted to develop a modern filming industry in the North. Kim personally went to Nampo port to greet the South Korean film star, as if she had volunteered to pay him a visit.

Shin Sang-Ok was preparing to immigrate to the US, when he learnt about the disappearance of his ex-wife. He travelled to Hong Kong to investigate but fell under the suspicion of local police and the South Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). The ROK government refused to extend his passport and Shin had to wait in Japan for his American visa. While in Tokyo, he was in contact with the Korean Democratic Unification Union, an association closely linked to the prominent opposition leader and future President Kim Dae-Jung. Shin was asked to produce a film about the 1972 KCIA's abduction of Kim and his miraculous release, but a shortage of funds and the sensitivity of topic did not permit him to carry out the project.

Soon the US embassy in Paris refused Shin an entry visa, suspecting that he had killed his ex-wife. Shin was desperately looking for a place to immigrate and seriously considered settling in West Germany or West Berlin. But the KCIA began harassing him and his close friends whom he visited in Europe. As most his of savings were kept in Hong Kong and his business interests were focused in Singapore, Shin left Europe to promote his films across Southeast Asia. In his memoirs Shin recalls that in July 1978 he felt like "a lost dog" and was ready to return to Seoul, but fell victim of a kidnapping plot. At one point, told that he could buy a passport from a South American country, Shin was lured into a trap set for him by DPRK agents. On the way to dinner one night, Shin had a sack filled with chloroform pulled over his head before being loaded to a ship bound for North Korea.

² Shin Sang-ok and Choi Eun-hee. 2001. Uriui Talchulun Kkunaji Anatta [Our escape has not ended yet], Part 1. Seoul: Wolgan Joseonsa, pp.38-41.

Pyongyang now admits it abducted 13 Japanese citizens in the late 1970s and 1980s to act as cultural advisers. However, even today the DPRK authorities deny the kidnapping accusations in relation to Shin and Choi, claiming that they went to North Korea willingly. At some stage of their captivity in the North they both had to give a press conference to “admit” that their choice to leave South Korea was voluntary. While Shin’s personal situation prior to the incident was very complicated and looked politically motivated, Choi’s confession seems less credible. Trying to save their reputation the couple risked their lives and made secret audio recordings of many conversations with Kim Jong-il to support their story as innocent abductees.

A Prison or a Golden Cage?

After the abduction, Shin Sang-ok was told by the North Korean agents that his wife, Choi Eun-hee, had been murdered in Hong Kong by South Korean spies. Shin was put up in a comfortable guesthouse, but tried to escape twice in desperation. One day he borrowed a car and drove to a railway station, where he hid among crates of explosives. He even managed to sneak aboard a freight train but was caught the following day and soon found himself in a prison camp. Yet even in the camp he was protected from afar, a testament to his very important status. When Shin tried to starve himself to death, prison officials forced him through a funnel. A guard told Shin that it was the first attempted suicide during his tenure that he was ordered to prevent.

Shin’s incarceration in Prison No.6 of the Department of Public Security continued for more than four years. He was living on the diet of corn, salt, and grass but the most difficult thing was that he did not know exactly why he had been taken to North Korea. During the period of incarceration Shin had many fortuitous encounters, including one with the prominent North Korean historian Yi Na-yŏng. By that time Yi had spent sixteen years in prison, also unaware of the nature of his guilt and the length of his sentence. Deprived of access to any historical materials, Yi kept writing a new, Kim Il-sung-centred version of Korea’s Modern History using only his memory and imagination. He created an heroic saga about the invincible clan of Kims, the saviours of the nation.³ From these encounters Shin learnt about the dramatic changes which North Korean political culture had suffered during the 1960s following the introduction of *Juche* [National Self-reliance] ideology.

After four years of imprisonment, Shin won his release through a series of abjectly apologetic letters sent to the Great Leader Kim Il-sung and his son and official heir Dear Leader Kim Jong-il. Known for his penchant for film and theatre, the Dear Leader orchestrated a scene of reunion for Shin Sang-ok and Choi Eun-hee in 1983. They both were brought to a dinner party in the capital, Pyongyang, where they met face-to-face for the first time after the five years of separation. Choi had not even known that Shin was in North Korea until that moment. Kim Jong-il knew how to make things cinematic and advised Shin and Choi to re-marry, offering a huge party and an apology.

Once again Shin Sang-ok and Choi Eun-hee's talents could be put to good use. According to their memoirs (published in 1988 in the US and in 2001 in Seoul), Kim Jong-il was worried that films produced in the capitalist and decadent South were better than those produced in the communist North. Kim genuinely believed that this was because North Korean cinematographers relied too much on the state and did not care enough about the quality of their artistic output. Kim admired the atmosphere of free competition in South Korea, where actors and directors had to sweat to make their films artistically attractive and commercially successful.⁴ While not assuming that there was anything wrong with socialism, Kim also

³ Choi Eun-hee and Shin Sang-ok. 1988. Chogugŭn Chŏhanŭl Chŏmŏlli [My Motherland is Faraway], Vol. 2. Monterey: Pacific Artist Cooperation, pp.456-457.

⁴ Shin Sang-ok. 2007. Nanŭn Yŏnghwa Yŏtta [I was a Film], Seoul: Randomhouse Korea, p.125

lamented that North Korean film studios were technically far behind their South Korean competitors.

Kim himself was a great enthusiast of cinematography, possessed a massive collection of films (at least 15,000). He was openly a big fan of James Bond films, "Rambo" and the "Friday the 13th" franchises. Kim naively believed that cinema was the way to elevate the image of DPRK in the eyes of the world. Over the years Kim Jong-il worked on dozens of films, even publishing a number of books on the subject.⁵ But by 1978, Kim had become profoundly disappointed with his own Mt. Paektu Creative Group and other studios despite their compliance with the "monolithic guidance" of the Workers' Party.

"The North's film-makers are just doing perfunctory work. They don't have any new ideas. Their works have the same expressions, redundancies, the same old plots. All our movies are filled with crying and sobbing," complained Kim. The Dear Leader admitted that North Korea did not have the proper pool of talent to make great films and, therefore, he arranged to procure a real filmmaker. He kidnapped Shin and gave him millions of dollars, four filming pavilions with audio-recording rooms, and more artistic freedom than any North Korean director had ever enjoyed before. Shin and Choi were free to fly to East Berlin for location shots, though constantly shadowed by ever-present security minders.

Remembering that Shin's filming company in South Korea had been shut down by Park Chung-hee, in 1983 Kim Jong-il established a film production company in the middle of Pyongyang also named Shin Film. Shin worried that Kim Jong-il would force him to make a political propaganda film for regime adulation. Instead, he was given a budget of US \$3 million dollars each year to produce high quality feature films. His hosts were friendly enough, and Shin would later say that the North Korean film crews were fine, and made up of good people. "Just 200 or so were evil, and they were in charge," he told the Guardian in 2003.⁶

Propaganda or Masterpiece?

Between 1983 and 1987, Shin Sang-ok directed seven films in Pyongyang, with Kim Jong-il acting as an executive producer and Choi Eun-hee playing lead roles. Perhaps Shin's greatest cinematic moment came with his finest film, "Runaway" (1984). It told the tragic story of a Korean family wandering around Manchuria the 1920s, suffering from Japanese oppression and the dishonesty of their neighbours. The following year, another masterpiece, "Salt" (1985), was created by the kidnapped couple. Continuing the same theme of anti-Japanese armed struggle in Manchuria, Shin reached out to the feelings of all Koreans in and outside of the divided peninsula. For her part in this film Choi received the Award for Best Actress at the 1985 Moscow International Film Festival.

An interesting episode took place during the shooting of "Runaway", in which Shin needed to create a scene with a train explosion. Shin submitted a proposal directly to Kim Jong-il, saying that he wanted to detonate and derail a real train to enhance the movie's special effects. Kim's approval came immediately and Shin was impressed. "This is only possible in North Korea. It's the first time I experienced a film shoot so spectacular," Shin wrote in his memoirs, believing that such consideration was only possible because Kim Jong-il himself was a film enthusiast, who not only used films for a political agenda but also wanted to create something new, original and extraordinary.

In 1985 Shin produced a very different genre of film. "Pulgasari" was Godzilla-type of movie set in the 14th century Koryo Dynasty Korea. A small doll magically comes to life when it touches blood eventually transforming into a metal-eating monster that helps the local

⁵ See Kim Jong-il's works *On The Art of Cinema* (1973), and *The Cinema and Directing* (1987).

⁶ Gourevitch, Philip, 'The Madness of Kim Jong Il', *The Observer* (2 November 2003). Available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2003/nov/02/features.magazine37>

peasants overthrow their feudal lord. But its constant demand for metal overwhelms the farming community who needs to feed the monster with their metal tools to satisfy its appetite. The beast that saved them initially must be destroyed. The plot is a subtle allusion to the story of capitalism running amok: efficient but hungry for resources.

“Pulgasari” (1985) was notable for featuring man-in-suit effects by Teruyoshi Nakano, the special effects director of the original Godzilla movies. Nakano was convinced that he would be allowed to return to Japan, and so he brought his team of technicians with him, including Kenpachiro Satsuma, who had played Godzilla in numerous films.⁷ “Pulgasari” was made for export and very soon became a cult classic, but after Shin Sang-ok’s defection it was banned inside North Korea. The fact that the dictator himself was executive producer and that capitalism was the primary target did not save the reputation of this first monster movie in the DPRK.

While working in Pyongyang, Shin claimed that the main obstacle to advancing North Korean cinema was created by Kim Il-sung’s “instructions”. He was otherwise very frank in dealing with Kim Jong-il, sometime even dangerously risky, advising the dictator to “free himself from the cult of personality.” In “Salt” (1985), for the first time in a North Korean filming history, Shin inserted a passage from the Holy Bible (Mathew 5:13) instead of Kim Il-sung’s instructions. Among other important landmarks, Shin’s movies depicted the first onscreen kiss, a sensational novelty for militaristic North Korean cinema. He was also the first to introduce the list of cast and staff.

“Genghis Khan” was intended to become another collaborative project for Shin Sang-ok, who had long wanted to make an authentically Asian version of “The Conqueror” (1956). Kim Jong-il, as the perfect producer, was naturally enthusiastic about themes of invasion and tyranny. Apparently they both agreed that this follow-up to “Pulgasari” would be of great export value, even if the idea was not preliminary approved by Kim’s father. Plans were being made for a joint venture with a company in Austria to distribute the future block-buster world-wide. Kim trusted Shin enough to permit him travelling to Europe to discuss details.

Yet the stifling atmosphere of the totalitarian state could not satisfy the true artists. They had no doubts about leaving the golden cage: “To be in North Korea living a good life ourselves and enjoying movies while everyone else was not free was not happiness, but agony,” Shin and Choi wrote in their memoirs years later. Nevertheless, Shin evaluated his own work in North Korea as a unique experiment that he was ultimately proud of: “I believe that the films which I made in North Korea were not contaminated by ideology, but became examples of pure collaboration between the North and South Korean filmmakers.”⁸

In 1986, the filmmaking couple managed to escape Kim Jong-il’s clutches while attending a film festival in Vienna. In an actual car chase the two raced to the American embassy where they applied for political asylum. Shin was reluctant to go home for fear that the ROK’s secret police wouldn’t believe his film-like story and suspect him of being a communist sympathiser. The National Security Law continued to be a convenient tool in the hands of dictators. But the audiotapes with the voice of Kim Jong-il, which Choi had secretly made during one of the audiences, were particularly useful for their case and made their return to South Korea in 1994 possible.

Unification or Co-existence?

A scholar of Theatre Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, Kim Suk-young, believes that “If all Kim Jong-il wanted was to innovate North Korean cinema and achieve

⁷ Faraci, Devin, ‘PULGASARI: Kim Jong Il’s Kaiju Film’, *Badass Digest* (19 December 2011). Available on-line: <http://badassdigest.com/2011/12/19/pulgasari-kim-jong-ils-kaiju-film/>

⁸ Shin Sang-ok. 2007. *Nanün Yǒnghwa Yǒtta [I was a Film]*, Seoul: Randomhouse Korea, p.133

international acclaim, he could have made exceptions by either sending a few North Korean directors to the Western world to bring back advanced filmmaking technology or inviting directors from Japan or other Western countries to North Korea for a limited time. Instead, Kim Jong-il decided to target South Koreans for reasons dictated not entirely by the aesthetics of filmmaking but by the ethnicities of the filmmakers. The fact that Shin and Choi were Koreans must have been a determining factor for Kim's decision precisely for the reason that Kim envisioned the couple functioning as a cultural buffer, filtering and bringing in Western cinema through the disguised forms of Korean ethnicity."⁹

Indeed, the saga of Shin Sang-ok and Choi Eun-hee's malicious abduction and fortunate escape is most extraordinary and reveals many aspects of the country's cultural and political life. It encapsulates the tragedy of the Korean conflict and hints at the possibility of reconciliation. Like in a good film, both the victims and villains have shown their human side, real intentions, and readiness for compromise. Even the happy ending in this particular story adds much optimism to the continuing drama of the ongoing Korean stand-off.

Before being abducted by Kim Jong-il's secret envoys, director Shin was on the run from the South Korean dictator Park Chung-hee and his military government. Shin was also in contact with the opposition led by Kim Dae-jung, who was once a victim of the abduction case organised by the KCIA. Their misadventures should be understood in the context of the ongoing Korean War, which has deep roots in the colonial past, allied occupation, and Cold War politics. The absence of radio, postal or telephone contacts between the North and South is responsible for a huge cultural gap which in turn hinders dialogue and understanding.

Tragically, abductions and defections have remained the only possible way for Koreans to visit the other part of their country beyond the DMZ. The longing for national unity is usually coincided with the claims for exclusive legitimacy of only one political regime that leads to the usual denial of the other rival regime in Korea. A decade before Kim Dae-jung announced his "Sunshine Policy" of peace and reconciliation, director Shin and actress Choi became the first messengers from the South who inadvertently found their way to the North and participated in the creation of a new Korean cinema: national but not nationalistic, ideologically neutral, and popular both in and outside of Korea.

With their hard work and talent, Shin and Choi not only improved the quality of DPRK cinema, but also created excellent new cinematic productions, which would have never come to fruition in the South. They taught North Korean filmmakers and learnt from them at the same time. More importantly, they showed their compatriots and the world that despite their ideological differences, North and South Koreans have much in common. The commonality of history, language, traditions and other cultural attributes made the films produced during Shin Sang-ok's North Korean captivity universally accepted as Korean films. Western influences, as well as ideological censorship, did not replace their characteristically Korean features.

The North Korean leader's hopes for the future was surprisingly similar to those of the South Korean filmmakers. This became particularly apparent on 1 January 1985, when Kim Il-sung personally met with Shin and Choi, specifically asking them to create films "which would be acceptable after unification". Kim had long advocated a plan for confederation between the capitalist South and communist North, with two separate governments and administrative arrangements. Kim also referred to his conversation with Deng Xiao Ping about the future of Hong Kong and the "one country, two systems" thesis. Addressing Shin and Choi, Kim Il-

⁹ Kim Suk-young "'Guests" of the Dear Leader: Shin Sang-ok, Choi Eun-hee, and North Korea's Cultural Crisis', *Towards Sustainable Economic & Security Relations in East Asia: U.S. & ROK Policy Options*, KEI Joint US Korea Academic Studies (2008), p.206, pp.196-208

sung admitted the ambiguity of future historical developments but strongly encouraged them to see the future of Korea through the notion of “one nation, two systems”.¹⁰

It is symbolic that the concluding sections of Shin and Choi’s memoirs “Our Escape Has Not Ended Yet” (2001) are written in the form of open letters to Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung. Shin frankly conveyed his opinions to his former captor, spelling out what should be done to make North Korea a better place for people to live: i.e. stopping the pursuit of superiority, improving the country’s economy, and abandoning the nuclear program. In his address to the former president Kim Dae-jung, the famous filmmaker warned him about the continuing conflict within South Korean society [*Namnam Kaltung*] and criticised him for not accomplishing the goals had which meanwhile brought him the glory of Nobel Peace Prize. Shin shrewdly explained the reasons why Kim Jong-il could not visit Seoul, listing the fears and phobias of any North Korean leader where the presence of US troops on the peninsula occupied an important place. Shin also used this opportunity to deliver a message from one Kim to another, but also warned them about the dangers of a new civil war and the fallacy of unification plans.

Kim Dae-jung, Kim Jong-il and their messenger Shin Sang-ok have already passed away but their dialogue continues on the pages of the memoirs by the filmmaker-turned-peacemaker. Their experiences, however, once again support the view that the well-known political notion of “By Our Own Efforts” [*Uri Mijok Kkirŭ*] remains the most feasible scenario for bringing the broken halves of the Korean nation together without any foreign influence or interference.

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¹⁰ Shin Sang-ok and Choi Eun-hee. 2001. *Uriŭi Talchurŭn Kkŭnaji Anatta* [Our escape has not ended yet], Part 1. Seoul: Wŏlgan Chosŏnsa, pp.361-365.