Chapter 1: A Brief History of South Korea and Its Film Industry

Right now, I have a feeling that some of you who picked up this book are wondering why the first chapter is a (yawn) history lesson. Some of you are also probably tempted to skip ahead to Chapter 4 to find out what DVDs are worth buying or renting. True, reading about wars, oppressive governments, and civil unrest is nowhere near as thrilling as watching espionage-actioner "Shiri", or as amusing as hanging out with "My Sassy Girl". However, in order to fully appreciate the uniqueness of South Korea films, as well as how they got to be that way, it is important to understand the history and culture of the country, which has shaped both the creativity of its filmmakers and the tastes of its moviegoers. Thus, this opening chapter provides some historical and cultural context to the films of South Korea, all of which have had a significant impact on the types of films we now see in the latest ‘Korean New Wave’.

Looking back over the past one hundred years, the most striking aspect of modern Korean history is the amount of turmoil that the country has endured. Within ten decades, the people of what is now South Korea have seen the fall of the age-old Choson Dynasty, endured the oppressive rule of the Japanese, had their country divided by the Cold War, fought their former countrymen in the Korean War, struggled long and hard to establish a true democratic state, and suffered from the meltdown of the Asian economic crisis. However, as the old proverb goes (or at least how it was presented in Disney’s “Mulan”), “The flower that blooms in adversity is the most rarest and beautiful of all”.

The Growth of the Korean Film Industry Under Japanese Occupation

Prior to 1910, the Korean peninsula had been ruled by a single monarchy, the Choson Dynasty, a social and political order that had remained stable for over half a millennia. However, as Japan expanded its sphere of influence in Asia during the end of the 19th century, which included victories over China and Russia, Korea finally came under the direct control of its most eastern neighbor.
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In 1905, the Protectorate Treaty was imposed upon Korea by Japan in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War. This was followed by formal annexation in 1910, after which Japan increasingly tightened its grip on the peninsula, assuming control over every aspect of Korean life. The Japanese government even went as far as trying to completely eradicate the Korean culture during the Thirties and Forties through the banning of the Korean language and the use of Korean family names.

During these four decades of Japanese rule, an infusion of money from Japanese business interests laid the foundation for Korea’s film industry. In addition to building a number of theatres in the major cities, Japanese money financed some of the films, such as the first feature with sound, “Ch’yunhyang-jun”, a filmed adaptation of a popular pansori folk tale (which also was the basis for Im Kwontaek’s “Chunhyang” from 2000).

However, a few enterprising Koreans were able to turn out features of their own during the time, some of which used the new artform for political purposes. Unfortunately, like other institutions around the country, the ruling Japanese government began to impose more and more restrictions on the production and exhibition of films, including censorship. As the years passed, the number of ‘safe’ genres that were approved for screening gradually dwindled until Korean-language films were completely banned by the Japanese government in 1942, and the local film industry became little more than an outlet for Japanese propaganda.

Postwar Partition, the Korean War, and the Golden Age

Japanese rule of Korea finally came to an end after four decades with the defeat of Japan by Allied forces in 1945. In order to expedite the surrender of the defeated Japanese forces to the armies of the United States and the Soviets, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel. Though this had initially been envisioned as an interim measure, this dividing line became a permanent fixture in the Korean political landscape as each side shepherded separate governments and attempts at reunification failed amidst the growing Cold War tension. In 1948, Korea was officially divided in two, with the Republic of Korea in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north, which ultimately led to the Korean War in 1950.

As part of the Cease-fire Agreement that ended the Korea War in 1953, a 4km-wide Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was created to act as a buffer between the North and South. In addition, the two sides agreed to create a Joint Security Area (JSA) around Panmunjom, the site where the Cease-fire Agreement had been negotiated, where both sides could meet face-to-face. With only the Cease-fire
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Agreement between them, both North and South Korea are technically still at war. Over the years, there have been a number of cross-border incidents, both within the DMZ and elsewhere, with the potential to become the flashpoint of renewed hostilities.

Most of South Korea’s production and exhibition infrastructure was destroyed during the Korean War. However, during the remainder of the 1950s, a combination of tax incentives and foreign aid helped rebuild the local film industry, launching Korean cinema’s ‘Golden Age’ during the late Fifties and throughout the Sixties. During this time, the number of homegrown film productions skyrocketed, as did attendance at the country’s movie theaters. A number of Korea’s most well respected directors had their start during this period, such as Im Kwon-taek and Kim Ki-young.

However, while the film industry was enjoying a tremendous revival, changes in the political landscape were paving the way for censorship, the bane of the industry, to rear its ugly head again-- only this time, it would be the Korean government restricting what its people could and could not see. During this period, South Korea was gripped with sluggish economic growth and paranoia over the growing influence of pro-North leftist groups. Taking advantage of the political instability, Park Chung-hee instigated a military coup in 1961.

Censorship and the Decline of Korean Cinema

Over the next decade, Park’s regime maintained an increasingly tight grip on the country through various means, such as declaring martial law, spying on and harassing political opponents, violently suppressing anti-government demonstrators, and manipulating of the country's constitution to allow for an indefinite term of office. As South Koreans increasingly had their freedoms curtailed, so did the film industry. Filmmakers faced increasing government censorship over films that criticized Park’s regime, portrayed North Korea in a sympathetic light, or dabbled in sexual material. In addition, changes to the Motion Picture Law in 1973 placed controls on the companies entitled to produce films as well as the types of films they could make, such as a stipulation that their films had to reflect the ideology of Park’s ‘Revitalizing Government’. As a result, the film industry focused on ‘safe’ fare, such as action films and melodramas. Coupled with the growing popularity of television, audiences abandoned the country’s movie theaters in droves during the Seventies, leading to widespread bankruptcies among Korea’s production companies.

In contrast to measures aimed at stifling creativity, another initiative of the Park regime was the imposition of a quota system aimed at protecting the country’s film industry. Under the quota system, the country’s theaters were mandated to
show Korean films, while limits were placed on how many foreign films could be imported and how many days of the year that they could be shown. Though this protectionist measure was lifted somewhat in 1988, to this very day, Korean theaters are still obliged to screen homegrown fare at least 106 days out of the year.

Reform and Revival in the Eighties

After a decade of increasing public dissatisfaction over his regime, the 1970s closed with the assassination of Park by Kim Jae-kyu, the director of the Korea Central Intelligence Agency, which plunged the country into chaos. General Chun Doo-hwan emerged victorious as the country’s new president, however, instead of democratic reforms, Chun continued the ‘revitalizing’ initiatives of his predecessor, including the suppression of anti-government protests and the arrest of opposition politicians.

The new decade also brought the Kwangju Massacre (an event that figures prominently in Lee Chang-dong’s “Peppermint Candy”). This important landmark in the South Korean democratic movement, in which a clash between government troops and student pro-democracy demonstrators resulted in 200 dead (mostly civilians), was a spectre that would haunt Korean politics for the next two decades, and ultimately result in the arrest and imprisonment of two former South Korean presidents. Furthermore, the Kwangju Massacre also triggered the rise of anti-American sentiment, as the Reagan administration had strongly endorsed the use of force in quelling the riot.

However, as the Eighties dragged on, President Chun’s administration faced increasing opposition and mass demonstrations. Finally, in 1987, Chun finally caved in and delivered several democratic reforms, including a new constitution and open elections.

Similar to the gradual democratic reform gripping the country, South Korea’s film industry enjoyed a modest revival during the Eighties, spurred by an infusion of new blood, increasing international recognition for Korean productions, and moviegoers returning to their local theatres. In addition, the country’s new constitution of 1988 relaxed the country’s strict censorship laws, providing filmmakers a more liberal venue for political expression.

However, this modest revival was tempered by another key legislative change that year. Import restrictions on foreign films were eased, forcing Korean filmmakers to compete directly against the slicker and more commercial Hollywood and Hong Kong productions. Unfortunately, the local film industry was slow in adapting to this new operating environment, and the market share of
homegrown product plunged in the face of increased competition, reaching an all-time low of 16% in 1993.

The Long Road to Democracy

Though the following decade would bring South Korea renewed economic growth and membership in the United Nations, the young democracy would still be rocked by numerous challenges. Government corruption figured prominently, as the 'old ways' came under greater scrutiny in the nascent democracy, which included the arrest of former Presidents Chun and Roh Tae-woo for their roles in the 1980 Kwangju Massacre and allegations of bribery against President Kim Young-sam, who had himself spearheaded an anti-corruption campaign in the early Nineties.

But then in 1997, the Asian economic crisis hit the debt-ridden South Korean economy, which resulted in a rapid depreciation of the country’s currency and a bailout by the International Monetary Fund. It would not be until 2000 that a semblance of stability would return to South Korea, as the local economy once again began to expand, and National Assembly elections brought veteran opposition leader and pro-democracy advocate Kim Dae-jung to power. At long last, the long five-decade long march was over, and democracy in South Korea had finally come of age.

During the early Nineties, South Korea’s giant industry conglomerates, also known as chaebols, began making investments in the movie business, with Samsung being the first out of the gate. With these investments, the chaebols revamped South Korea’s movie industry into a more professional and business-oriented infrastructure that integrated all production, distribution, and exhibition, and providing a solid footing for the country’s filmmakers to compete on the world stage.

Interestingly (and ironically) enough, the 1997 recession in South Korea ended up helping the local film industry in the long run. As economic conditions in the peninsula became bleaker, the very same chaebols who had made substantial investments in the film industry only a few years earlier, such as Daewoo and Samsung, decided to divest their movie industry subsidiaries. The funding shortfall was then eagerly picked up by the private sector, which eschewed the conservatism of the past in favor of films that were more daring and in tune to audience tastes. In addition, this renewed entrepreneurial zeal provided many opportunities for novice directors (it has been estimated that 70% of productions are helmed by first-time filmmakers), whose unique worldview married their upbringing in Korean society with their exposure to Western education and filmmaking techniques.
Thus, it was in the 1990s that the final pieces of the puzzle fell into place, jump-starting the latest ‘Korean New Wave’: relaxed government censorship, investments in infrastructure, entrepreneurial zeal, and an iconoclastic attitude. As a result of these legislative, economic, and creative shifts, today’s South Korea possesses one of the most successful and vibrant domestic movie industries in the world, and is rapidly becoming a key destination for those in search of the most exciting filmmaking today.