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Cross-currents of Change and Continuity: Korean National Literature and Korean National Cinema[1)]

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Introduction

Literature, particularly poetry and short fiction, is often regarded as "High Art" (or "belles lettres"), a notion posed in deliberate contradistinction with popular or "low" forms of art such as serialized novels, pop songs, and cinema. Within the mainstream of intellectual discourse in Korea, this distinction has historically been particularly stark, where even prose was traditionally deemed inferior to the tightly-packed poems written in Chinese, and in the twentieth century prose was rehabilitated to a certain extent, but pop songs and cinema, in particular, were deemed as culturally inferior forms of poetry and fiction. The chasm between high and low culture dates back to the exclusivity and elite nature of neo-Confucian scholarship throughout the Chosŏn Dynasty, and even though the dynasty ended in 1910, Confucian attitudes on education and social harmony continued to enjoy a certain hegemonic dominance well into the

【Keywords】 Kim Sŭng-ok, National Literature (*minjok munhak*), National Cinema, National Identity, Popular Culture, Korean New Wave

1) This paper is a revised and expanded version of my presentation at the Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs held in Minneapolis, Minnesota on October 1-3, 2004. I am grateful to fellow panelist Pil Ho Kim and University of Illinois graduate student Yoonjeong Shim for their helpful comments. Any omissions and errors, however, are my own.

colonial era.

Following the Korean War, however, democratic ideals of freedom and egalitarianism began to empower the masses, and indeed the masses gained access to the same education as the former *yangban* variety of successful films from the Korean "new wave" that were also based on successful works of literature.

The distinction between high and low art *may* have at one time served a reasonable purpose, but those days now seem to be well behind us. One major reason for this, at least in the case of Korea, is the continued prominence of the idea of a national literature, and more recently, of a national cinema. Marshall Pihl has defined "national literature," following Korean critical usage, as a literature committed to a vision of national wholeness:

> National literature (*minjok munhak*) is defined by contemporary Korean criticism as a literature which is based upon a thorough understanding of the nation as a whole, both in terms of its historical conditions and of its current realities. It grasps the totality of national life and gives both meaning and value to the lives of those who constitute the nation.[2)]

In other words, any topic or issue, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, ends up being framed by an awareness of its relationship to the nation. Not surprisingly, the same logic of "historical conditions" and "current realities" governs the various conceptions of a Korean national cinema.

The idea of a national literature of South Korea was an immediate concern in the confusion of the post-liberation years, and nationalist discourse only intensified in 1948 with the advent of two competing governments that both

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2) Marshall R. Pihl, "The Nation, the People, and a Small Ball: Literary Nationalism and Literary Populism in Contemporary Korea," *Korea Journal* 30 no. 3 (March 1990): 16.

claimed legitimacy over the entirety of the Korean peninsula. Ironically, while fewer and fewer people genuinely believe in pan-peninsular legitimacy of either side of the 38th parallel, national literature became, if anything, more prominent in critical circles—a kind of collective version of the individual desiring most that which is the most difficult to obtain. In the case of contemporary South Korea, the threat, of course, is no longer from the North, and is instead from the inexorable march of internationalization, globalization, and transnational culture. So it is that national literatures and national cinemas, to the extent that they actually represent any kind of national wholeness, are compelled toward inclusivity rather than exclusivity, and by the 1970s and 1980s, the *minjok* (the nation) as a cultural construct had given way to the minjung (the masses). The logic of national literature and "populist literature" (*minjung munhak*) dictated an intellectual shift toward a new emphasis on social engagement, social responsibility, and social justice. Many works of minjung literature were, at least in their day, extremely successful, and also uplifting and empowering. And yet the success of the minjung project essentially contained the seeds of its own demise, as a newly educated and now culturally empowered minjung became free to frolic in Confucius's garden. In this respect, the second half of the twentieth century in South Korea was a cultural battleground that witnessed a clash between high and low art. For a long time, these clashes were marginalized, swept under the carpet, or simply unnoticed behind the scenes. But as time marched on, these clashes became increasingly visible.

In recent years, the so-called "new wave" of Korean cinema has sparked an increased interest in popular culture that has lent a new respectability to both cinematic production and cinema studies. There is indeed even a kind of backlash, where cinema scholars, perhaps feeling invigorated and emboldened by the global rise and market dominance of the cinematic medium, now tend to ignore, or otherwise make light of, possible connections between literature and

cinema, as if to distance the field of national cinema from its prodigal elder sibling.

A good example of this kind of territorialism is the comprehensive study by Yi Yŏng-il, *The History of Korean Cinema*.[3] Yi remarks with some disdain that literary works increasingly became the basis for movies in the 1960s only because government policy basically bribed film studios with distribution rights to Hollywood films (which was where the money was). Yi writes:

> Artistic films and literary films produced in the 1960s were quite plentiful…. The contents of the artistic films produced in the first part of the 1960s came out spontaneously through the film directors with strong subject consciousness based on realism patterns. The literary films produced in the latter part of the 1960s on the other hand, came out through the government's reward system for quality films…. Generally speaking, the literary films produced in the latter half of the 1960s lacked necessary aesthetic value which was needed to express realism in Korean films although some of them had some value. *They were just so busy filming as many famous novels as they could find.*[4]

Yi in this way leads us to believe that literary adaptations were not quality films, while at the same time Yi and others have characterized the 1960s as a "golden age of Korean cinema," thanks evidently to the "spontaneous" artistic films. It is interesting to note, however, that Yi's list of "artistic" films is comprised almost entirely of literary adaptations.[5] Yi goes on to characterize the 1970s as a period of drastic decline, but he then praises the success and artistry of films such as *Yŏngja ŭi chŏnsŏng sidae* (Yŏng-ja's age of success, 1975) and *Kyŏul yŏja* (Winter woman, 1977), without mentioning anywhere

3) Lee Young-il [Yi Yŏng-il], *The History of Korean Cinema* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 1998).
4) Lee, p.174, emphasis added.
5) Lee, pp.174-5.

that both of these films were based on previously successful literary works. Yi also fails to mention that both of these adaptations were by the same novelist/screenwriter, Kim Sŭng-ok, and I will return to this topic shortly.[6]

The point here is that even a cursory review of popular, quality, or otherwise successful films from the 1960s and 1970s reveals a great number of films that were literary adaptations. Most of these are easily recognizable because they retained their original literary titles verbatim. Although more difficult to spot, there were also several films that were based on literature but that were released under new titles.[7] Throughout his book, Yi Yŏng-il points out literary influences in *neither* of these cases. And Yi's attitude is not an isolated incident. In an article on Im Kwŏn-t'aek's 1993 film *Sŏp'yŏnje* (Sŏp'yŏnje), Donato Totaro ends up comparing *Sŏp'yŏnje* with Mizoguchi Kenji's 1954 film *Sanshō dayū* (Sansho the bailiff), while totally ignoring the fact that both films are

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6) *Yŏngja ŭi chŏnsŏng sidae* (Yŏngja's golden age) (1975), based on the 1973 short story of the same title by Cho Sŏn-jak (b. 1940); see Cho Sŏn-jak, "Yŏngja ŭi chŏnsŏng sidae" (Yŏngja's golden age), *Sedae* (Generations) 120 (July 1973). *Kyŏul yŏja* (Winter woman) (1977), based on the 1976 novel of the same title by Cho Hae-il (b. 1942); see Cho Hae-il, *Kyŏul yŏja* (Winter woman) (Seoul: Munhak kwa chisŏngsa, 1976). Another famous movie adapted by Kim Sŭng-ok was *Changgun ŭi suyŏm* (The general's beard) (1968), based on the 1966 novella of the same title by Yi Ŏ-ryŏng (b. 1934); see Yi Ŏ-ryŏng, "Changgun ŭi suyŏm" (The general's beard) *Sedae* (Generations) 32 (March 1966). Kim won the Taejong Prize for this screenplay adaptation, and the film appeared in the fourth Chicago Film Festival.

7) As an extreme example, Kim Sŭng-ok's landmark story "A Journey to Mujin" was made into a film on three separate occasions with three distinct titles, none of which was the original "Mujin kihaeng"; for the original story, see Kim Sŭng-ok, "Mujin kihaeng" (A journey to Mujin), *Sasanggye* (World of thought) 12 no. 10 (October 1964): 329-46; see also Kim Sŭng-ok, "Mujin kihaeng" (A journey to Mujin), in *Kim Sŭng-ok sosŏljŏnjip* (Complete works of Kim Sŭng-ok), vol. 1, *Saengmyŏng yŏnsŭp woe* (Life rehearsal and other stories), pp. 125-52. The three films are: *An'gae* (Fog) (1967), and *Hwanghol* (Rapture) (1974), and *Mujin hŭrin dwi an'gae* (Fog after the clouds in Mujin) (1986). It is interesting to note that Kim did not write the screenplays for any of these versions.

literary adaptations. *Sŏp'yŏnje* is based on a 1976 novella by Yi Ch'ŏng-jun, and *Sanshō dayū* is based on a story by Mori Ōgai.[8] Although cinematic analysis is not obligated in all cases to distinguish between original screenplays and literary adaptations, I would expect this distinction, as well as an enumeration of the author and title of the original work, in any discussion of literary qualities of the filmic text. And so the fact that these two examples deliberately avoided such a discussion suggests to me a certain kind of turf mentality that I believe is representative of a larger trend of a lack of interdisciplinary inclinations. Meanwhile, the attitudes of literary critics and scholars toward cinema and cinema studies has been no less dismissive.

And here I would like to return to the novelist and screenwriter Kim Sŭng-ok, whose career provides a particularly convincing view of the continuities between Korean national literatures and Korean national cinemas. The case of Kim Sŭng-ok shows that the perceived divide between literature and cinema is at least partly a mirage, and it also shows that the troubled relationship we find in intellectual circles post-new wave is actually nothing new. Kim was *the* celebrated new literary star of the 1960s, and yet he was suddenly regarded as a traitor in many literary circles when he moved into film screenplays in the 1970s —all of which were adaptations of works other than his own. In a personal interview with Kim in 2002, he said that he was most reviled by friends and critics alike *not* for dropping out of society in the wake of the 1980 Kwangju Massacre even though he was in the middle of serializing a novel, but instead for his movement into film screenplays. People were willing to forgive Kim's

8) Donato Totaro, "Sopyanje" (sic), *Offscreen* (May 3, 1999). Accessed online, www.horschamp.qc.ca/9905/offscreen_reviews/sopyanje.html, on 26 May 2004. The basis for comparison is that in both stories there is a search for a relative who ends up going blind, and Totaro concludes that: "while the familial separation remains literal in *Sansho*, in *Sopyanje* (sic) the separation can be seen as a metaphor for the North-South division of Korea."

reaction to a national tragedy, his subsequent conversion to Christianity (regarded by some as "fanatical"[9]), and even his reputation for laziness. People were much less willing (Kim's wife included), however, to tolerate Kim's descent into vulgarity.

It seems clear that the uneasy relationship between literature and cinema merits a closer look. In this paper I will first look at the significant continuity in the career of novelist/screenwriter Kim Sŭng-ok, and then I will zoom out to see how Kim's career mirrors larger social, intellectual, and artistic trends of the Korean "new wave" of cinematic production. As we shall see, the Korean "new wave" is not as new as advertised, but then again this does not mean that there was no conflict. To the contrary, as we shall also see, the existence of significant continuity is a fundamental sign of complex processes of cultural negotiation and conflict.

Kim Sŭng-ok and National Literature

Kim Sŭng-ok was revered in the 1960s as a supremely talented novelist and also as the voice of a new generation, but almost as quickly he was the object of considerable scorn in the 1970s for moving away from short-story writing and into cinema screenplay writing. Kim's literature was richly multivalent, and one clearly defined aspect of his writings was his contributions at the level of literary nationalism. Kim's literary nationalist project boils down to the attempt to find a basis *not* for national (re)unification but rather for national *unity*. By dint of birth and talent, Kim was at the forefront of a new "4.19 generation" (named after the April 19, 1960 Student Uprising) and as such Kim's literature

9) See for example Lee Tong-ha (Yi Tong-ha), "Kim, Seung-ok" [Kim Sŭng-ok], in The Korean Culture and Arts Foundation, ed., *Who's Who in Korean Literature* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International, 1996).

was completely divorced from notions of reunification—whether from naïve idealism or from belligerent ideology. Being of the younger generation, Kim was able to accept national division for what it was—the start of a new, South Korean, nation. And Kim, without the benefit of Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, was nevertheless able to move beyond nostalgic visions of an organic, inviolable (as if somehow natural) whole nation that was unnaturally and unjustly divided by foreign imperial intervention.[10] Moreover, Kim, without the benefit of Bruce Cumings's scholarship on the origins of the Korean War, was able to recognize the Korean War as a civil war, and as such he felt it more important to find a basis for unity *within* the increasingly-fixed confines of the South Korean state.[11] Although South Korean "national literature" (*minjok munhak*) is normally held to begin concomitant with the creation of the Republic of Korea in 1948, it becomes truly national—in content rather than just in name—in the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of Kim Sŭng-ok and others.

I have argued elsewhere that Kim's literature was also an allegorical response to the Korean War.[12] If Kim and the 4.19 generation were trying to come to terms with the war and move on, it was not because they had been too young to participate as soldiers. To the contrary, Kim and the 4.19 generation were able to move on precisely because they could vividly remember the divisive effect of the war *not* in terms of political lines in the sand but rather in terms of societal

10) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, (London: Verso, 1991).

11) Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) and Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume II: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

12) Daniel H. Kim, *Literature of the Bittersweet: Kim Sŭng-ok and 1960s Korea* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Indiana University, 2004), Chapter Three.

disruptions, even though they were technically occurring *within* a politically unified state, namely South Korea. So it is that Kim's "Sŏul 1964nyŏn kyŏul" (Seoul 1964 winter) addresses not only a 1960s society unable to communicate, but also a civil war as the fundamental cause for social breakdown, represented in this particular story by class differences and consequently differing horizons of expectations.[13]

And in Kim's other canonical work, "Mujin kihaeng" (A journey to Mujin), Kim allegorizes the war along the theme of the lack of courage, delineating a kind of survival complex. Kim believed that the war could be characterized as the mutual destruction of anyone with the courage to pick a side and fight for his or her beliefs, such that anyone left alive after the war by definition was a coward.[14] In Kim's literary world of Mujin, everyone is in some way complicit in a national malaise that is the inexorable result of a society that has forsaken courage.

Kim began to move toward cinema as early as 1967, writing and directing an adaptation of Kim Tong-in's 1925 classic story "Kamja" (Potato). Film historian Yi Yŏng-il's low opinion of literary adaptations notwithstanding, Kim Sŭng-ok's film version of *Potato* was well received artistically. Among other honors, Kim's film version of *Potato* received a positive review in the French daily *Le Monde*. For better or worse, this was to be his one and only job as a director. According to Kim, his wife was very unhappy with his entry into film direction, because directors in those days had such bad reputations as philanderers (anyone who has seen pictures of the legendary director Sin

13) Kim Sŭng-ok, "Sŏul 1964 nyŏn kyŏul" (Seoul 1964 winter), in *Kim Sŭng-ok sosŏljŏnjip* (Complete works of Kim Sŭng-ok), vol. 1, *Saengmyŏng yŏnsŭp woe* (Life rehearsal and other stories), pp. 202-24. Originally published in *Sasanggye* (World of thought) 13 no. 6 (June 1965): 401-17.

14) Kim Sŭng-ok, interview by author, 20 October 2001, Seoul, Korea, notes.

Sang-ok may well understand her position), and she gave Kim an ultimatum: me or directing. Kim agreed not to direct again, but he was able to continue his interest in cinema through the relatively more respectable profession of screenplay writing. As mentioned above, however, this move still churned the collective stomach of Kim's literati friends.

Kim Sŭng-ok wrote the screenplay adaptation for Kim Ho-sŏn's 1977 *Kyŏul yŏja* (Winter woman), based on the 1976 novel of same title by novelist Cho Hae-il. At the time, *Winter Woman* set a domestic box office record of 585,775 tickets sold at first-run theaters.[15] The film follows the agony of a female college-student protagonist named Yi-hwa after her boyfriend commits suicide out of sexual frustration. Although this is admittedly a rather saucy plot in comparison with the literary adaptations of the 1960s, *Winter Woman* is by no means the first or only film to deal with sexual themes. As early as 1961 with Sin Sang-ok's *Sarangbang sonnim kwa ŏmŏni* (The houseguest and my mother) we can find subplots of a sexual nature. And there was in fact an entire subgenre of the melodrama that developed in the 1970s (called by Yi Yŏng-il as "hostess films") that by definition engaged in topics and themes of sex and sexuality.[16] What makes *Winter Woman* notable is its box office success, which suggests a powerful resonance with salient social issues of the 1970s. As the economy progressed and politics digressed, the collective social hierarchy of needs moved upward from shelter and food and away from ideological dissent, creating a funneling effect toward the tremendous changes in conceptions of sex, marriage, morality, and desire.

As the film *Winter Woman* shows, then, there is significant continuity from the golden age of the 1960s and the alleged cultural desert of the 1970s in the

15) Lee, 203.
16) Lee, 201, passim.

form of sincere attempts to work through social contradictions. A difference in content between 1960s films and 1970s film, and a concomitant difference in the content of actual literary works chosen to be remade, is at least partly the result of major changes in Korean society from the 1960s to the 1970s. Even though adaptations of literary works were largely due to 1960s government policy, that fact alone should not cloud the result that some of the finest films of the 1960s and 1970s were literary adaptations. In the 1960s, there were Yu Hyŏn-mok's *Obalt'an* (Aimless bullet, 1961), *Ingyŏ in'gan* (Superfluous people, 1964), and *K'ain ŭi huye* (Descendants of Cain, 1968), Sin Sang-ok's *Sarangbang sonnim kwa ŏmŏni* (The houseguest and my mother, 1961), Yi Song-gu's *Ilwŏl* (Sun and moon, 1967), *Memilkkot p'il muryŏp* (When the buckwheat blooms, 1967), *Chŏlmŭn nŭt'inamu* (Young zelkova tree, 1968), and *Changgun ŭi suyŏm* (The general's beard, 1968). In the 1970s, two prominent examples are the adaptations written by Kim Sŭng-ok for Kim Ho-sŏn's 1975 *Yŏngja ŭi chŏnsŏng sidae* (Yŏngja's age of success) and 1977 *Winter Woman*. All of the above films are literary adaptations. In fact this trend continued basically unchanged into the 1980s, with such films as Pae Ch'ang-ho's 1984 hits *Korae sanyang* (Whale hunting) and *Kipgo p'urŭn pam* (Deep blue night), both based on stories by the novelist Ch'oe In-ho.

Kim is the first one to admit that the main reason he moved into cinema was money. In the 1969s, he had been swindled out of royalties on his mammoth bestselling collection of short stories by an unscrupulous (or shrewd, depending on one's point of view) publisher. We may therefore be skeptical of any idealistic and revisionist notions that Kim was consciously out to bring his literary project to the movie-going masses. That Kim was motivated primarily by money does *not*, however, in any way detract from the clear boost in quality/artistry that Kim brought to the cinema world. More importantly, the issue of whether Kim did it for love or for money bears no relationship

whatsoever to the issue of whether or not Kim's screenplays continued to contribute, in very much the same manner as his literature, to a vision of national unity. The film *Winter Woman* was just as much the talk of the town in 1977 as "Seoul 1964 Winter" was in 1965, and indeed, through film Kim was reaching a far wider audience. Themes of communication, alienation, and isolation in the 1960s gave way to more particularized themes of contradictions in sexual morality and consumerism. It is worth noting in this regard that Kim did continue to publish works of fiction in the 1970s, albeit much more sporadically, and these same themes of sexuality and consumerism that are so visible in his screenplays are equally prominent in his 1970s literary works. For example, sexuality and consumerism are central to Kim's 1977 story, "Sŏul ŭi talbit, 0 chang" (Moonlight in Seoul, chapter zero)—a story that won the inaugural offering of the Yi Sang Literary Prize.[17]

On the one hand, the same critics who chastise Kim for moving into screenplays also bemoan a certain drop in literary quality in Kim's 1970s works of fiction. On the other hand, however, such a critique begs the question of who gets to judge, of who gets to decide standards of problematic notions such as quality, literariness, and art. This very debate, in fact, is at the core of the cultural war between high and low culture. As we shall see in the following section, this debate was emblematic of the larger dynamics of the steady rise of cinema and popular culture in South Korea.

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17) Kim Sŭng-ok, "Sŏul ŭi talbit, 0 chang" (Moonlight in Seoul, chapter zero), in *Kim Sŭng-ok sosŏljŏnjip* (Complete works of Kim Sŭng-ok), vol. 1, *Saengmyŏng yŏnsŭp woe* (Life rehearsal and other stories), pp. 292-320. Originally published in *Munhak sasang* (Literary thought) 58 (July 1977): 397-418.

National Identity and the "New Wave"

The case of Kim Sŭng-ok is in many ways a microcosm of the processes of national identity formation (and continuous re-formation) that have occurred since 1987. Michael Robinson, in a forthcoming article, traces the links between the relaxing of government control over social life and the rise of popular culture.[18] The 1987 summer of the *minjung* and the resignation of Chun Doo Hwan marked the beginning of the so-called "new wave" of Korean cinema. On a variety of levels, the new wave is indeed new, and yet one also finds a strong and vibrant line of continuity reaching back into the 1950s in terms of the connections between literary adaptations and commercial and critical success. In a clear parallel with the career of Kim Sŭng-ok, there is a continued, unmistakable presence of literary adaptations, a presence that is particularly noticeable in the films of greater success and/or higher quality.

An early film of the new wave is the 1992 film by Chŏng Chi-yŏng, *Hayan chŏnjaeng* (White badge). The film is based on a bizarre (albeit in my view highly successful) blend of the 1983 novel by An Chŏng-hyo and the 1986 Oliver Stone film *Platoon*. Both the original novel and the film adaptation create structural parallels between the Vietnam War and the Korean War, a technique that was used somewhat more famously in Hwang Sŏk-yŏng's 1992 novel *Mugi ŭi kŭnŭl* (The shadow of arms).[19] Although these parallels are not without problems (such as Hwang's usage of literary technique as a substitute for historical evidence), the issues raised by An and director Chŏng Chi-yŏng

18) Michael E. Robinson, "Contemporary Cultural Production in South Korea: Vanishing Meta-Narratives of Nation," in Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer, eds., *The New Korean Cinema* (Forthcoming--Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

19) Hwang Sŏk-yŏng, *Mugi ŭi kŭnŭl* (The shadow of arms), revised edition (Seoul: Ch'angjak kwa pip'yŏngsa, 1992). Originally published in two parts in 1985 and 1988.

are important ones nonetheless. Just as in Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, the Vietnam War in *White Badge* is made to mirror very real social problems (or in literary terms "social contradictions") of class, race, and gender. Furthermore, the open ending to this film is a classic literary technique used to heighten artistic tensio n.[20]

The following year saw an old-school director, Im Kwŏn-t'aek, cash in on the growing wave with his 1993 hit film *Sŏp'yŏnje*, based on a novella of the same title by the novelist Yi Ch'ŏng-jun. Although this film has received significant critical attention, the original novella only rarely gets mentioned. For example, Cho Hae Joang's article, "*Sopyonje*: Its Cultural and Historical Meaning," is an excellent critique of *Sŏp'yŏnje*, and this article is one of the few instances where the original novelist Yi actually gets mentioned. It is worth noting, however, that Cho does not use Yi to highlight literary and aesthetic triumphs of the film, and instead uses Yi to highlight "the thoroughness of Im, who continued to interrogate the author even after he [Yi] had come up with an answer or a solution."[21]

Sŏp'yŏnje was the first Korean film to top the one million tickets mark, and the Korean film industry shifted into high gear, amid continued protection from the government, culminating in the watershed 1998 film *Shiri*, directed by Kang Che-gyu. *Shiri* was recognized as the first Korean "blockbuster," and it went on

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20) More precisely, a favorite technique of pure-literature authors, whose intellectual roots date back to Chosŏn era Confucian literati. In the future, I hope to examine in more detail the relationships between popular culture and intellectual history, as manifested by the elite debate between "pure literature" (sunsu munhak) and "engagement literature" (ch'amyŏ munhak).

21) Cho Hae Joang, "*Sopyonje*: Its Cultural and Historical Meaning," in David E. James and Kyung Hyun Kim, eds., *Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), p. 148. The author Yi is relegated to an endnote: "Yi Ch'ŏng-jun has said, 'The story was my responsibility, but the movie is theirs,'" p.155.

to become the first Korean film to surpass the all-time domestic mark of 4.7 million tickets set earlier that year by James Cameron's *Titanic*. However, *Shiri* was an original screenplay, and although it was wildly successful at the time, the story does not stand up well to even cursory critical scrutiny, and the film is now largely passé. Among several problems, the most glaring is the blatant demonization of the North Korean other.

Pak Ch'an-uk's 2002 film *Kongdong kyŏngbi kuyŏk JSA* (Joint security area), by contrast, was even more successful at the box office and evinces a much more nuanced story. In addition to the mesmerizing whodunit plotline, there is, for the first time ever in world cinema (with the possible exception of North Korean cinema?), a portrayal of North Koreans as thinking, feeling human beings. Pak was able to finesse the National Security Law (an obstacle that remains in effect even today) by being careful to distinguish individual North Koreans from the North Korean *system* that, we are meant to assume, remains as evil as ever. Although this is clearly a weakness of *JSA*, it becomes much more plausible to blame the state-policy side of the popular culture equation. One can even speculate that Pak Ch'an-uk—or indeed Pak Sang-yŏn, the original author of *JSA* the novel—might have made an even bolder film or novel if they had not been limited by the National Security Law.

Even comedies are not immune from the interplay of cultural production. The 2001 comedy hit *Yŏpgijŏgin kŭnyŏ* (My sassy girl), directed by Kwak Chae-yong, was second in box-office receipts for 2001 only to Kwak Kyŏng-t'aek's gangster-paradise melodrama *Ch'in'gu* (Friend). *My Sassy Girl* is based on the novel by Kim Ho-sik, which was in turn based on his weblog (online serial) fictionalization of his college-days relationship with an unusual girlfriend. Within the Confucian cultural hierarchy, cinema is often viewed as a technique for vulgar entertainment that is only a step or two above pop-songs and subway minstrels, and within the cinema industry, the comedic genre is

often viewed as just above soft-core pornography. And yet, *My Sassy Girl* contains powerful motifs of perseverance and the sustained efforts required of genuine communication, and compelling themes against the objectification of women and against skin-deep conceptions of love, beauty, and humanity. As has so often been the case, these critical niceties are made possible because the story first had to survive *as a story*.

In all of these examples, the dividing line between high and low culture is being steadily effaced. In the war and action films, the new wave has made a significant contribution to Korean culture and national identity by testing and pressing beyond the limits of mainstream discourse on division and reunification. In the films that question mainstream notions of tradition and modernity, the cinematic medium becomes a metaphor of its own projects of reconciling the role of tradition in the modern age and of blending the strengths of literature and cinema. And even in comedies, we are witnessing a melding of a light and airy cinematic style with heavy and socially compelling issues.

Conclusion

In the battle for cultural legitimacy, can we find a victor? Literature and cinema were historically more often than not regarded as polar opposites, and it is even possible to say that there are indeed a number of significant differences between the two. Not least of which is the continued specter of the elitist Confucian predilection for dense prose and denser verse and a concomitant disdain for low and vulgar forms of popular entertainment. Added to this already volatile situation, the cinematic undertaking has from its very beginning been an intrusion of foreign technology, values, and sensibilities. If we are forced to declare a victor, the stakes very high indeed.

As we have seen, however, a closer examination of the film industry and the history of its development in Korea reveals significant areas of overlap. This overlap strongly suggests that the dividing line between high culture and popular culture may not have been as stark as we believe, nor is the division stark today. And this is particularly true in the case of Korean national cinema or cinemas. Korean national literature, in the form of original works and in the form of novelists turned screenwriters, played a major role in the development of a Korean national cinema, and continues to play a role today. The extent that Korean films contributed to national-level dialogues on identity-forming issues of self and society is largely due to the influence of literary art. This was true in the 1960s and 1970s, and it is no less true today.

Meanwhile, in the 1990s, as if intentionally hoping to meet the new wave on some kind of middle ground, Korean literature experienced a "lightening" of both subject matter and themes.[22] One particularly interesting example is the novelist Ha Sŏng-nan, who won the prestigious Tong-in Literary Prize in 1999. Although she is acknowledged as a so-called "serious" author (and there can be no better stamp of approval than the Tong-in Prize), her prose style is distinctly new and visual (if not to say postmodern?), and her works often read like cinematic narrations. As if worried that we might not get it, she even published a full-length novel in 2001 entitled, *Nae yŏnghwa ŭi chuin'gong* (The star of my movie).[23] So in at least one way, we are now seeing a convergence of literature and film, and so far the results of this dialectic have been extremely positive, at least in terms of cultural production. This is in my opinion a major, yet unnoticed, contribution of the post-1988 "new wave" in Korean cinema.

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22) Yu Chong-ho, interview by author, 12 March 2002, Seoul, Korea, notes. See also Michael Robinson.

23) Ha Sŏng-nan, *Nae yŏnghwa ŭi chuin'gong* (The star of my movie) (Seoul: Chakka chŏngsin, 2001).

Having said that, however, I think we may be in 2005 reaching the end-stage of this so-called Korean "new wave." A number of the new wave directors still have yet to follow initial successes with follow-up hits. New films are increasingly formulaic and dependent on star power, although there are several exceptions, to be sure. Those exceptions notwithstanding, however, the success of the new wave seems to be succumbing to a kind of trap of success, and Korean films seem to be painting themselves into a stale corner. Masses of Korean audiences have yet to pick up on this and are still flocking to see their stars, and consequently theaters are still reluctant to drop Korean films for Hollywood films. But I wonder how much longer Korean audiences will continue to be so eager.

In many ways, what we are seeing instead, in terms of any freshness that still exists, is continued success by the iconic Im Kwŏn-t'aek and other old-school holdouts like Pae Ch'ang-ho, who are in many significant ways *unchanged* from the 1960s. The only real changes are a definite revitalization thanks to the energy and cash infusion of the Korean new wave. Furthermore, we are also seeing the rise of yet another class of directors (upon whom I have yet to see a label affixed), led by the extremely talented director (and erstwhile Minister of Culture for the No Mu-hyŏn administration) Yi Ch'ang-dong. This, by the way, is the very same Yi Ch'ang-dong who was a novelist before going into film. I think there will always be a market for quality, if not to say literary-minded, *stories*, just as there will always be a market for quality acting by the old-school likes of An Sŏng-gi and Kang Su-yŏn. And as I have tried to show in this paper, this trend is intensified when it comes to *national* literature and *national* cinema.

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[Abstract]

Cross-currents of Change and Continuity: Korean National Literature and Korean National Cinema[24]

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The decade of the 1960s in Korea is normally regarded as a transitional period, but this transition has been consistently viewed in either economic or political terms. In this paper I examine the 1960s and the 1970s as a period of *cultural* transition—from a neo-Confucian emphasis on "high" art to a broader, more inclusive acceptance of "popular" forms of cultural expression. Although these two realms of cultural production are often viewed as fundamentally antithetical, I argue that there is actually significant continuity in terms of both artistic expression and cultural engagement. In particular, I look at the trajectories of Korean national literature and cinema and their areas of confluence. I examine the career of Kim Sŭng-ok, who in the 1960s was the preeminent literary voice of a new generation and who in the 1970s was the screenwriter for some of the most popular films of that era, and I show how Kim's career changes track parallel changes in both literature and cinema. Artistically, Kim continued his literary expressions of a new sensibility in his screenplays, bringing to cinema a new infusion of seriousness and respectability. Culturally, Kim continued his explorations of the ways in which rapid changes in Korean politics and the booming economy led to

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miscommunication and chaos in society. By consistently exploring processes of national identity formation and re-formation, Kim's 1960s literature can be seen as crucial instances of Korean national literature (*minjok munhak*). In the same manner, Kim's 1970s screenplays can be seen as foundational moments in a Korean national cinema.

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