

# National Cinema-Who Is It For?

## The History and Context of the Korean Cinema

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Liberation from Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, and national division are the three monumental events in the history of Korean cinema. The traces of historical events control the direction of history itself, determine the appearance and disappearance of a genre, and define the relations and boundaries between film and politics. The interrelated events of liberation, the Korean War, and national division aroused anti-Japanese and pro-American sentiment, while increasing the feeling of being a victim of history. Liberty, anti-communism, patriotism and democracy were treated as one thing, and this belief was used by those in power. This is the context of the Korean cinema audience. This belief was abused as a national ideology to buttress hegemony by administrations, including those empowered by military coup, military dictatorships, and the so-called civilian governments. Korean cinema developed against this political background.

### **Anti-communism, Reunification, and Victimhood in Nationalist Cinema**

In films, the Korean people are portrayed as the victims of history, and



*Piago!* (Lee Kang-chun, 1955) Publicity still

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*The Hand of Destiny* (Han Hyung-mo, 1954)  
Poster

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*The Seven Female POW's* (Lee Man-hee, 1965)

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*The North and South* (Kim Kee-duk, 1965)

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this is related to nationalistic ideology such as anti-communism. Because of this background, the history of the Korean cinema must be understood through careful observation of the cinematic discourses that provoked ideological dispute and the themes of the films. The most frequent theme was North Korea (and its military). North Korean ideology and the military shaped by that ideology have appeared frequently since Korea's liberation in all film genres. Therefore, studying how these depictions have changed enables us to understand changing political ideas in the cinema. *Piagol* (Lee Kang-chun, 1955), in which all the characters are North Korean soldiers, and *The Hand of Destiny* (Han Hyung-mo, 1954), which features a love story between a North Korean spy and a South Korean soldier, were produced before the Park Cheong-hee (a.k.a. Park Chung-hee) regime's political promotion of anti-communist ideology by awards for producing "quality" films. The North Korean theme continued in war films of the 1960s; anti-communist and national policy films in the 1970s; *North Korean Partisan in South Korea* (Chung Ji-young, 1990), which came out after the democratization movement of June 1987; *Swiri* (Kang Je-kyu, 1999); and many more films, particularly comedies, after the 2000 summit meeting between the two Koreas.

*Piagol*'s release was blocked at first because it was accused of being pro-communist. It featured a North Korean troop that failed to retreat to North Korea after the Korean War, but did not deliver the message that South Korea was superior to North Korea and that the North Korean soldiers regretted fighting for communism. The film passed censorship by adding a scene with the South Korean national flag, suggesting the survivors' defection. Such strong anti-communism is also seen with *An Aimless Bullet* (Yu Hyun-mok, 1961). When the mother cries out "Let's go!" in the film, some interpreted the line as meaning, "Let's go to North Korea," as a result of which the film was banned. In the 1960s, the Third Republic—the first period of the Park Cheong-hee regime that had overthrown the previous government by a military



*North Korean Partisan in South Korea* (Chung Ji-young, 1990)

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*Swiri* (Kang Je-kyu, 1999)

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*To the Starry Island* (Park Kwang-su, 1993)

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*A Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-dong, 1999)

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coup in May 1961—strengthened anti-communist ideology. The anti-communist genre was established and the government censored every film strictly. Lee Man-hee's *The Seven Female POW's* (1965) had to change its title to *Return of the Female Soldiers*, because the government claimed that the original title demeaned the Korean military. The director even had to endure torture. From the mid 1960s until the 1980s, Korean films were strictly controlled by military dictatorships. As any humanitarian perspective on the North Koreans was considered pro-communist, Korean films became monotonous and routine, and the Korean audience turned away from Korean cinema. However, the filmmakers took a detour around ideological confrontation through mixed genres such as war-action films and war-melodramas. Instead of featuring anti-war and humanitarian themes, which were considered pro-communist, Korean films emphasized the Korean people as victims. *The North and South* (Kim Kee-duk, 1965), *I Want to Be Human* (Yu Hyun-mok, 1969), *Rainy Days* (Yu Hyun-mok, 1979), *No Glory* (Im Kwon-taek, 1979), *Mismatched Nose* (Im Kwon-taek, 1980), and *Kilsodeum* (Im Kwon-taek, 1985) are some examples.

*North Korean Partisan in South Korea* looks at North Korea and its soldiers left behind in South Korea as victims of history, rather than looking at the Korean War as a byproduct of the Cold War. Comedy films about North Korea increased dramatically after the historical summit between the two Koreas in 2000. They tried to resolve ideological confrontation through laughter. Most showed the economic superiority of South Korea and the isolation of North Korea in capitalist globalization. *Swiri* came out in this social atmosphere of reconciliation in the 1990s. It was similar to *The Hand of Destiny* in so far as it features a female spy from the North and focuses on her internal struggles between romance and ideology. However, whereas Margaret in *The Hand of Destiny* is financially better off than the South Korean soldier who disguises himself as a laborer, Lee Bang-hee, the spy in *Swiri*, is inferior to the man, suggesting the same old belief that North Korea is in-

ferior. Some individual films have been out of tune with the prevailing ideology, lagging behind as the nation went from anti-communism to reconciliation. An example is *Tae-guk-gi* (2004, Kang Je-kyu), which attempts to heal national wounds and emphasizes the importance of family. Despite the prevalent anti-war sentiment and reconciliation mood, the film still defends conservative values. Through the history of liberation, the Korean War, and national division, constructive criticism of nationalism and gender discrimination is lost in the film. So we can find a political standpoint only in the different attitudes around male-oriented nationalism.

### **Beyond the National Wound**

A particular period of Korean history became another controversial political area for the Korean cinema. After the late 1980s, when government censorship and anti-communist restrictions were relaxed, a number of revisionist films that shed new light on post-liberation history appeared, escaping strict government control. This revisionist genre was quite different from the various popular genres that had developed spontaneously in the 1960s and the 1970s and the government-controlled genres such as enlightenment, anti-communist and national policy films. The so-called “Korean New Wave” vividly depicted Korean reality from the people’s perspective, using film as an archive for public memory and restoring the history that had been distorted by government-led ideology and equated liberty, anti-communism, and patriotism with democracy. It gave protestors against government control support and focused on humanism and nationalism. Exemplary Korean New Wave films include *Chil-su and Man-su* (Park Kwang-su, 1988), *The Age of Success* (Jang Sun-woo, 1988), *A Short Love Affair* (Jang Sun-woo, 1990), *Black Republic* (Park Kwang-su, 1990), *Berlin Report* (Park Kwang-su, 1991), *To the Starry Island* (Park Kwang-su, 1993), *Out to the World* (Yeo Kyun-dong, 1994), *A Single Spark* (Park Kwang-su, 1995), *A Petal* (Jang Sun-woo, 1996), and *Pep-*

*permint Candy* (Lee Chang-dong, 1999). All the directors of these films were influenced by the nationalist movement and the class movement of the 1980s. The films attempt to capture Korean history, accentuating the reality of ordinary life with an ideology that stands against government-controlled ideology. Despite the commercialization of the cinema because of skyrocketing production costs, such films make room for political and ideological cinema.

In conclusion, the political perspective of Korean films can be best understood by observing the relationship between the North and the South in films, and their perspective on the Korean present and past. This shows that the division of the nation and the related problems of the people were the center of political representation. However, with the end of military dictatorship, the political influences on films have changed with the emergence of a different style of realism, the other gender as a workforce, and a point of view that deviates from nationalist history. Now, the political arena in cinema itself needs to be redefined.