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Korean Cinema during the Colonial Period: In-between Pro-Japaneseness and Modernity

Introduction

The formation of modernity in Korea during the colonial period is still a controversial issue in academia, in part because Korean historiography has not solved the matter of pro-Japanese sentiment. I believe that it is necessary to re-evaluate pro-Japanese artists and to write Korean cinema history, and by extension Korean modern history, while both avoiding justification of pro-Japanese activities and refraining from making pro-Japanese artists the Other, opposed to Korean nationalist movements or modernization projects in Korea.

In part due to the lack of material, study and research into Korean cinema during the colonial period has been extremely rare in Korean academia, as well as outside Korea. Through the textual analysis of two films made in 1941, *Angels on the Streets* (Guri-eui Chunsadeul) and *Volunteer* (Jiwonbyung), I will explore the agony of Chosun filmmakers restricted to life as colonial subjects, and Japanese film censorship policies during the colonial period. Also, through research on the KAPF movement and study of the history

of early Korean cinema (particularly from the 1920 to the 1940s), I will ultimately examine how the Chosun people's desire for modernity is revealed in these two films.

Filmmaking in Colonial Korea

Although the Chosun people despaired after witnessing the violent suppression by the Japanese authorities of the March 1 Movement of 1919—the nationwide liberation movement in which 2 million people rallied, and which resulted in more than 20,000 casualties including 8,000 deaths—the movement functioned to organize the Liberation Army (*Dongnipgun*) outside the Korean peninsula and to establish the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai, and changed the direction of the rule of the Chosun Government-General into cultural policy, which ranged from 1919 to 1937. During the Japanese Forcible Occupation Period, the colonial policy of Japan can be divided into three periods: (1) the period of Military Rule, from the Korea-Japan annexation in 1910 to 1919; (2) the period of Cultural Rule, from 1919 to the Manchurian incident in 1931; and (3) the period of Culture-genocide Policy from 1931 to 1945.

After the March 1 Movement of 1919, the Chosun Government-General recognized that their oppressive military policy ruling by gun and sword had not worked. Admiral Saito Makoto became the new governor-general of Chosun in August 1919, and transformed the ruling policy into a seemingly less harsh one—that is, the cultural policy. During this period of cultural policy (the 1920s), it was legal to exhibit Korean traditional culture, such as publishing newspapers in Hangul. It was during this period that socialism and class consciousness began to emerge in Korea, and women's and youth movements developed. And it was during this period that the first Korean films, such as *The*

Righteous Revenge (*Uirijeok Kutu*, dir. Park Sung-pil, 1919), *The National Borders* (*Kookkyung*, dir. Kim Do-san, 1923), and *The Plighted Love under the Moon* (*Wolhau Maengseo*, dir. Yoon Baek-nam, 1923)¹ were screened. Na Un-kyu's *Arirang* (1926), which depicts the grief of Koreans being exploited by Japanese colonialists, touched off anti-Japanese sentiment and became a sensational box-office hit during this period of cultural policy rule. Korean cinema enjoyed its first golden age through the late 1930s. During the first Golden Age of (South) Korean cinema, from 1926 to 1935, more than 80 films were produced, which accounts for more than half of all films—140 films—made during the entire colonial period. More than 40 production companies existed during the Golden Age, accounting for almost 80% of all production companies that existed in Korea before the Liberation in 1945.²

Considering the quantity and popularity of Korean films produced during this period and the popularity of foreign films, including Hollywood and German films, it is not surprising that film censorship regulations were established in Korean cinema during this period. In August 1926, Governor-General Saito created a national Censorship Board and announced a new film policy, Government-General Law No. 59. This was, according to B. M. Yecies, the first “systematized” film censorship regulations. Through the central censorship regulations, the Japanese government controlled both domestic/Korean films and foreign films. According to Law No. 59, “socially accepted

¹ *The Righteous Revenge* was, in fact, not a film in its traditional sense, but was a Kino-drama. Kino-drama is a stage play in which actors perform against the backdrop of a projected feature. *The Plighted Love under the Moon* was a film, not a kino-drama. Also, the identification of the first true Korean cinema and the definition of Korean cinema are still controversial issues in academia in part because of the matter of whether the filmmakers were Japanese or Korean. For more detailed history of early Korean cinema, see Lee Young-il and Choe Young-chol, *The History of Korean Cinema*, translated by Richard Lynn Greever, Seoul: Jimoondang Press, 1998. For problematic issues in the historiography of early Korean cinema, see Lee Hyangjin, *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

² Lee Young-il, *The Complete History of Korean Cinema*, Seoul: Sodo, 2004, p. 98.

films” should avoid “violating the dignity of the emperor.” As Yecies notes, Law No. 59 “reinforced a kind of international/national/local hierarchy, which in reality was not always easy to control completely.”³ Overall, Korean progressive historians agree that the Chosun Government-General’s more appeasement-minded cultural policy aimed to split the Korean people according to their class differences, and to ally the privileged class of Chosun society with Japanese authorities.

The cultural policy confronted an abrupt change after 1931. During the last stage of colonial rule, when Japan was embroiled in the Manchurian Incident of 1931, the Second Sino-Japanese war in 1937, and the Pacific War in 1941, etc., Japanese colonial power attempted to eradicate every kind of Korean-ness under the name of the assimilation policy, “Japan and Korea as a single body” (*Naisen ittai* in Japanese), which always paradoxically connoted superior Japanese and inferior Koreans (*Chosenjing* in Japanese). During this period, Governor-General Minami Jiro, who ruled Korea from 1936 to 1942, established numerous new rules for assimilation to make Koreans serve Japan’s wars. He announced laws mandating that all Koreans should recite the Pledge of Imperial Subjects in 1937, prohibiting the use of the Korean language in 1938, requiring worship at Shinto shrines in 1939, and, in the ultimate humiliation for Koreans, forcing Koreans to change their names to Japanese names in 1940.⁴ These policies are depicted in the films made during this period, since cinema was one of the most effective propaganda tools for Japanese imperialism, and all Korean films were strictly regulated by the Japanese government. In particular, after the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Japan’s control

³ B.M.Yecies, “Film Censorship as a Good Business in Colonial Korea: Profiteering From Hollywood’s First Golden Age, 1926-36,” <http://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/103>, p. 4. This article was first published in the *Journal of Korean Studies*, 2005, 10(1), p. 59-83.

⁴ Hildi Kang, *Under the Black Umbrella: Voices from Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, p. 110.

over the Korean film industry became much more apparently strict. In 1940, the Japanese government proclaimed the Chosun Film Regulation, which required all filmmakers and actors register with the government and mandated the rationing of film stock. In 1942, the Chosun Government-General founded the Chosun Film Corporation (a.k.a. Cho Young), and all Korean film production companies—20 production companies existed at that time—were forced to merge into the Chosun Film Corporation, which controlled the arenas of production, distribution, and exhibition. Some filmmakers, such as Lee Kyu-hwan, the director of *Ferry Boat without a Ferryman* (1936), refused to register and ceased making films, whereas some filmmakers registered and continued to make imperialist propaganda films for the Japanese. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Korean cinema from the late 1930s to the Liberation in 1945 was totally controlled by the Japanese authorities.

Even before the establishment of the Chosun Film Regulations in 1940, filmmaking *per se*, including the way of shaping artistic imagination, were deeply affected by the Chosun Government-General's policy toward every arena of Korean society as well as Korean cinema; only propaganda films that reinforced Japanese colonial policies were produced after the late 1930s, including films to justify the drafting of Koreans for Japan's wars, and every film included praise for Japanese imperialism and the emperor. Even the Korean language completely disappeared in films produced after 1942. As Lee Young-il has suggested, "speaking accurately, there was no 'Korean' cinema in the 1940s."⁵ In the following sections of this paper, I will analyze how two films made in 1941 reveal the agony of artists as colonial subjects when Japan deployed

⁵ Lee Young-il, *The Complete History of Korean Cinema*, p. 208.

its assimilation policy more heavily than ever, and how these two films incorporated the desire for modernity of colonial subjects in Chosun.

Angels on the Streets

Based on a true story, *Angels on the Streets* depicts orphans and a priest who creates an orphanage for the children. This film is a Korean-language film, but the script was originally written in Japanese by Japanese writer Nishigame Motosada, based on a newspaper story. The Japanese script was translated into Korean by Im Hwa, the most representative theorist of the KAPF, which will be discussed later in this paper. Choi Inkyu, director of this film, is often regarded as having employed Italian neorealist aesthetics before they arrived in Korea, and served as the mentor of Shin Sang-ok, Jung Chang-hwa, and Yoo Hyun-mok, either directly or indirectly. After liberation from Japan, Choi In-kyu made *Hurrah for Freedom* (1946) and *The Night Before Independence Day* (1948), as if to compensate for his earlier pro-Japanese filmmaking.

Angels on the Streets starts with a scene of the dazzling streets of Seoul with splendid neon signs, street lamps, a train station, and street cars symbolizing the modernized cityscape. The gorgeous landscape of Seoul is contrasted with the abject lives of orphans in the film. Myoungja (played by Kim Shin-jae) and Young-il are sister and brother, and sell flowers. They have to give the money they earn to the villain, Mr. Kwon, who provides them with shelter. One day, Young-il escapes from Mr. Kwon and wanders the streets. Young-il is found by a generous priest, Bang Soon-bin (played by Kim Il-hae), who takes care of orphans in his house. Bang Soon-bin decides to create an orphanage in the farmhouse of his brother-in-law, Doctor Ahn In-kyu (played by Jin

Hoon), outside Seoul. Bang Soon-bin's family and more than twenty orphans leave for the farmhouse. The children cooperate to build a new home, called Hyanglinwon, and make noodles for a living. Bored with rural life, two kids try to escape and cross the river near the farmhouse. While stopping them from crossing the dangerous river, Young-il falls into the river. This accident lets Young-il reunite with his sister, Myoungja, who is working as a nurse for the doctor, Ahn In-kyu.

This film resembles Italian Neorealist films in that the film depicts poverty (of children), is mostly shot on location, and uses nonprofessional actors--except for the five main child characters, all children in the film are played by real orphans of Hyanglinwon. However, whereas Italian Neorealist films show an open or unresolved ending, this film shows an apparently happy ending. The Korean audience probably found entertaining hope in the story of orphans constructing their own lives. With a star cast including Kim Il-hae, one of the most popular actors of the colonial period, Kim Shin-jae, wife of director Choi In-kyu, and Moon Yebong, called the greatest beauty of Chosun, this film met with great box-office success, and was exported to Japan as the recommended film of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology of Japan. However, before the screening in Japan, the Ministry of Home Affairs insisted that it be censored again, and cut several parts of the film and dubbed in the Japanese language. There has never been a formal explanation of exactly why the Ministry of Home Affairs censored the film again before its Japanese debut. Yet, as some (Korean scholars such as Kim Jongwon, Kim Ryushil, and actor Song Hwan-chang, who played Dondol in the film) have pointed out,

it was probably because this film is a Korean-language film, and depicts the poor lives of children in Seoul, which is a negative aspect of Japanese rule in Korea.⁶

Compared to other films encouraging Koreans to become Japanese soldiers, *Angels on the Streets* is more ambivalent in its arguable pro-Japanese sentiment. *Angels on the Streets* shows the miserable lives of children in Kyungsung (Seoul), and thus may function as a criticism of Japanese colonial rule, but at the end of the film, when every problem has been solved and everyone reconciled, every character of the film recites the Pledge to the Japanese Flag and the “Narrative of Imperial Subjects” in Japanese. The “Narrative of Imperial Subjects” was established in 1937, and the Chosun Government-General ordered that all Koreans should recite it. The “Narrative of Imperial Subjects” as recited includes the statements, “we are the citizen of the Japanese Empire”, “we devote ourselves to the Emperor”, and “we will become strong citizens through endurance and solidarity.” This recitation is conspicuously discontinuous with the narrative of the film. It is more likely that it was only included at the end of the film to pass the censorship board. After all, the good adults in the film claim that even a bad child can become a good citizen of the empire if educated very well. However, without the element of applauding Japanese imperialism, this well-made film, which is regarded as one of the best films of the colonial period, could not have been created.

Volunteer

Volunteer is the story of a young man and his lover living in a rural area. Chun-ho (played by Choi Woon-bong) works as a supervisor in a small agricultural city on the

⁶ Kim Ryushil, *Projecting Empire, Reflecting Colony: Korean Cinema, 1901-1945*, Seoul: Samin, 2006, p. 239.

outskirts of Seoul, but he always dreams of doing something important for his family and country. (It is not clear whether this country means Japan or Korea or both in the film.) After being fired by the landowner, who made an unfair decision, Chun-ho decides to volunteer as a soldier, because at that time, the Japanese government had announced that Koreans could have “the honor” of becoming soldiers for the emperor. Chun-ho’s fiancée, Boon-ok (played by Moon Ye-bong), supports his decision to join the Japanese army and fulfill his ambition, and she gives him a nice farewell in the train station where Japanese flags are waving at the end of the film.

Volunteer is particularly interesting because the film was made by many former members of the KAPF (Korean Artista Proletariat Federate in Esperanto, 1928-1935) and is a prototypical Japanese propaganda film that encourages Chosun men to become soldiers for Japan and participate in World War II as citizens of the Japanese empire. This film was produced by Choi Seung-il, a writer and former member of the KAPF, written by Park Young-hee, one of the founders of the KAPF, and directed by Ahn Seokyoung, another former member of the KAPF.

The KAPF was established by writers, critics, and artists on August 23, 1925, and it is considered the first proletarian art movement formed to struggle against Japanese colonial rule. By 1930, five departments in the KAPF had been formed: literature, fine arts, music, cinema, and theater. The KAPF’s members produced cartoons, paintings, prints, films, theater works, art and literary criticism/theory, etc., and had their own periodical, *Musanja*. One of the most representative KAPF theorists, Im Hwa, author of the Korean script of *Angels on the Streets* as mentioned above, wrote “The Establishment of Juchae theory in Fine Arts” in 1927, and claimed first that artists needed to recognize

Marxist principles of revolution and understand that without aiming for a revolution, art meant nothing to the proletariat. Second, he claimed, artists and art theoreticians should “practice” toward the proletarian classes’ will, and without practice, the art movement meant nothing but building the ivory tower of art-for-art’s-sake. Further, Im Hwa asserted that art cannot exist for starving people and emphasized the importance of propaganda and class struggle.⁷

Because of a combination of lack of capital, inexperience in filmmaking, and the harsh censorship of the Japanese government,⁸ only five films were finally produced under the name of the KAPF movement between 1928 and 1931: *Wandering* (1928), *The Imbecile Street* (1929), *The Dark Road* (1929), *The Underground Village* (1931), and *Hwaryun* (1931). The Censorship Board of the Government-General used the censorship laws to restrict “freedoms of expression” throughout the whole colonial period, and banned films that criticized society or evoked revolution—not only those of the KAPF but also all similar Korean films.⁹ According to Yecies, the main purpose of the Censorship Board in the 1920s and the 1930s was “to suppress Korean independence and Communist themes” and socialist ideas; thus, the KAPF’s films became an important target of censorship by the Japanese government.¹⁰ On the compulsory dissolution of the KAPF in 1935, many of the former members became pro-Japanese.

It is perhaps easy to criticize *Volunteer* as a pro-Japanese propaganda film in that this film depicts the male protagonist’s decision to become a soldier fighting for the

⁷ Choi Yeul, *The History of Korean Modern Art Criticism*, Seoul: Yeolhwadang, 2001, p. 68, 73.

⁸ Lee Hynagjin, *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics*, p. 28.

⁹ Yecies, “Film Censorship as a Good Business in Colonial Korea: Profiteering From Hollywood’s First Golden Age, 1926-36,” p. 6-7.

¹⁰ Yecies, *ibid.*, p. 7.

emperor; and in fact, this film has been criticized as one of the most representative pro-Japanese films made by the former KAPF members. However, I would argue that in this film, the class consciousness of the left-wing intellectuals is vividly alive and thus reveals a desire for modernity in that it problematizes the agricultural community at that time by depicting the insecure lives of tenant farmers. Nonetheless, I also would like to point out that class consciousness in this film covertly negotiates with the Japanese authorities; the landowner family is not depicted negatively, and this film shows the possibility of reconciliation between landowners and tenant farmers. In addition, we should acknowledge that in this film, the landowner family symbolizes the city—in other words, modernity, which is something desirable both in the film and in Korean society at the time.

The KAPF members saw that the nation's modernization projects could be achieved through class struggle, by overthrowing feudalism and breaking the vicious cycle of exploitation of peasants and laborers by landowners or capitalists, generation by generation. In *Volunteer*, the appearance and social status of Soo-ae, the younger sister of the landlord, who lives in the city, is the object of jealousy from Boon-ok, the rural woman. The lives of city and countryside are contrasted through characters' costumes and architectural styles of the houses of the landlord family and villagers. In *Volunteer*, being a soldier is becoming a real imperial citizen of Japan, and this identity formation is depicted as the accomplishment of the protagonist's ambition to escape from the countryside and its system of feudalism, thus participating in modernization. Obviously, this film promotes Japanese assimilation policy at that time, which included the reformation of rural areas. It is a historical tragedy that the left-wing intellectuals, such as

Ahn Seok-young, Choi Seung-il, and Park Young-hee in the case of *Volunteer*, saw the means to achieve modernity by conforming to Japanese colonial power, no matter what they were forced or volunteered.

Filmmaking by Colonial Subjects and Colonial Modernity

As Shin Ki-wook and Michael Robinson observe, although modernity emerged in eighteenth-century Western Europe, in the process of its spread to the other parts of the world, it has taken various forms. Shin and Robinson suggest that modernity in Korea appeared in association with “external influences,” that is, “the emergence of modern Japan and its intrusion into Korea.” According to Shin and Robinson, modern Japan provided “a direct model” to “build a nation state” in Korea in the late nineteenth century.¹¹ At this moment, it is hard to say the exact impact or role of imperial Japan as a modern nation state to Korea’s modernization project at that time; however, as Shin and Robinson argue, it would be important to recognize that in Korea the processes of modernity were “entwined with outside economic and political influence, and ultimately they evolved in a context of colonial domination.”¹²

Whereas the process of modernization in the west took a few centuries, the modernization of Korea was compulsory and rapid; this difference in the modernization processes of the west and Korea epitomizes the features of Korean modernization, and again, the results of this rapid process of modernization reveals symptomatically the colonial traits of Korea. According to Kim Jin-kyun and Chung Geun-shik, three paradigms depict the transformation of Korean society in regard to its colonized past. The

¹¹ Shin Ki-wook and Michael Robinson eds., *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 9-10.

¹² Shin and Robinson eds., *ibid.*, p. 11.

first regards contemporary Korean society as desirable, seeing the root of this positivity in the colonial period. The second paradigm accepts the present progress of Korea as positive but sees the colonial period as negative. The third view is critical of contemporary Korean society, which has many elements in need of repair, and this perspective believes that the negative phenomena in contemporary Korean society can be traced to the colonial system.¹³

The historiography of modern Korea is a controversial subject in current academia to great extent because of the matter of liquidation of pro-Japanese people during the colonial period. It would not be fair to see Korean film in the 1930s and 1940s only through the binary criteria of whether the film is pro-Japanese or not. The left-wing cinema movements of Korea in the 1920s can be regarded as examples of constructive power in response to oppression by the Japanese and foreign imperialism. However, from the late 1930s until the Liberation in 1945, it was almost impossible for filmmakers to resist Japan's hegemonic power controlling the entire film industry of Korea. As Shin and Robinson argue, "Japan's extensive use of modern means of cultural production such as education and media for domination further complicates the effort to understand colonial modernity and hegemony."¹⁴

It has been sometimes said that Korea's anti-Japanese movement during the colonial period was split into two factions, nationalism and the left-wing ideology, as was the case in Taiwan at the time; similarly, in modern Korea, the democratization movement has been split into two the factions, NL (National Liberty) and PD (People's Democracy). The former emphasizes the nationalist idea—reunification of the nation or

¹³ Kim Jin-kyun, Chung Geun-shik, *The Modern Subject and Colonial Disciplinary Power*. Seoul: Munhwa Kwahak Sa, 1997.

¹⁴ Shin Ki-wook and Michael Robinson eds., *ibid.*, p. 11.

minjok— and the latter emphasizes left-wing ideology—class struggle or *minjung*. Obviously, as ideological bases to resist colonial power, the two ideologies, nationalism emphasizing *minjok* (ethnicity of a nation as a whole) and left-wing ideology emphasizing the role of *minjung* (common people or oppressed people), should not be excluded from the intellectual history of colonial Korea, and the issue of which is more suitable for the epoch of the colonial period (and of present Korean society) was and still is in debate. For instance, as Henry Em has suggested, in the 1925 writings of Shin Chae-ho, one of the first scholars who conceptualized *minjok* in Korea during the colonial period, the author turns to anarchism, where “the all-embracing identity of *minjok* is replaced by the more partisan category of *minjung*,” because for Shin Chae-ho, according to Em, “*minjok*, by itself, can no longer serve as a democratic imaginary.”¹⁵

It would be unfair to simply condemn films of the 1940s, with their elements of complicity with Japanese colonial ideology, for being pro-Japanese. Korean filmmakers during the colonial period, especially after the second Sino-Japanese war began in 1937 and Japan imposed ethno-genocidal rule, had little choice but to obey the Japanese ruling powers. In both films, *Angels on the Streets* and *Volunteer*, the city is seemingly depicted as an example of the success of Japanese modernization projects on the Korean peninsula, and being a good imperial citizen is the accomplishment of personal ambition. However, if we look closely without trying to judge whether these films are pro-Japanese or not, we will find that the filmmakers’ definition of modernity ultimately achieves an egalitarian society where there are no poor children, where there is no exploitation of peasants by landlords, where everyone has the opportunity to fulfill his ambition. Perhaps we will

¹⁵ Henry H. Em, “Minjok as a Modern and Democratic construct: Sin Ch’aeho’s Historiography,” in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, p. 356, 361.

never know what Korean filmmakers were thinking when they were making propaganda films encouraging Koreans to become imperial citizens. Although Shin Chae-ho was never pro-Japanese, his anarchist idea of *minjok* being replaced by *minjung* might be one explanation of the Korean filmmakers' conformity to the Japanese authorities and their pro-Japanese filmmaking during the colonial period.

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