

Changes in the Korean Star System

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Star power has been evident since the beginnings of Korean film history. Even though it was mostly confined to the local market, stars representing each era appeared in various films and exerted their power. *The Summer I Stole* by Kim Seung-ok, a representative 1960s novelist, has a vivid scene in which a character meets a woman on a train while traveling to his hometown. She loved one male star so much that she started to hang around his house. However, her father had caught her, and now she was on her way home, still treasuring a scarf she received from the star. Just as in this story, star worship is still strong in Korean society.

The Formation of the Star System

The appearance of the first true star in Korean films can be traced back to Lee Wol-hwa of *The Vow Made below the Moon* (Yoon Baek-nam, 1923). However, a “star system” as such did not appear until the late 1950s. It played a critical role in the rapid growth of the Korean film industry. During modernization, women who entered the public arena went to movie theaters, where they could forget about their destitute and difficult lives and recreate themselves by identifying with stars. That is why women audiences envied male stars such as Lee Min, Choi



Magazine advertisement from the late 1950s and featuring Choi Eun-hee as a model



The star couple Shin Seong-il and Um Aing-ran



The Student Couple (Kim Soo-yong, 1964) newspaper advertisement

Moo-ryong and Kim Jin-kyu as well as female stars like Choi Eun-hee, Cho Mi-ryung and Kim Ji-mee. At the time, women's magazines ran stories about stars over many pages. This was an example of the early star system using stars in film marketing and focusing on women, who had emerged as a major consumer group.

However, it was the youth films boom in the mid 1960s that made stars into popular idols. The younger generation then had been born around the time of Korea's liberation from Japanese colonization, and was the first generation to receive American-style education. They made the screen couple of Shin Seong-il and Um Aing-ran their idols and imitated their every move. Shin Seong-il enjoyed huge popularity playing alienated young men, on the basis of which regional distributors pre-sold his films. However, he had to act in several films at the same time, sometimes appearing in as many as twelve films at the same time. In 1967, he appeared in sixty-five films, one third of total number of films produced that year.

The “troika” of three major female stars of the time—Nam Jung-im, Moon Hee, and Yoon Jung-hee—had similar experiences. This period was regarded as the golden age of Korean cinema, and simultaneous appearances in several films became increasingly common for the stars. In an era without management companies, brawny film producers sometimes used violence to secure the cooperation of stars. It is said that simultaneous appearances were also the result of threats from producers rather than greed on the part of the stars themselves. The three main female stars appeared in a staggering total of three hundred films over only seven or eight years, indicating how being a “star” licensed their exploitation.

The Expanded Star System, and the Stars of the Popular Culture Industry

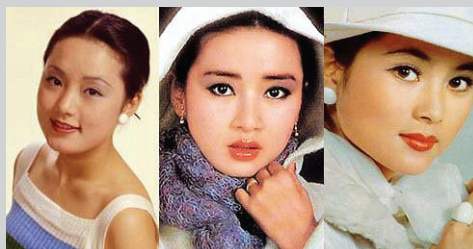
When the three actresses retired in the early 1970s, the film industry faced a serious lack of stars. The development of the popular culture



The "Troika" of the 1960s Female Stars (Moon Hee, Nam Jung-im, and Yoon Jung-hee)



Marriage Classroom (Jeong In-yeob, 1970)



The "New troika" of the 1970s (Jang Mi-hee, Jung Yoon-hee, and Yu Ji-in)

industry, including television, enhanced the status of the star greatly. However, it also meant that stars who had appeared only in films in the 1960s now appeared in other various cultural arenas. Many movie stars moved into television and it was common in the late 1970s for actors to appear in both television dramas and movies. The “new troika”—Yu Ji-in, Jang Mi-hee, and Jung Yoon-hee—were cast in television dramas and movies simultaneously. At the time, by building different star images in television dramas and movies, they provided different pleasures to different audiences, making it was possible to manage stars more effectively than before. Also, stars increasingly appeared in commercials as the commercial industry developed in the 1970s. This meant stars were becoming a high value-added product as media marketing tools. In the 1980s, television commercials boomed with the advent of color television, producing so-called “commercial stars.” Kim Hye-soo, Lee Mi-yeon, Choi Soo-ji, and Ha Hee-ra all started out in commercials, and then appeared in television dramas and movies later to become popular stars of the 1980s. However, because the military government’s appeasement policy led to many erotic films being produced, many female stars avoided movies and turned to television. The number of films produced increased, but the industry suffered from a serious lack of stars. Of course, another actress troika was produced, composed of Won Mi-kyung, Lee Mi-sook, and Lee Bo-hee, and there were “movie actors” like Ahn Sung-ki and Kang Soo-yeon, but their star power was not very powerful. Instead, as foreign film imports increased with liberalization, Hollywood or Hong Kong stars became more popular than Korean stars. Even in television commercials, these foreign stars took the place of Korean stars.

The New Star System and the *Hallyu*

After the boom of “concept movies” in the 1990s, stars were placed at the center of the planning system. Of course, stars no longer guaranteed box-office success, nor did they determine quality. However, cast-

ing star actors was a critical factor when investors decided which films to invest in. Sometimes casting a certain actor determined investment in a particular film.

The star's status began to change once again with the “*hallyu* (Korean wave, 韓流)” phenomenon of the 2000s. Korean stars became popular not only in Korea, but also in Japan, China, Taiwan and South-east Asian countries. This change was evident at the press premiere for *April Snow* (Hur Jin-ho, 2005). Two hundred Japanese reporters attended the premiere, which would have been unimaginable in the past. *Hallyu* stars like Bae Yong-joon exert enormous power in the Japanese market, creating a new phenomenon. Even though the box-office record for *April Snow* in Korea was poor, it had already recouped its budget through sales to the overseas market.

As Korean films were introduced overseas, star status was greater than ever. As a result, star management agencies have become powerful in the entertainment industry. They are carrying out various star marketing campaigns using the stars they have nurtured. Established Korean filmmakers feel threatened by star power and management agencies. Furthermore, the current management system is focused on profits in return for investment, so they just consume star images. Because stars are serving as the bridgehead of Korean films amid the *hallyu*, we have to develop the system and nurture experts to develop long-term and successful star careers. Presently, Korean cinema is undergoing reform.