

On This Topic

A Century of Korean Film: *From “Joseon Film” to Global Korean Cinema*

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2019 marks the centennial anniversary of Korean film. This year, old and young film workers joined the efforts together to launch the Planning Committee for Korean Film Centennial Celebration Programmes and organized various events up to October 27, Cinema Day, while international film festivals hosted in Korea and Korean Film Archive (KOFA, hereafter) had screening events commemorating the 100th year of Korean cinema. Also, a publication entitled *Hanguk yeonghwa 100-nyeon 100-gyeong* (Korean Film, 100 Years, 100 Scenes, 2019) was released in time for Cinema Day to broaden public awareness of Korean film history. Particularly, 2019 will be recorded as a year of having a multitude of academic events on Korean film. A forum was held in a section of the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF, hereafter) under the topic of “Reception and Practice of Early Cinema in East Asia” (Oct. 9) in commemoration of the Korean film centennial, which was organized by KOFA and held in collaboration with the BIFF. It was followed by another forum, “Cracks and Creation: Korean Cinema 100 Years” (Oct. 10–11), organized by the Jiseok Film Institute affiliated with the BIFF. The first one, for which I was responsible as a principal organizer, was planned as

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an arena to grope for a new direction in the study of the early history of Korean cinema—which has been riddled with unproductive disputes on its historical origin, having a critical limitation that few films from that era exist today to allow for in-depth examination—in the context of world cinema history, especially, in the comparative study of film histories of East Asian countries. Besides, the Planning Committee for Korean Film Centennial Celebration Programmes and the film studies community cooperated to hold an international seminar, “A Century of Global Korean Cinema: Thinking Through and Beyond Celluloid Lights” (Oct. 23–25). This event offered a meaningful occasion in which renowned Korean and foreign scholars and young researchers convened to recollect on the history of Korean cinema and foresee its new future.

Although both popular and academic programmes suiting the centennial celebration took place in succession, they leave some things to be desired. Specifically, it has failed to produce from a historian’s perspective a coherent, systematic, reliable and cross-sectional description on the 100-year trajectory of Korean cinema. *Hanguk yeonghwa jeonsa* (The Complete History of Korean Film) was published in 1969 in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Korean film, which is still the most basic and most important reference book in the research arena of Korean film history at home and abroad. Undoubtedly, its publication project had a strong association with the cultural policy of the regime at the time, but its academic value has not lessened at all even today. In other words, the significance of the cross-sectional history book authored by a film historian named Young-il Lee based on a systematic compilation of extensive materials and information transcends the clout of ideology, being still influential and inspiring to contemporary researchers. Perhaps, a major issue of the Korean film studies circles today is the absence, difficulty, or avoidance of the authorship of the cross-sectional history. Although 50 years have passed since the publication of *Hanguk yeonghwa jeonsa*, no substantial effort has been made to produce a cross-sectional historical account of the 100-year trajectory of Korean films or 50 years thereafter. Why? Is it because there is no another Young-il Lee, i.e., a brilliant film historian has not yet appeared? In fact, when Young-il Lee

(1932–2001) wrote the book, he was only in his late thirties, and must have taken on the work with Don Quixotic passion and mind-set. Let me put the question in another way. Can we have another cross-sectional historical account which compares in parallel to *Hanguk yeonghwa jeonsa*? Without another Don Quixote, how can we deal with the problem?

It was in the early to mid 2000s that the study on Korean cinema history had a new turning point. During the late 1990s when the Korean movie industry had what was called the Renaissance, making a huge growth, the film studies scholarship had a golden period as well. At the time, a number of college graduates, mostly of humanities and social sciences, swarmed into graduate programs of universities having a film studies department, which was an unprecedented phenomenon. While the research on Korean film history had been previously made by a handful of researchers at an individual level, now a group of people interested in Korean cinema history began to exert collective efforts to study it based on Western film theories. Entering the 2000s, research outcomes of the new generation began to reap some achievements gradually. It was around this time that the first-generation researchers of Korean film history, including Young-il Lee, were rediscovered. Among the outputs were the publishing of *Leeyeongil-ui hangukyeonghwasa ganguirok* (Lectures on Young-il Lee's Korean Cinema History, 2002) edited by the Young-il Lee Archive of the Korean Arts Institute under Korea National University of Arts, the series of *Leeyeongil-ui hangukyeonghwasa-reul wihan jeongeonnok* (Young-il Lee's Testimony for Korean Film History, 2003–2004), and the reprinting of *Hanguk yeonghwa jeonsa* (a revised and enlarged edition, 2004).

A critical factor for the vitalization of the study on Korean film history during the mid 2000s was related with the new launch of the research function at KOFA. As a scholar of Korean film history was appointed as KOFA's new Director for the first time in 2003, a number of projects were undertaken, including the senior film workers' oral history project and the serial publication of materials and information related to Korean movies, which are still ongoing today. Also, the first volumes of the oral history series, *Hangukyeonghwa-reul malhanda* (Speak on Korean Cinema), and the Korean Film History Research Material Series, *Sinmungisa-ro bon*

hanguk yeonghwa (Korean Films in Newspaper Articles) were issued. Additionally, publication of collected works of researches was planned by inviting established scholars and young researchers to look into the movie history from the 1960s to the 1990s along the subjects of aesthetics and genre, policy and industry, technology, theater culture, and criticism. This endeavor resulted in the production of *Hanguk yeonghwasa gongbu 1960–1979* (A Study of Korean Film History 1960–1979, 2004) and *Hanguk yeonghwasa gongbu 1980–1997* (A Study of Korean Film History 1980–1997, 2005). This may be seen as an exemplary effort to overcome through collective authorship the difficulty of writing a cross-sectional movie history. It could be said that during this period KOFA began experimenting how a public institute could co-work with the film studies community to make progress in the research on Korean film history.

Furthermore, around this time KOFA played a crucial role in forging another momentum to replenish researches on Korean film history. That was KOFA's discovery and recuperation from the China Film Archive of eight feature films produced in colonial Korea, which occurred between 2004 and 2006. It immediately opened them to the public by offering special showing sessions and releasing a DVD series entitled *Balguldoen gwageo* (The Past Unearthed, 2007–2009), igniting a research boom in Korean colonial film history domestically and internationally. Although the focus of the researches lied mainly on the feature films made in the 1930s and 1940s, it arguably generated an opportunity for the research arena of Korean film history—establishing a connection with international film archives' old materials—to garner attention in Korea and beyond. After that, the institute proceeded to publish collections of materials and information relating to movies from the Japanese forced domination period, which serve as core references for Korean and overseas researchers studying colonial cinema history. They include the serial works of *Sinnungisa-ro bon joseon yeonghwa* (Joseon Films in Newspaper Articles) printed from 2008 and *Ilboneo japi-ro bon joseon yeonghwa* (Joseon Films in Japanese Magazines) released from 2010. Currently, KOFA makes available to the public a variety of materials and information on Korean film history covering a broad range of aspects from film production to

cinema culture by launching in 2018 the Korean Film History Archive within the Korean Movie Database (KMDb).¹ While it would not be an overstatement to say that the study on Korean film history is currently in contraction in the wake of the crisis of the disciplines of humanities and social sciences, it is far from being active, to say the minimum. The fact that the public institution feeds the lifelines of research on cinema history seems to show succinctly the reality facing the Korean film studies scholarship.

As it can be seen in KOFA’s progress in the investigation, collection, and release of historical materials related to Korean films, it seems that currently the historiography on Korean film does not keep up with the speed and volume of their public release. Regretfully, the layer of researchers of Korean film studies in the country and abroad is getting thin compared to the 2000s. A practical reason for it is that the number of graduate students venturing into the study of film history, in which clear outcomes are hard to come by, is on a rapid decrease. Meanwhile, research topics have been fine-grained with the increase of researchers’ microscopic interests, and they are less interested in cross-sectional history writing in which the perspective and flow can be easily detected than in investigating ruptures in national cinema history with a deconstructive approach. Cross-sectional history writing which resembles Young-il Lee’s *Hanguk yeonghwa jeonsa* is unlikely to be attempted owing to the current academic practice that the absolute number of journal articles one produces is treated more favorably for his/her academic achievement. At the juncture of the 100th anniversary of Korean film, the film studies scholarship has not been able to produce a reliable and legitimate cinema historiography, leaving it as a future challenge.

What needs to be done to use the centennial celebration of Korean film to create a momentum for the production of a cross-sectional history? Needlessly to say, the enduring provision of public funds is a must, but a more critical issue is that researchers of Korean film history should take it on with a sheer determination and a sense of duty in a realistic

1. KMDb, accessed December 1, 2019, www.kmdb.or.kr/history/main.

manner. Building on the research outcomes generated in the form of short papers for the past twenty years or so, they need to try to write multiple histories along various topics. While it has strengths and weaknesses, collective writing can be a viable option with the participation of a group of authors specialized in different subjects and temporal periods. Also, each researcher needs to write not just the history of filmmakers and their outputs, but multiple histories reflective of their core subject areas and perspectives according to their research interests, e.g., policy and industry, technology, spectatorship reception, and criticism. Of course, such keywords as feminism, film style, and cultural studies should not be excluded, because they are important components running through Korea's centennial film history. Most importantly, the multiple descriptions of the history should not target only academic researchers for the readership, but reach out to the public to draw their attention and induce empathy and a favorable response from them.

This special edition of *Korea Journal* has been planned by KOFA as part of the endeavor to commemorate the centennial anniversary of Korean film. Its prime purpose is to take on the vast volume of Korean cinema spanning over a century in entirety and introduce scholarly perspectives through which to configure the historical current running through it. To do that, the 100-year history is divided into five subperiods (the era of Japanese occupation and liberation, the 1950s and the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s, the 1990s and the 2000s, and the 2010s), and most authoritative scholars for each period have been selected to contribute a paper. The five authors tackle a century of Korean film broken into five temporal periods. We try to avoid simply introducing movies and directors one after another; instead, we aim to delve into the core aspects of Korean film employing perspectives and keywords which are helpful for comprehending the essence of each period. The five papers contained in this special issue examine the cinema history of each period with new viewpoints and methodologies which have not been pursued seriously in Korean film studies until now.

The first paper, "The Identity of "*Joseon Film*": Between Colonial Cinema and National Cinema," is written by myself. Serving as a

senior researcher at KOFA, I have been involved in the investigation and excavation of "Joseon films" in China, Russia, and Japan, and have produced notable studies in the comparative history of Korean and Japanese cinema. My paper proposes that Korean motion pictures from the colonial and liberation period which were excavated by KOFA be called "Joseon yeonghwa" (Joseon films). This labeling is intended to draw attention to the historical context lurking behind the problem that they cannot be simply referred to as and integrated into Korean films. In the cases of *Sueomnyo* (Tuition, 1940) and *Jip eomneun cheonsa* (Angels on the Streets, 1941), they were Japanese movies in terms of international law, and the filmmakers themselves leaned toward Japanese national cinema. As the colonial reality portrayed in the movies was taken issue with, they reaped a success in "outlying" Joseon, while not even being released in the "inland," Japan. This shows that they were not accepted as Japanese (state) cinemas and simultaneously, excluded from Joseon (national) films. How are we to integrate colonial Joseon movies into the description of Korean film history? Especially, the concept of Korean film was swept in turmoil amidst the political ambience surrounding the establishment of the government of the Republic of Korea. For another example, *Jayumanse* (Hurrah for Freedom, 1946) and *Haeyeon* (A Seagull, 1948) were subjected to re-inspection, as the main actors' deflection to North Korea became an issue after their opening, and eventually they failed to become Korean films. In the future, Korean film history writing shall be able to move onto a new stage by dealing with such ruptures sternly with a critical reflection, instead of going around them or putting them in parentheses.

The second piece, "The Status of Historical Drama Films in South Korea in the 1960s: The Relevance between the Film Industry and Genre Films," is contributed by Gil-sung Lee, who specializes in Korean genre films of the 1950s to the 1970s. Historical dramas played the most important role in the process of establishing the industrial foundation of Korean movies during the 1950s and the 1960s. In a sense, the work to examine the genre of historical dramas, which led quantitative and qualitative growth of Korean films, is probably the most effective way to understand the first Renaissance of Korean cinema characterized by

dynamic interactions among the state institutions, the private sector industry and the audience. The cinema history of the 1950s and the 1960s has been extensively studied in a relative sense by the Korean film studies scholarship. This paper tries to get closer to the core of Korean movie history of the mid 1950s to the 1960s with the keyword, historical drama, a main genre of that period. While existing researches on film genres tend to revolve around text analysis and discussion in the socio-historical context, this one attempts to expand it to the dimensions of industry and acceptance. Especially, the discussion and consideration of the influence of foreign movies set it apart from the prior researches. It is pioneering in terms of demonstrating that genre research on classical Korean cinema needs to be conducted in a multifaceted fashion by addressing the film industry's rationale and reception by the audience.

The third paper, “Coevolution of Conventions and Korean New Wave: Korean Cinema in the 1970s and 80s,” is taken on by Hyoin Yi, a former Director of KOFA. Belonging to the film movement camp (the Seoul Film Group and the National Film Institute) during the 1980s, he relies on personal experiences, scholarly assessments, objective records, and a critical outlook to develop a multidimensional discussion on Korean films of the 1970s and the 1980s. It attempts a historical investigation of how novel films managed to appear in the realm of commercial films of Korea in the 1970s and the 1980s. Focusing on the “Korean New Wave” emerged in the second half of the 1980s, it clarifies that the new move in the Korean cinema scene at the time did not come out of nowhere, but was connected with prior ones. That is, there was the flow from *Yeongsang sidae* (The Age of Image) to the progenitor of the New Wave (New Wave Prequel) to the New Wave. The 1970s and the 1980s are often defined as a period of recession and depression of Korean cinema; because of that, earlier studies attend to the discussion of directors and trendy collective work, which are also addressed in this paper. However, it does not just stop at labeling them as auteur directors and limit the assessment at the level of aesthetic success and failure; rather, it reveals that their creative renditions were consequences of the coevolution of Korean films’ customary practices and the spirit of the New Wave. It persuades that the assets of Korean cinema

attained from the “Age of Image” in the 1970s to the “Korean New Wave” of the 1980s were actually the best outcomes impregnable by Korean commercial films.

The fourth article, “From the Era of Melodrama to the Age of Comedy and Thrillers: The Simultaneous Transformations of Korean Society and Film Genre From the 1990s to the Present,” is authored by Yuhee Park, a researcher of Korean cinema history and film critic. Considering her research background of analyzing the flow of Korean film history through the prism of popular narrative genres, she is likely the most suitable person to be entrusted to capture the current of Korean motion pictures from the 1990s to the 2000s. This work performs a reflective symptomatic analysis of Korean society in order to explicate the reformation of Korean film genres, from the long-lasting grandiose tide of melodrama continued from the 1950s to the emergence of comedy during the 1990s and then to thrillers in the 2000s. Concerning this period which is lacking in comprehensive analysis in the academy mainly because it is an immediate past, she suggests that the evolution and halt of movie genres are interlinked with collective conscious and unconscious desires of Korean society. It is pioneering for confronting squarely the two decades of contemporary Korean movies, and I am certain that it will provide a good basis for churning out future researches.

The last piece which addresses the most recent period of the 2010s under the title of “(In)Commensurability of Korean Cinema: International Coproduction of Korean Films in the 2010s,” is by Suhyun Kim, who conducted research on movie coproduction in East Asia, including Korea-China collaboration, while working as a researcher at the Film Policy Research Department of the Korean Film Council, and currently studies in the doctoral program at Kyoto University, Japan. Probably, the main reason that Hollywood’s studios came to be directly involved in the production of Korean films in the 2010s and OTT (over the top media services) streaming services represented by Netflix pay attention to pro-Korean movie content is its commensurability and integrality which can be shared with globalized audiences in capitalist society. Since Korean film’s status as global cinema was paved initially by *Seolguk yeolcha*

(*Snowpiercer*) in 2013, it has continued to grow as *Gokseong* (The Wailing, 2016) and *Miljeong* (Secret Agent, 2016) were made with the investments of 20th Century Fox and Warner Brothers, respectively. The paper focuses on the notion of commensurability for a theoretical framework to examine the potentiality of Korean film in the global market. It is viewed as an appropriate concept which explains fabulously Korean cinema opting for international coproduction and its orientation for global film production as well as the successful performance of director Joon Ho Bong's films in the 2010s. I have no doubt that it will lead to spin off follow-up studies on today's Korean film industry and the path for creation which are, unavoidably, tied intricately to the global environment of filmmaking.

In my view, the five papers which look into a century of Korean film together have fulfilled their not-so-easy mission to take a sufficiently close-up view of each broad subperiod in scope and at the same time, present persuasive discussions through keywords which help explicate the essence of each. Concurrently, this special issue will be noted for offering a significant historical account on the 100-year history of Korean motion pictures. 2019 marks the centennial of Korean cinema and a new beginning for the next 100 years ahead. I firmly believe that the academic experiences and achievements attained this year will make a solid starting point to invigorate Korean film studies and research on Korean film history.

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Received: 2019.11.14. Accepted: 2019.12.11.