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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Two Golden Ages of Korean Cinema

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Steven Chung. *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 304 pp. $75 (cloth), $25 (paperback).

Young-a Park. *Unexpected Alliances: Independent Filmmakers, the State, and the Film Industry in Postauthoritarian South Korea*. Stanford University Press, 2015. 224 pp. $40 (cloth/e-book).

The two books by Steven Chung and Young-a Park that I discuss in this essay signal the growth of Korean studies by simply beginning in medias res. That is, unlike many books that came before them, they offer no lengthy exposition to set things up, to declare and justify the need for the study at hand. These new books also reflect the recent scholarly trend of reaching beyond the established area studies or Korean studies models to present studies that are interdisciplinary and transnational in scope. Park's *Unexpected Alliances* is a narrative at once of South Korea's transition to a (truly) civil society, of its artistic struggle for independence and integrity, of the individual's negotiations with the state, and of feminist awakenings in unlikely circumstances. Chung's *Split Screen Korea*, which I will discuss first, is similarly expansive in scope. As he lays out in the beginning, the book

> follow[s] the trajectories that Shin Sang-ok took, the ways in which his work continued through ostensibly radical cultural and economic transformation. But it . . . also attempt[s] to press the idea of continuity itself, interrogating its salience as a critical idea both in the study of film, a medium synonymous with the shock of the new, and in the study of Korea, whose very name heralds rupture and division. (3)

Korean studies and film studies are becoming increasingly nuanced, owing to the recent scholarship that critiques and questions the projection of a cultural, artistic, or historical

coherence when it is not actually present. This nationalistic impulse is ultimately a will to power and is not helpful in rescuing Korea and famous Koreans from their less-than-glorious history. Chung's book makes a strong contribution to the rapidly growing field of Korean visual cultural studies that poses such questions. Chung states that there are two modes by which people try to rescue Korean cinema, especially films made by masters such as the director Shin Sang-ok:

> [One is] the "nationalist realist" thesis that posits the primacy of an anticolonial, prodemocratic tendency in Korean cinema that is mediated via an ostensibly ethical realist modality. The other . . . is a set of criteria for what constitutes the aesthetic value of film as well as its politics. [These modes] depend on a limited concept of modernism and mass culture that de facto function as a set of criteria for what constitutes aesthetic value in film. (21)

Writing against such modes is only a part of Chung's project, which is appropriately ambitious given his subject: the great film impresario, prescient entrepreneur, and "genre master" Shin Sang-ok (1926–2006). To say that Shin is a fascinating figure would be a gross understatement. The answers to the larger questions with which Chung opens each chapter are not at all predictable, and there is a real sense of discovery for the reader, of each chapter as an intricately designed whole. One example is how Chung treats the question of Shin's political significance as a filmmaker. He argues that Shin's political significance is not the point, but, rather, (here he borrows from Rancière) the point is "how an interrogation of his work can condition a reevaluation of how politics and art are constituted in postwar Korea." Thus, Chung's project, which he hopes will "occasion different modes of reflection on postwar modernity and cinema," is by necessity both interdisciplinary and transnational (16).

Enlightenment film, a surprisingly flexible category in Korean cinema and one of Chung's main focuses in deciphering Shin's body of work, is closely connected to the book's other key concepts, such as modernism and mass culture. Following film theorist Linda Williams, Chung argues that this mode stretches across decades, policies, and Korea's experience of modernity, and he terms it the "continuum that defines the enlightenment modality," which is the "basic agreement that film has important real-world effects and that filmmakers are implicitly or explicitly accountable for the political consequences of their work. . . . [F]ilm is both the active, hortatory subject of enlightenment and its passive and ethically charged object" (25, 39). This is an interesting assertion—and a contradictory one—when we consider the numerous enlightenment films Shin made in his time, and also his insistence that

film's only goal and obligation to the audience is entertainment. This contradiction, however, may be a singularly good description of Shin as an artist.

Another leitmotif is what Chung calls Cold War regimes, the discussion of which serves well to expand the analyses of Shin's postwar films. Considering Korea's politico-cultural particularities—brilliantly examined by Theodore Hughes (2012) and Jin-kyung Lee (2010], for instance—we might call this period the overt, or most intense, Cold War period. Chung's readings of the era's films take into account the shift from the colonial period, clearly illustrating a number of significant connections between the two periods in ways that help situate postwar Korean cinema in a larger context. It is a rare pleasure to read a well-researched, well-written analysis of the Golden Age of Korean cinema; this is especially true of chapter 2, in which Chung analyzes several of Shin's key film texts. It is a study not only of his films from this decade, but also of the relationship between film, fashion, material culture, new technology, and Ch'ôe Ûn-hûi as a star, thus belying the chapter's subtitle, which simply suggests a discourse on 1950s fashion and film. Here, Chung introduces an important insight into Shin's filmmaking—namely, the refined sensibility and sophisticated look that are central to his films. The other side of this picture is the vacuum-sealed quality of the narratives' luxurious diegetic world, one of surface beauty and newness, which attests to Shin's own escapist desire. This is an aspect of his films that I find both compelling and disconcerting, as this world seems more surreal than "self-consciously realistic," as Chung puts it. It is tricky to argue for both realism and extravagant fantasy, but this is essentially what Chung does regarding Shin's Golden Age cinema. In addition, he engages with a thorny issue to give it the serious consideration it deserves: the heavy influence of American and Japanese cinema on postwar South Korean cinema, and the latter's plagiarism of those two cinematic traditions. The chapter ends with the scandalous conclusion that Shin and other filmmakers were nostalgically conjuring up colonial-era splendor on postwar Korean film screens.

In chapter 3, Chung offers a history and analysis of Shin Film Studios, which was the first of its kind in Korea and revolutionary for its time. Chung writes against the common disparaging claim that Shin's films are uneven and incoherent as a body of work, and also argues that Shin's films did not benefit from the Park regime's reforms "so much as receive sanction and endorsement through them" (93). Chung tends to rescue Shin's reputation here through an analysis of his films during this period. For instance, in trying to make sense of the nebulous

reason why Shin won the "*Ch'unhyang* battle" against director Hong Sông-gi, Chung points to Shin's professionalism, which underlay the remarkable consistency in the quality of all his films.[1] Chung is, in fact, quite generous in his interpretation of certain events, seeing Shin's vulnerability to censorship where others see coziness with power, including with Park Chung Hee himself. Although I cannot see the coherence that Chung discusses, one always notes the way that Shin's films represent women—namely, that the films don't exhibit the almost casual misogyny typical of the era's narratives. This could be related to Shin's professionalism, as Chung puts it, which led to the unquantifiable something that audiences responded to when his version of *Ch'unhyang* won in the theaters. Just as Chung could not abide a less-than-authentic depiction and aura of Ch'unhyang and her times, his interesting, multidimensional manner of depicting women probably stemmed not from any feminist leanings but, rather, from the high standards to which he held himself accountable in terms of character development.

Another contribution *Split Screen Korea* makes is that, as far as I know, it offers the first English-language account of the Korean film industry's regional investment and distribution system. The system is fascinating in a byzantine way. It petered out only in the 1980s, after three decades of regional audiences dictating which films got made and how they were made. The existence of this system helps explain the lack of avant-garde modernist film experimentation from the postwar period up to the 1980s. This history is also helpful in illuminating the times and context of Shin Sang-ok, whose stature and box office power was unrivaled at the time.

Chung assesses that, given the limitations and pressures exerted by the government, market, audience, and capital, Shin was able to find a niche for himself that allowed for "*well-made genre films*" (101). Perhaps more significantly, he also notes something that is still true of Korean cinema today, for the most part: set against the larger backdrop of the system (which we might define in various ways in this context), "Shin Films amply demonstrates that while the circuits and resources of cinema are irreducibly global, its contours, depths, forms—and even the concepts of art and genre that subtend them—are shaped domestically, in the regional theaters" (101).

Chung then presents an engaging discussion of Shin's experiments with B-movie genre films, which, in typically unexpected fashion, become challenging auteur pieces in Shin's hands even while featuring all the popular genre conventions that audiences have come to expect. I was always curious about Shin's horror movies because they seemed so strange. In *Cruel Stories of*

Yi Dynasty Women (1970), a film I viewed as horror only to learn later that it was not conventionally categorized as such, Chung sees Shin's criticism of the Park regime. Although I was not able to see this film as a metaphorical challenge to the powers that be, I tend to agree with Chung that the end of Shin Films in 1975 comes about in a far more complex manner than has been suggested by previous scholarship.

Given Shin's contribution to Golden Age cinema, an examination of the place and significance of melodrama in his body of work is crucial. Shin could turn just about any narrative —even one about national policy—into convincing melodrama. Chung calls this style a *melodrama of development* (142), after anthropologist Nancy Abelmann's study of melodrama films and upward social mobility in postwar South Korea (2003), positing that in the 1960s, "the nation was mediated through a melodramatic modality" (145). Chung's analysis of visual themes often found in Shin's 1960s policy films is one of the most intriguing in the book, for Chung sees both the "elite bourgeois" developmentalist state's demands and the late 1950s and 1960s North Korean cinema, two diametrically opposed ideological agendas, somehow coinciding in their cinematic tropes of "the mass pan and the labor montage" (154). This section taps into a rich vein and could have been developed into a separate chapter, which would have allowed for an engagement with multiple strands of discussion about the global circulation of socialist aesthetics, developmentalist narrative, and gender images, and the relationship between mass culture and Cold War politics, for instance. Ultimately, Chung makes a strong case that "global cinematic institutions and codes are appropriated and transformed within the particular pressures of postcolonial/postwar Korea to render" what he calls a "melodrama and aesthetics of development" (157).

In the last chapter, Chung discusses Shin's North Korean period (1978–1986). The most illuminating insight here is that North Korean revolutionary cinema always depicts a certain moment of revolutionary awakening and is, in fact, stuck in this particular revolutionary temporality. I also suspect that North Korean films cannot move beyond such a moment because it is the most dramatic point in the narratives; the films need to draw it out, because they need the infusion of shock and melodrama to make them memorable, empathic, and *human*. It should surprise no one at this point that Shin again adapted to his changed environment with dexterity. He also transformed the industry, set new standards, and put it on the international map with films such as *Salt, Record of an Escape,* and *Breakwater.*

Chung asserts that Shin's films were popular in the North because he was capable of turning enlightenment narratives into melodrama and spectacle in the past, and could again practice similar magic with ideologically driven narratives, even while (perhaps unwittingly) exposing the contradictory demands of artistry, mass appeal, and didacticism. In other words, Shin was not a radical auteur in North Korea but gave the regime what it wanted and, as usual, did what most pleased him. In the end, Chung notes the "basic populist conservatism" (212) in Shin's body of work, which aptly summarizes its creator's political disposition as someone who consistently disavowed the political role and responsibility of being a filmmaker. Eventually, one is left with an impression of Shin as both a pragmatist and a disillusioned dreamer, for the vehemence and frequency with which he denied the very possibility of film auteurs in Korea makes one suspect bitterness and despair on his part.

With *Split Screen Korea*, Chung contributes to Korean studies, film studies, and Cold War discourses. The book would serve well in both undergraduate and graduate courses on topics such as Golden Age Korean cinema, film modernism, politics and aesthetics, and enlightenment narratives, for instance.

In the background of Young-a Park's thoughtfully written and organized book, *Unexpected Alliances*, is a momentous historical event—the fall of the Eastern European socialist bloc—which affected South Korea in a number of profound ways. Park writes that her book is "an anthropological exploration of the social and political contexts in which the Korean film explosion of the late 1990s to mid-2000s occurred [that looks at the] 'democratic generation' filmmakers and cultural producers whose historical and political consciousness was largely shaped during the 1980s' radicalized student culture" (2–3). Also, it is "about the reconfiguration of activist/independent filmmaking networks in reform-era South Korea" under the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun administrations. Through this study, what Park is really examining is the "foundational shift in South Korean society, especially in its cultural production, in that the rigid boundaries that separated the state and political activism, corporate conglomerates and independent artists, filmic spaces of resistance and spaces of upwardly mobile, middle-class consumption, and local and global cultural realms have become increasingly blurred" (14). Park begins each chapter with a quick summary, which is helpful. On the other hand, though this seems a minor point, the book's romanization is inconsistent, which can be distracting.

Park's informants were members of both KIFA (the Korean Independent Filmmakers Association) and the mainstream film industry, and she provides the context of the field at large in terms of ethnographic research on national film industries. In addition, she uses a variety of theoretical sources drawn from multidisciplinary fields. For instance, she uses Bourdieu's notions of social and symbolic capital to discuss how "the rhetoric—interpellation of the 'democratic generation' as urgently needed agents of change—and protest repertoires of the past democracy movements often became foregrounded [and] enacted as the 3-8-6 generation [those who were born in the 1960s, came of age in the 1980s, and were in their 30s in the 1990s] became a central term in politics and media" in the postauthoritarian era (19). In doing so, however, she makes an important distinction that, unlike the subjects Bourdieu describes, South Koreans who draw on such forms of capital do so in a performative, self-conscious way. Park also cites anthropologist Christopher Pinney: "The cult value of image springs from what people do with it, not from the idea of an original" (23). This observation provides an important frame for her discussion of how certain independent films gained cult status in postdemocratic South Korea.

In the 1990s, independent filmmakers and film activists found themselves with newly available public screening opportunities and new audiences. The country had abruptly changed from a military dictatorship to a democratic, neoliberal society. In the politically charged 1980s, film was considered an "inferior medium," and the "task of Korean film activism was to 'liberate' the film medium and technology from commodification and Hollywoodization" (34). The militancy we see above is indicative of the rigid self-other dichotomy that partially characterized the *minjung* (people's) movement, which eclipsed other discourses and movements at this time. As their world changed in the early 1990s, many film activists reemerged as critically and commercially successful directors and film industry members. Park explains that the term "independent film," first used in South Korea in 1991 by the Independent Film Committee, was meant to designate a mediation of political-factional differences, something that is neither *minjung* (people) nor *minjok* (nation) (50). Although not chronicled in this book (it would take another book to tell that particular narrative), we get a glimpse into the compelling human drama of how these film industry members survived the 1980s and found themselves in some strange (ideological) places in the 1990s and beyond.

In the new context of reforms, new venues (some made possible by the conglomerate, or *chaebôl*, investments), and new audience demographics, as well as uneasy partnerships, negotiations, and compromises with big money and the state, everyone could harness the moral authority of the 3-8-6 generation, whose ethical legitimacy had become the symbolic and social capital par excellence. This generation moved to the center of power and rose in the bureaucratic ranks during the postauthoritarian regime, and inevitably, tension built up among old friends and colleagues.

A key player in the midst of this transformation and shaping of the industry was KIFA, which had immense influence as the single channel of mediation between indie filmmakers and capital. KIFA also played a pivotal role in securing the screen quota system that was meant to protect the native film industry against foreign film's dominance in Korea. By "capitalizing on KIFA's potent symbolic connection to the 3-8-6 generation as well as its social network, the Screen Quota Emergency Committee transformed KIFA's and civil movement groups' activist legacy into the uniting trope of cultural nationalism" (90). Anti-American, anti-foreign sentiments of the "IMF era" were also at work, and, combined with the sudden interest in "Korean cinematic tradition," became useful fodder for the interested parties' argument for Korean film's sovereignty. The recycling of 1980s tactics proved effective, as Park illustrates with the example of the head-shaving protests of 1998–1999 that involved a massive number of Korean film industry members, including senior members of KIFA.

Ironically, it was at this time that the Korean film industry was enjoying an unprecedented domestic market share and global visibility, and this period also saw the arrival of Korean-style blockbuster movies. At the end of the successful struggle to protect the screen quota policy, KIFA members felt ambivalent as they discovered that mostly big blockbuster movies benefited from the policy. And true to a disturbingly familiar pattern of late capitalism in neoliberal South Korea, big movies did big business while small movies could barely open in a handful of theaters, due to the "wide release" practice adopted from Hollywood.

Chapter 4, which analyzes the cases of two female independent filmmakers, is one of the strongest sections of *Unexpected Alliances*. It first describes how one informant came to gain a gendered vision through her interactions with the forgotten, all-but-invisible female POWs. While their support group addresses its male counterpart as "teacher," the women are addressed as "mother," thus losing perhaps the most significant aspect of their self-identity through a

simple act of everyday speech. This narrative is telling of the way in which gender and class operate in South Korean culture and reveals the prevalence of sexism in "progressive" movement subcultures. The case of the second female filmmaker again weaves the intersecting issues of gender and class through the narrative of her experiences with both a male filmmaker mentor, who became an internationally famous figure, and the almost exclusively male members of the Korean Trade Union Congress (KTUC), while making a documentary about the organization. It begins with a famous chapter in contemporary Korean labor history: the massive layoffs and the subsequent labor strike at Hyundai Motors in 1997. The title of the filmmaker's resulting documentary, *Divergence,* captures how the struggles of male union workers and female dining hall workers diverged, never to meet in the middle, in a culture that did not consider working women to be the breadwinners of their families, while such status was assumed for male workers. As was the case with the unconverted long-term prisoners'[2] support network, labor activism reveals itself to be oppressively male-centered and male-identified.

Park's last chapter chronicles the birth of the Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) as well as the social actors who make up the "film festival landscape," such as independent filmmakers, those who helped organize the film festivals, and audiences (138). PIFF is the result of complex negotiations and compromises between the festival founders and local politicians. And yet it is hardly a local film festival. As Park correctly points out, PIFF "emerged as a nexus of local, national, and global aspirations" (142). And this characterization is related to what Park calls the "cultural developmentalism" exhibited at twenty-first century film festivals: as audiences finally gained access to previously unavailable films, they responded with excessive enthusiasm stemming from the notion that they needed to catch up with the West. Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that this moment happened to be the historical beginning of the so-called Korean Wave, or *hallyu,* as Korea's soft power grew with the wild popularity of its popular cultural products outside of Korea.

According to Park, PIFF took advantage of "Korea's entry into the group of genuinely Western capitalist systems characterized by the triad of a flexible mode of production, high consumerism, and neoconservative politics" (145). But in this new context, KIFA's films seemed out of touch, as they were screened for heterogeneous audiences, rather than those interested in political activism. This led to a kind of generational and class tourism, since independent films "acquired a cult value as the film festival audience became introduced not only to films but to

film subjects. In the eyes of the upwardly mobile middle-class spectators, the unmediated contact with the film subjects whose lives exist far apart from their everyday lives symbolized the authenticity of the independent films they were consuming. And the experience of meeting the subjects, in turn, functioned as proof of the authenticity of their tastes" (161). Ultimately, however, if KIFA members were co-opted by state power, they also changed the government's practices. As Park points out, "the relationship between power and resistance is much more complex and complicit than it seems" at first glance (169).

Today, Korea's pattern of compressing temporality and skipping through the chains of historical cause and effect continues. The reform era of the Kim and Roh administrations did not last. At present, progressive cultural producers and civil activists are struggling to keep some of the reform measures in place. In this light, Korea seems to exist only for today, though in some significant ways it is reliving the nightmarish cultural and political life of the not-so-distant past. One contribution of *Unexpected Alliances* to Korean studies is that it captures a pivotal transitional moment in recent Korean history that passed so completely, seemingly without a trace, that it is surprising to remember how things have changed as South Korea became an unabashedly neoliberal state. Park's account is a valuable one that, beyond its utility as a teaching and research tool for those of us in academia, could function as a fascinating narrative of a chaotic few years of ideological and cultural upheaval in Korea's contemporary history that left legacies, practices, and conventions whose implications are yet to be fully comprehended.

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Notes

1 This refers to the "battle" waged in theaters when Shin and Hong released film adaptations of a famous traditional tale, "The Tale of Ch'unhyang," around the same time in 1961.

2 The strongly anti-Communist South Korean state has attempted to "convert" Communist prisoners against their will. The issue of conversion (K. *chônhyang*; J. *tenko*) is one of the enduring legacies of not only the Korean War era, but also the colonial period, when anticolonial or Communist individuals were (often) forcibly "converted" to support the imperialist agenda.

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