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The Revival of
the Film Industry

1954-1962



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1. *Chun-hyang Story* (Lee Kyu-hwan, 1955)
2. *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyung-mo, 1956)
3. *Life* (Lee Kang-chun, 1958)
4. *Chun-hyang Story* (Lee Kyu-hwan, 1955) publicity still
5. *Chun-hyang Story* (Lee Kyu-hwan, 1955)

Films In the Age Of Popular Culture

Following the armistice agreement on 27 July 1953, the South Korean government returned to Seoul from the refugee city of Busan on 15 August 1953, and reestablished itself. During the 1950s, South Koreans were dismally poor because of the war, and the tension between South and North was not mitigated. However, this could be called the “age of explosive energy,” because the country was gearing up for a new start. Korean society found itself following a general trend of Americanization and modernization. Western-style democracy affected every aspect of policy. Capitalism also spread, changing the way people thought and acted in their daily lives. In the 1950s, modernization led Korean society to undergo fundamental changes in its structure and customs, heralding an era of great upheaval.

Noteworthy social phenomena in the 1950s included rapid urbanization, booming popular culture, and mass media. This suggests that such trends were increasingly viewed from an industrial perspective. Some people had regarded filmmaking as a profit-driven enterprise in the past, but in the 1950s people did not feel guilty when they bluntly insisted that filmmaking was a capitalist industry. Today, this is taken for granted. While the importance of the cultural aspect of cinema was still emphasized to promote social enlightenment or conduct political campaigns, most 1950s films were made for mass amusement. Of course, there were also anti-communist propaganda films. But these were not as influential as previously. After the war, filmmakers became relatively free from the burden of dealing with ideologies, and there was intense debate over whether commercial aspects and artistic values could be integrated in the cinema.

The Film Industry and Film Policy

Following the armistice agreement in 1953, the Korean film industry gradually recovered. Thanks to the great success of *Chun-hyang Story* (Lee Kyu-hwan, 1955) and *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyung-mo, 1956), there was a boom, heralding the “Chungmuro era.” During the gold-

en age of the Korean film industry, from the 1950s to the 1980s, Chungmuro was home to filmmakers. The number of film production companies increased so rapidly that over seventy film companies were located in the Chungmuro area of Seoul. Before 1956, the number of films produced annually was no more than twenty. After 1956, the rate of film production soared, until one hundred and eight films were made in 1959. Government policies that helped promote the film industry underlay this growth. Government laws aimed at promoting the film industry included: "The Exemption of Admission Taxes on Domestic Films" (1954) and "The Preferential Treatment of Korean Films and Awards for Producing Quality Films" (1958).

Various strategies were also developed to boost the film industry. 35mm films replaced 16mm black-and-white ones as standard. In 1958, Korea's first Cinemascope film, *Life*, was directed by Lee Kang-chun. Jeon Chang-geun's *King Gojong and the Martyr An Jung-geun* (1959), a box-office hit, triggered a boom in epic films with lots of spectacle. In 1961, Korea's first color Cinemascope film was made. Other achievements during this period included co-productions with foreign countries, which allowed many foreign filmmakers to visit the country, and various awards at international film festivals.

Despite controversies over the censorship of the anti-communist film *Piagol* (Lee Kang-chun, 1955) and the gangster Im Hwa-soo and the Freedom Party's abuse of power in its dealings with the film industry, the overall atmosphere surrounding the industry was not oppressive. Furthermore, thanks to the April Revolution of 1960, Korea's first civilian film organization, the Film Ethics Committee, was launched, which helped to ease rigid government censorship. Before the Park Cheong-hee (a.k.a. Park Chung-hee) military regime, formed after the military coup on 16 May 1961, established the Motion Picture Law on 1962, the film industry continued to grow, enjoying an atmosphere of relative freedom. However, the regulations imposed by the military regime were as strict as those imposed by the Japanese Government-General of Korea under Japanese rule.

Various Genres, Directors and Stars

The revival of the film industry witnessed not just quantitative growth, but also qualitative growth. Modernity diversified genres. While conventional *shinpa*-style melodramas and anti-communist propaganda films were still produced, modern films portraying social reality with a critical view kept filmmakers busy. To produce these films, filmmakers experimented with various genres such as melodramas, comedies, thrillers, gangster films, and horror films. It is true that they were much influenced by Hollywood films, as well as post-war Italian and French films. However, Korean cinema mixed genres to produce new genres and achieved its own identity. These various genres reflected the spirit of the age in various ways, stirring fierce debates about conflicting values circulating in that period.

A factor behind the boom was the abundant supply of manpower. The film industry had not only veteran directors, who had made films since the colonial period, but also talented rookies, many of whom debuted in the 1950s. These younger directors contributed significantly to the growth of the industry by producing many quality films in both the 1950s and 1960s. This was also the time when Korea's first female director appeared. Meanwhile, the appearance of galaxies of film stars had more significant implications. The 1950s was the age of the film star. Actors became so popular that they were objects of public fascination and debate in film culture, which focused on their private lives as well as their acting. Furthermore, magazines often focused on actresses' sensuous bodies. Stars not only tried to look sexy, but also demonstrated an ability to use their attractive bodies to achieve their aims. As popular interest in the flesh was growing, views on love and sex were changing, and so was the socio-cultural meaning of the body. This led to active debates about sex in the 1950s, driven by the deep impact of film stars on the general public.

The Vitality and Open-Mindedness of Korean Cinema

With South Korea transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy, the solemn social atmosphere that had prevailed gave way to liveliness. Freedom began to spread, allowing individuals to voice their opinions for the first time ever. The cinema responded to these changes in a most sensitive and proactive way. Subjects ignored in the past, such as love, sex, and the lives of ordinary people, became main themes. Moral values were reflected not by portraying collective views, but by describing individual lives. The growing focus on daily lives of individuals stood in clear contrast to wartime, when conflicting ideologies prevailed. In other words, freed of the old burden of ideologies, Korean cinema in the 1950s was full of vitality resulting from a combination of hope for a new era and enlightened awareness of individuals and their ordinary lives. More fundamentally, it was the film community's open-minded attitude that allowed the Korean film industry to accept and adapt proactively to social changes. (Oh Young-sook)