

THE THREE FACES OF PEOPLE'S CINEMA: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE SOUTH KOREAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA MOVEMENT IN THE 1980s

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This study examines the origin and development of people's cinema (*minjung yŏngbwa*) as the determining feature of the South Korean independent cinema movement in the 1980s. Defying the simplistic description of people's cinema as political propaganda which arose in the mid 1980s, this study illuminates the multiple aspects of the idea that originated from the intricate dialogues between youth culture, *minjung* discourse and theories of resistant filmmaking. The 1980s youth culture rooted in universities is examined first to see how the youth culture functioned as both the producer and consumer of resistant cultural practices including people's cinema. Based on this discussion, this study tackles the three main aspects of people's cinema. First, it shows that people's cinema emerged as an alternative film aesthetic to conventional narrative cinema, a variation of which was film documentary. Second, along with analysis of the film texts, it also shows how people's cinema ideologically flanked cinema as an instrument of political activism. Lastly, it discusses the way in which people's cinema developed into a national cinema thesis (*minjok yŏngbwaron*) in combination with North Korean film theory.

Key words: South Korean independent cinema, people's cinema, activist cinema, national cinema thesis, North Korean film theory

INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, South Korean independent filmmakers invented new film concepts invested with their needs and aspirations for an alternative cinema. Small film (*chagŭn yŏngbwa*), open cinema (*yŏllin yŏngbwa*), and people's cinema (*minjung*

yŏnghwa) emerged to redefine noncommercial independent filmmaking as opposed to industry cinema that the independent filmmakers deemed to have lost not only commercial viability but also socio-political consciousness as well. Of the terminologies mentioned above it was people's cinema that had the greatest impact on the theorization and institutional practices of the independent cinema movement in South Korea. By definition, people's cinema refers to cinema that documents the underrepresented aspects of social realities such as grass-roots struggle against socio-political inequalities imposed by the ruling class. This concept was particularly endorsed by independent filmmakers, mostly university students, who claimed their filmmaking activities to be a politically resistant action against the Chun Doo Hwan (Chŏn Tuhwan) military regime (1980–1988). Apart from its political implications, the idea of people's cinema remains as one of a few theoretical endeavors made in order to cultivate the cinema movement in South Korea. On the other hand, however, there is no historical record that people's cinema was ever developed into a systematic film theory which can, for example, be considered to be equivalent to socialist realism. In fact, it never posed a singular aesthetic principle but only stressed socio-political imperatives such as the representation of the embattled lives of the lower-classes. Then, the question arises how such an amorphous concept was able to wield such an enduring effect on independent filmmaking throughout the decade.

This study proposes to view people's cinema not merely as a mode of filmmaking, but rather as a field of subculture in which noncommercial independent filmmaking was exercised both in theory and practice to add the important cultural element of the cinema to the body of resistant culture that university students and progressive intellectuals fostered during the 1980s. People's cinema bore a range of different meanings depending on the purpose it was enacted to serve. It at times referred to an activist cinema in the service of political propaganda. At other times, it indicated an alternative film aesthetic that would debunk the mannerism of mainstream narrative cinema. At still other times, it presented an ideological goal toward which the South Korean film industry was encouraged to be geared in opposition to the indiscriminate commercialism of Hollywood cinema. It is because of such a plurality of its implications that people's cinema has been able to define the 1980s independent cinema in its entirety. More importantly, however, the idea had a cultural viability because a major segment of university students were ready to view and support the films produced in the name of people's cinema. Therefore, it is also necessary to examine the youth culture rooted in universities to see the way in which people's cinema developed and was transformed in the course of the 1980s.

In the following, the three distinctive features of people's cinema will be

discussed. First, people's cinema was originally a theoretical application of *minjung* discourse, by which independent filmmakers experimented with new types of filmmaking including film documentaries. Second, student filmmakers used the idea of people's cinema to invest their independent films with political propaganda. Third, the theories and practices of people's cinema inspired the national cinema thesis in the independent cinema sector. But, first, a brief history of the activities of university students between 1980 and 1985 is presented here to illuminate the historical context: particularly, the way in which university students comprised the major force of the production and consumption of the *minjung* discourse and its cinematic offshoot, people's cinema.

THE IMAGINED *MINJUNG* COMMUNITY

The military coup in May 17, 1980, in which the leader Chun Doo Hwan declared martial law nationwide and banned all political activities, dealt a devastating blow to the budding democracy in South Korea. Meetings of the National Assembly were called off while universities were closed down in fear of insurgency. With newspapers and television stations acting as mouthpieces for the military junta, university students were placed at the vanguard of popular resistance. The students started to conspire against the state by creating their own culture of resistance and struggle. Yi Yong-Bae (Yi Yǒngbae), producer of the independent film *The Night before the Strike* (*P'aöp chōnya*, 1990), called the university students of that time an "unfortunate generation," citing their loss of opportunity to study and counting himself as one of them.¹

That universities served as the locus of social movement alerts us to the fact that the students felt they had to depart from their social status as bourgeois intellectuals in order to serve the needs of the general citizenry. For this collective identity, the notion of *minjung* offered a desirable option, because it encompassed the majority of the people who were deprived of their own means of production and marginalized in mainstream political transactions. Laborers, peasants, and urban ghetto dwellers constituted the components of *minjung*.² The students re-identified themselves with the *minjung* by denouncing elitist liberalism and, instead, advocating the lifestyle of workers and peasants. Self-sacrifice and collectivism were the values that the students saw as the essence of the *minjung* spirit. They also reenacted peasant uprisings from the pre-modern era by practicing mask dance (*talch'um*) and "courtyard entertainments (*madang nori*)" at occasional

¹ Yi Yong-Bae, Personal interview with the author, 12 July, 2006.

² Kim Wōn, *It'hyōjin kōt tūre taehan kiōk* (Memory of things forgotten) (Seoul: Yihu, 1999), p. 128.

intramural events: the dramatic performances served to justify the students' own experiences of the democratic movement. Thus, university campuses were transformed into a counter-cultural space in which elements of working-class lifestyle were extensively imitated as a way for the students to materialize a utopian imagination that the sociologist Kim Wŏn has named the "imagined *minjung* community."³

The imagined *minjung* community as a sub-cultural sphere built its self-righteousness through *minjung*-oriented social engagements. For instance, underground labor activists, trained in the student movement, infiltrated sweatshops to unionize workers and lead labor movements. During the early 1980s, approximately 3,000 student-turned-labor activists operated in industrial complexes in the metropolitan areas.⁴ Solidarity between student activism and labor movements bore significant results in July 1985, when ten different corporate unions located in the Kuro Industrial Complex in Seoul waged a combined strike against the anti-union policy of the company Daewoo Apparel.⁵ On March 13 in 1982, a group of theology students in Pusan set fire to the U.S. Information Agency, reportedly to draw public attention to the role of the U.S. Army in dispatching military forces to suppress the Kwangju Uprising in May 1980.⁶ In May 1985, a group of university students from Seoul forcibly occupied the U.S. Cultural Center as a symbolic action to condemn the U.S. government's support for the South Korean military government.⁷ Between 1980 and 1985, student activism remained as the sole force that drew public attention to issues such as the Kwangju Uprising and the United States' interventionist foreign policies.

The military regime took active countermeasures against such student activism. The headquarters for public security in the South Korean Army implemented the so-called "Green Project" (as opposed to red, which symbolized communism) between 1981 and 1983, which was designed to press male students involved in student activism into military service.⁸ Once drafted, they were forced to recant their previous activities in the student organizations and interrogation was accompanied by illegal torture and physical abuse. A comprehensive ban was placed on the periodicals and books that the government considered to be subversive. The government deregistered as many as 172 periodicals in July 1980

³ Kim Wŏn, *It'hyŏjin kŏt tŭre taehan kiŏk* (Memory of Things Forgotten) (Seoul: Yihu, 1999), p. 130.

⁴ Kang Chunman, *Promenade through Modern Korean History: 1980s I* [*Han'guk hyŏndaesa sanch'aek: 1980 nyŏndaek-I*] (Seoul: Inmul kwa sasangsa, 2003), pp. 179–180.

⁵ Pak Sae'gil, *A Rewritten History of Modern Korea 3* [*Tasi ssŭnŭn Han'guk hyŏndaesa 3*] (Seoul: Tolbaegae, 1992), p. 151.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 161–162.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁸ Kang Chunman, *Promenade through Modern Korean History: 1980s I*, pp. 70–72.

and suspended the publication of 233 books and 298 pamphlets under the pretext that “the publishers and organizations which produced the books (...) aim to criticize capitalism on behalf of North Korea and other anti-South Korean organizations and instigate violent revolutionary struggles as well as labor disputes.”⁹

It is notable that many of the forbidden texts concerned the issues of people's literature (*minjung munhak*) and the people's culture movement (*minjung munhwa undong*). The proponents of people's literature, for example, proclaimed that “literature should ultimately be committed to the cause of political movement.”¹⁰ This claim went side by side with the view that literary attempts to represent working-class people should be undertaken not by petit-bourgeois literati but by the people themselves. A prominent example of people's literature that appeared at this time was an anthology of poems entitled *The Dawn of Labor* (*Nodong ūi saebyōk*, 1984). The author, Pak Nohae, was an underground labor activist who until that time had received little recognition in the literary community. However, his poems shocked the existing literary circle with their accomplished artistic facility that vividly captured the lived realities of laborers. *The Dawn of Labor* was immediately banned by the government but hailed by those who were sympathetic to people's literature or, by extension, the people's culture movement. The youth culture built upon the imagined *minjung* community in universities was the main arena where the massive consumption and regeneration of progressive cultural products such as *The Dawn of Labor* took place.¹¹

⁹ Kang Chunman, *Promenade through Modern Korean History: 1980s I*, p. 273.

¹⁰ Im Ugi, “The Debate on the Destruction and Expansion of Literary Genres” in *A Compendium of Great Debates in 1980s' South Korea* [*P'alship nyondaek Han'guk saboe taenonjaeng chip*] (Seoul: Chungang Daily Press, 1990), p. 186.

¹¹ Two interviews conducted for this study suggest that even non-activist students were no less sympathetic to the building of the imagined *minjung* community. Yun Sangmin attended Seoul National University between 1983 and 1991 and Kim Minhŭi went to Chonnam National University in Kwangju between 1979 and 1983. Both acknowledged no personal involvement in any organized activity of the student movement. Asked whether they felt alienated from the movement culture and sought individuality in the consumption of youth culture, the interviewees both answered that they had supported student activism, materially and emotionally as well. Yun stated, “At least in my case, I did not hold any adverse sentiment against the student movement at all because the outrageous political situation made the democratic movement a matter of life and death. I just felt sorry for my activist friends because I couldn't join them.” Yun and Kim added that rampant governmental censorship extremely narrowed down the scope of youth culture to say nothing of popular culture. Kim described commercial cinema of the time as “being crude in titles, contents, and even in posters.” According to Kim, viewing a domestic film, usually released at third-rate movie theatres, was dismissed as a shameful act for a college student. Kim's statement affirms that the movement culture and *minjung* discourse remained the primary resource for cultural consumption among university students in the 1980s. The author conducted the

The origin and development of people's cinema are to be found in the context of the literary and artistic movements of the 1980s, which reflected the demands of the democratic movement and served to enrich youth culture. Particularly, the conceptual genesis of people's cinema lies in the intricate dialogues between people's literature, the people's culture movement, and the demand for a new cinema.

PEOPLE'S CINEMA: AN EXTENSION OF CINEMA

People's cinema was first mentioned in the anthology entitled, *Toward a New Cinema* (*Saeroun yŏngbwa rŭl wihayŏ*) published by the Seoul Cinema Collective¹² in 1983. This book advances the term as a reference to the revolutionary popular cinema that New Latin American Cinema developed in the 1960s.¹³ The concept

interviews by exchanging emails with the interviewees during December 26–29, 2006. Pseudonyms have been given to the interviewees to protect their privacy. The other personal information provided here establishes certain facts. The interviewees are:

- Yun Sangmin (male) – Yun attended the Department of Metal Engineering at Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea, between March 1983 and February 1991 (military service during the period 1986–1989); as of December 2006 he is a doctoral student at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, U.S.A.
- Kim Minhŭi (female) – Kim attended the Department of Education at Chonnam National University, Kwangju, South Korea, between March 1979 and February 1983; as of December 2006 she is a doctoral student at the Department of Special Education at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, U.S.A.

¹² The Seoul Cinema Collective was established by a group of university graduates as an attempt to launch a progressive cinema movement in 1982. The founding members had been involved in student filmmaking in universities prior to the formation of the collective. The collective published *Toward a New Cinema* as a preliminary theoretical work for the cinema movement it envisioned. The book came out as an anthology which comprised a number of articles concerning film movements that arose in different continents including Europe, Africa, North America, and South America. According to Chŏng Sŏngil (email interview with the author, 6 October, 2009), one of the founding members, the original English or French articles were translated by some members of the collective into Korean to be published in the book. The original manuscripts were mostly acquired by the members' colleagues who were studying film in foreign countries (mostly France) at the time. This is also the way in which they came to know the film theories and practices advanced by the New Latin American Cinema, particularly the Bolivian Ukamau Group. Interestingly, however, the members had no chance to see the actual film works by the Ukamau Group or other Latin American filmmakers. It explains why Latin American Cinema Movements, despite the continent's shared experiences of military dictatorship with South Korea, failed to wield an extensive influence on the South Korean independent cinema movement in the 1980s. The Seoul Cinema Collective reorganized as the Seoul Visual Collective in 1986.

¹³ Filmmakers who initiated the New Latin American Cinema (1950s–1960s) hardly developed any terminology equivalent to people's cinema (*minjung yŏngbwa*), which originated in the South Korean

is interpreted as having multiple meanings, depending on different theoretical strands derived from Latin American Cinema Movements. For instance, derived from the Brazilian Cinema Novo, people's cinema indicates popular cinema intended to "raise consciousness among the people in order to disclose the coercions imposed on them and to awaken the people to take action against such exploitative conditions."¹⁴ In the account of the Bolivian Ukamau Group, however, people's cinema informs Jorge Sanjinés's concept of revolutionary cinema that "materializes in the filmic acts in which Bolivian people create and play the most urgent stories of their own, whereas the operations of the Ukamau Group members are limited to providing their experienced and systematic filmmaking skills for the people."¹⁵ Thus, people's cinema initially appeared in South Korea as a literal translation of the general doctrines of New Latin American Cinema.

The Seoul Cinema Collective subsequently published another volume entitled *A Thesis on Cinema Movements* (*Yŏnghwa undongnon*, 1985), devoted to the discussion of Third Cinema as the ideological plank of New Latin American Cinema. Even in this book, however, the idea of people's cinema is neither elaborated nor highlighted as an autonomous mode of film production. Yet, film critic Hong Man in his essay "The Small-Group Filmmaking Movement," contained in the same volume, maintains that the task of the small-group (namely, guerilla) filmmakers is to be faithful to "the historical consciousness, ideology, and sentiment of the *minjung* community that consists of working classes, and to participate in what is spontaneously going on within the *minjung* community."¹⁶ Here, the term *minjung* is not necessarily the translation of the people advocated in Latin American cinema but closer to the Korean concept of *minjung* as it was conventionally used in the people's culture movement. Hong further suggests that the Bolivian Ukamau Group should be used as the prototype for small-group filmmaking, while making no attempt to define people's cinema.¹⁷ He doesn't seem to feel the need to offer a detailed account of the concept, presumably

cultural context. However, they used the term "popular cinema" to denote revolutionary cinema for common people. See, for example, Fernando Birri, "For a Nationalist, Realist, Critical and Popular Cinema" in Michael T. Martin (Ed.) *New Latin American Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 95–98. In *Toward a New Cinema*, the term *minjung yŏnghwa* was used to translate the words "popular cinema" into Korean.

¹⁴ Seoul Cinema Collective, *Toward a New Cinema* [*Saeroun yŏnghwa riŭl wihayŏ*] (Seoul: Hangminsa, 1983), p. 240.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

¹⁶ Hong Man, "The Small-Group Filmmaking Movement" in *A Thesis on Cinema Movements* [*Yŏnghwa undongnon*] (Seoul: Hwada, 1985), p. 219.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

because the mode of small-group filmmaking presupposes *minjung*-oriented filmmaking.

It would not be far-fetched to argue that in the translation process the revolutionary popular cinema proposed by New Latin American Cinema was “naturalized” into the *minjung* discourse and transformed into people’s cinema. Terminologies such as people’s literature and people’s art (*minjung misul*) were common parlances among intellectuals and students as people’s cinema was introduced in the early 1980s. Therefore, when Hong Man claimed that the small-group filmmakers must acquaint themselves with the *minjung* community, such an injunction had already been internalized by artists engaged in other *minjung*-oriented arts.¹⁸ If Latin American revolutionary cinema emphasized pedagogic filmmaking and heuristic content, it was far from a new idea to South Korean filmmakers who were familiar with similar methods in other *minjung*-oriented arts. Once ensconced in *minjung* discourse, people’s cinema did not need further edification from its Latin American forerunner, but continued to develop on its own by responding to domestic conditions. Notably, combined with the theory and practice of people’s literature, people’s cinema opened up a new vision for South Korean cinema.

In 1985, the film director Jang Sun-Woo (Chang Sõnu) issued “Exploring People’s Cinema,” based on a roundtable discussion regarding the significance and potentiality of people’s cinema.¹⁹ Starting with a brief assessment of South Korean cinema as “something that should not be left as it stood,”²⁰ the participants pointed to the perennial stagnation of the domestic Korean film market. Indeed, between 1980 and 1985 in South Korea, the commercial viability of domestic films gradually weakened in an inverse proportion to the dramatic upsurge of Hollywood films’ popularity.²¹ For instance, in 1985, the top three

¹⁸ For instance, in “Toward an Expansion of Literary Genres”, an influential essay that came out in 1984, Kim Toyõn pointed out that the following critical concepts characterized South Korean literature at the turn of the 1980s: practical literature, literature of the living, the quality of everydayness, the quality of the popular, the quality of expediency, the quality of mobility, the guerilla spirit, movement, collectivism, community. These words are strongly reminiscent of the revolutionary popular cinema of New Latin American Cinema. See, Kim Toyõn, “Toward an Expansion of Literary Genres” in Sõng Minyõp ed., *A Thesis on Minjung Literature [Minjung munbangnon]* (Munhak kwa chisõngsa: Seoul, 1984), pp. 99–130.

¹⁹ The participants in the discussion were Kim Kyudong (member of the film censorship bureau), Lee Jang-Ho (Yi Changho) (film director), Jang Sun-Woo (film director), Kim Myong-Gon (Kim Myõnggon) (actor), Jeon Yang-Jun (Chõng Yangjun) (member of the Seoul Cinema Collective), Cho Chaehong (assistant director), Yi Yõnho (newspaper reporter). See, Jang Sun-Woo, “Exploring People’s Cinema” in *Practical Literature [Silch’õn munhak]* (Spring, 1985), pp. 147–157.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The following table shows the rise and fall in the number of film audiences in South Korea

films at the box office were *The Killing Fields* (USA, [925,994]), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (USA, [808, 492]), and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (USA, [639, 098]). These were followed by two South Korean films: *The Deep Blue Night* (*Kipgo purin pam*, [495, 573]) and *Eo Woo-Dong* (*Ŏdong*, [479, 225]).²² The predominance of Hollywood films in the domestic box office further aggravated apprehensions that the U.S. would ultimately demand an unconditional opening of the South Korean film market—the governmental decision to that effect was made in 1985. Referring to the ongoing short-film movement, Jang points out that “the current demands for the artistic as well as commercial recuperation of South Korean cinema appear extensive and fundamental.”²³ In Jang’s view, people’s cinema arose as a “comprehensive and historical concept that encircles a wide spectrum of cinematic movements that urge the improvement of national cinema.”²⁴

Jang utilized two concepts, *taejung* (the masses) and *minjung* (the people), to distinguish people’s cinema from mainstream commercial cinema. Whereas *taejung* indicates the masses in industrial society, which are “consumeristic, homogenized, quantifiable, and liable to manipulation,” *minjung* stands for “independence and creativity.”²⁵ The dynamism underpinning *minjung* defies the wholesale characterizations tagged to the collective entity, such as “political subjugation, social discrimination, and moral inferiority.”²⁶ This broad outlook on *minjung* entails a

between 1980 and 1985:

A	B	C	D	E	F
1980	75		53,770,415	25,429,699	28,340,000
1981	87		44,443,122	21,346,232	22,937,410
1982	97		42,737,086	21,914,424	20,780,259
1983	91		44,036,000	17,539,164	26,483,052
1984	81	24	42,917,379	16,886,914	27,630,045
1985	80	27	48,098,263	16,425,34	31,662,560

Key:

A-Years, B-Number of Domestic Films Produced, C-Number of Foreign Film Imported, D-Year Total of the Number of Film Audiences, E-Year Total of the Number of Domestic Film Audiences, F-Year Total of Foreign Film Audiences

The table is from *The Almanac of Korean Film* (Korean Film Institute, 1985), p. 45.

Hollywood films accounted for the majority of film importation. For example, in 1984, out of twenty-six foreign films in total, twenty films were from the U.S., four were from Hong Kong, and the last two were from Italy and China respectively. See *The Almanac of Korean Film* (Korean Film Institute, 1984), p. 85.

²² *The Almanac of Korean Film* (Korean Film Institute, 1985), p. 45.

²³ Jang Sun-Woo, “Exploring People’s Cinema” in *Practical Literature* (Spring, 1985), p. 148.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

plural description of people's cinema as "something that is neither entirely a mouthpiece for a particular social class, nor a political cinema, nor a univocal pursuit of moral truth."²⁷ Adding that "*minjung* is the total sum of living lives,"²⁸ Jang seems to posit *minjung* as a form of Hegelian *Geist*. Given that *minjung* incarnates a collective spiritual vitality fighting homogenizing forces in modern society, *taejung* also bears the potential to become like *minjung*. However, a catalyst is necessary to activate the *minjung* spirit in the collective mind of the *taejung*. Jang believes that people's cinema would be that catalyst: "People's cinema means a living cinema. It is the cinema that facilitates resistance, awakening, unification, and jubilation"²⁹

Jang offers as a possible example of people's cinema *Declaration of Fools* (*Pabo sŏnŏn*, Lee Jang-Ho, 1983). He says, "The camera angle in this film is leveled at the people's aspiration for solidarity. It demonstrates the possibility of dismantling the prosaic narrative of established cinema and creating a new one."³⁰ Indeed, *Declaration of Fools* ignores verisimilitude of acting and linear temporality in narrative construction. Portrayed in this unconventional diegesis is the tragic fate of two male vagabonds and a prostitute, who are proxy characters representing the people. Therefore, Jang argues that the film takes the perspective of the people in order to capture the life of the people, and this attempt brings about the deconstruction of the traditional cinematic narrative.

In discussing the ideal acting style for people's cinema, Jang discredits Stanislavsky's method acting as "not only an extreme conservatism that places the highest regard upon the prosaic world of everydayness" but also an emotionalism which affirms that "a person's natural born character determines his/her social status."³¹ Instead, he draws attention to the "corporeality" of acting, which, as Jang argues, enables the objective representation of the surrounding world and brings the world closer to liberation.³² In fact, the corporeal acting style constitutes an element of repertory theatre such as Italian *Commedia dell'arte*—this genre is usually performed in such a way that stock characters play satiric farces in front of local audiences. At the same time, "courtyard entertainment (*madang nori*)," one of the main components of the people's culture movement, is similar to *Commedia dell'arte*. Besides, although Jang makes little reference to people's literature, he admits that "people's cinema cannot depart from the theories and

²⁷ Jang Sun-Woo, "Exploring People's Cinema" in *Practical Literature* (Spring, 1985), p. 148.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 149.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 150.

³¹ Ibid., p. 154.

³² Ibid.

accumulated achievements in *minjung*-oriented arts in general.”³³ The most striking text that illustrates the influence of people’s literature on Jang’s concept of people’s cinema is “Satire or Suicide,” poet Kim Chiha’s essay that reputedly launched the people’s literature movement in 1970.³⁴

Kim drafted “Satire or Suicide” in an attempt to criticize the poems of Kim Suyŏng who had represented resistant literature in the 1960s. While conceding that Kim Suyŏng devoted many of his works to denounce petit-bourgeois consciousness as the ideological cause of mass collaboration with fascism and consumerism,³⁵ Kim Chiha held that Kim Suyŏng’s critique of the petit bourgeois unwittingly buried positive aspects of *minjung* such as “wisdom, bottomless power, and fortitude.”³⁶ He goes on to argue that “the petit bourgeois should not be conceived of as a social stratum or a class, but as an element of *minjung* that takes a larger form of consciousness.”³⁷ This statement precisely corresponds to Jang Sun-Woo’s description of *minjung* as a collective consciousness sustaining people’s cinema. Echoing the “perspective of the people” in Jang’s analysis of *Declaration of Fools*, Kim Chiha further suggests that “the poet is obliged to trust the people, [...] and to enter into the *minjung* community so as to identify him/herself with the people.”³⁸ He also draws attention to the literary techniques found in Korean folkloric ballads such as conflict, montage, symbol, and ellipsis as the possible *modus operandi* of people’s poetry.³⁹ They are also reminiscent of the narrative techniques that Jang noticed in *Declaration of Fools* as the elements of people’s cinema.

Both the people’s poetry proposed by Kim Chiha and people’s cinema characterized by Jang Sun-Woo advance *minjung* discourse as a practical means to dismantle the established systems of political oppression and artistic convention. In this case, *minjung* discourse mirrors Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s interpretation of the serial novel, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, written by French humanist François Rabelais (1484–1553). Bakhtin describes Rabelais’ novelistic vision in the following way.

³³ Jang Sun-Woo, “Exploring People’s Cinema” in *Practical Literature* (Spring, 1985), p. 148.

³⁴ Sung Min-Yup (Sŏng Minyŏp), “The *Minjung* Literature Thesis in Progress of Formation” in Sung Min-Yup (Ed.), *A Thesis of Minjung Literature [Minjung munbangnon]* (Munhak kwa chisŏngsa: Seoul, 1984), p. 12.

³⁵ Kim Chiha, “Satire or Suicide” in Sung Min-Yup (Ed.), *A Thesis of Minjung Literature [Minjung munbangnon]* (Munhak kwa chisŏngsa: Seoul, 1984), p. 25.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 30–31.

It is necessary to destroy and rebuild the entire false picture of the world, to sunder the false hierarchical links between objects and ideas, to abolish the divisive ideational strata. It is necessary to liberate all these objects and permit them to enter into the free unions that are organic to them, no matter how monstrous these unions might seem from the point of view of ordinary, traditional associations.⁴⁰

Conjuring up “the logic of realistic folkloric fantasy,”⁴¹ this Rabelaisian picture, as Bakhtin diagnoses it, “is polemically opposed to the medieval world, in whose ideology the human body is perceived solely under the sign of decay and strife”⁴² and where “ascetic other-worldly ideology”⁴³ holds sway. The static outlook of the medieval world in which the vitality and corporeality of the folkloric world is denied, strongly evokes the South Korean military dictatorships (1961–1979 and 1980–1988) against which Kim Chiha’s people’s poetry and its offshoot, Jang Sun-Woo’s people’s cinema successively struggled.

While Jang’s “Exploring People’s Cinema” submits a speculative inquiry inspired by people’s literature, the aforementioned small-group filmmaking came out as an actual product of the people’s cinema thesis. The Seoul Cinema Collective (1982–1986) was organized by a group of professional independent filmmakers, heralding small-group filmmaking as the major mode of independent film production in the 1980s. To take *Water Tax* (*Surise*, February 1984) as an example, the members of the collective made the film as a staged documentary in which real-life participants of a farmers’ protest reenacted the actual event. Insofar as the people who were involved in the protest retell and reenact their own experiences, *Water Tax* is strongly reminiscent of the Bolivian Ukamau Group’s *Courage of the People* (1971), in which the survivors and witnesses of a 1967 massacre of striking miners perpetrated by the Bolivian Army make a dramatic representation of the incident. The Seoul Cinema Collective was reorganized into the Seoul Visual Collective in 1986, and the new organization produced *Blue Bird* (*P’arangsae*, 1986), another staged documentary tackling agrarian problems. A crew of filmmakers moved to the Korean countryside and recorded actual farmers living in poverty and debt. In the production notes for *Blue Bird*, the crew members left the following statement:

⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel”, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (Austin: Texas UP, 1981), p. 169.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 175.

⁴² Ibid., p. 171.

⁴³ Ibid.

We believe the production process of *Blue Bird* was an opportunity to measure and become convinced of the direction and feasibility of people's cinema. This is because this film was made as we lived and experienced the struggling lives of our brother farmers, and was critically reviewed by these same people. We entered a new horizon of filmmaking in which the experiential gap between producers and viewers becomes minimized.⁴⁴

In this passage also, we can sense the strong influence of the Bolivian Ukamau Group on the production mode of *Blue Bird*.

Despite its association with the Latin American cinema movement, small-group filmmaking also falls under the general rubric of people's literature. In the early 1980s, literary critic Kim Toyön in his "Toward an Expansion of Literary Genres" paid attention to the fact that South Korean literature was facing a new trend in which the closed circle of literary elites was giving way to amateurs in the production of literary works.⁴⁵ Kim noted that ordinary people were participating in the production of biographical essays, reportages, and political tracts.⁴⁶ The democratization of literary production, in turn, enabled collective literary creations by small-scale literary groups.⁴⁷ Although different groups stood for different artistic visions, the subject matter commonly concerned the struggling lives of the working classes.⁴⁸ Considering that the expansion of literary genre was to secure realism captured by non-professional writers, it was not incidental that the proponents of small-group filmmaking advocated film documentary, as the genre *par excellence* of visual realism. Furthermore, Hong Man, in the aforementioned "The Small-Group Filmmaking Movement," stressed the democratic way of the distribution of independent films made by the small-group filmmaking method.

The distribution routes that the small-group filmmaking crews have to find and develop are diverse. All the locations and its neighborhoods where the people documented by films are living may transform into the place for public exhibition. ... The purpose of the film exhibition can also be diverse: not only for public viewing, but also films may function as a legal testimony or as a part of the program for a massive political gathering⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Seoul Visual Collective, *From Periphery to Center* (Seoul: Sigak kwa önö, 1996), p. 29.

⁴⁵ Kim Toyön, "Toward an Expansion of Literary Genres" in Sung Min-Yup (Ed.), *A Thesis of Minjung Literature [Minjung munhangnon]* (Munhak chisöngsa: Seoul, 1984), p. 105.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 105–128.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴⁹ Hong Man, "The Small-Group Filmmaking Movement," p. 232.

This statement reveals elements of media activism built into the characteristics of small-group filmmaking. But, more importantly, small-group filmmaking extended the horizon of South Korean cinema by adding documentary to ordinary filmmaking practice: until the mid 1980s there had been no history of documentary filmmaking as social commentary in South Korea.

In short, people's cinema was initially seen as a new alternative to conventional commercial cinema both in theory and practice. Theoretically, it was considered to be a new frame for cinematic narrative, and practically it developed into a social documentary based on small-group filmmaking. However, the new expressive space carved out by people's cinema was soon to be filled with political propaganda that encompassed the issues of student activism and the labor movement as well.

PEOPLE'S CINEMA: ACTIVIST CINEMA

From the mid 1980s, student filmmakers began to make a series of independent films intended to denounce the then military government and advocate popular protests against it. The term "activist cinema" would best describe these films because they bore political messages designed to raise public awareness about the socio-political issues of the time. People's cinema largely influenced the development of activist cinema. Yi Hyeoyŏng's "The University Cinema Thesis: Its Issues and Present Condition" (1985) illustrates this point. Yi maintains that "since the multitudes of students do not belong to any particular social stratum nor class, they are able to seek, albeit within a limited scope, social truisms independent of ruling ideologies"⁵⁰ and that "since there are no other organized forces that can legitimately confront the military dictatorship, the political engagement of university students strengthens accordingly."⁵¹ Yi further argues that "the theory and practice of university cinema cannot stand without the premise that student filmmaking will lead to a social movement" and that "the *minjung*-orientedness of university cinema should transform into the *minjung* spirit when it moves out of the school boundary."⁵² These statements confirm that university cinema took the form of activist cinema under the spiritual guidance of people's cinema.

The first example of activist cinema can be found in *The Mountains and Rivers Resurrected* (*Pubwalhanŭn sanba*, 8mm, 90min) produced by Yonsei University

⁵⁰ Yi Hyeoyŏng, "A Thesis on University Cinema" in *A Thesis on Cinema Movements* [Yŏnghwa undongnon] (Seoul: Hwada, 1985), p. 243.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 244.

⁵² Ibid., p. 249.

General Student Council in 1986. An agitprop work that compiled scenes of the Kwangju Uprising and other popular protests, the film was indicted by the National Security Police on the charge of demagoguery. Although the allegation proved unsubstantiated, the prosecutory measures enacted by the police testify that the film medium had acquired a sufficient level of recognition as a propaganda instrument in student activism. The student filmmakers who initiated activist cinema adopted small-group filmmaking as the major mode of film production. It was a natural option because of the chronic shortage of money and production equipment. But the same conditions led the various groups of student filmmakers to join together to form the General Association of University Filmmakers (1987–1991) in May 1987.⁵³ The next month, the members of the association held a film festival under the title, “Toward an Open Cinema.”

Out of the fifteen short films submitted to the Open Cinema Festival,⁵⁴ *For a Talented Young Man* (*Injae rŭl wihayŏ*, 8mm, 45min, Dir. Jang Yun-Hyun [Chang Yŏnhyŏn], 1987) is notable in that it prefigured the typical narrative of activist cinema in which the male protagonist is forced to undergo psychological and physical ordeals to be reborn as an activist hero. The narrative concerns the main character Uyŏng, a literature major who is presently under ferocious police interrogation because of a poem he has written with an anti-establishment theme for an underground journal. Not yielding to torture, Uyŏng preserves his integrity as a student activist. His will is manifested in the film’s postscript that reads, “Now I move out of the closed room toward the public square.” This poetic phrase is advanced as a piece of Uyŏng’s literary work, but epitomizes the prophetic vision shared by actual student activists of the day. Given that there is no hope of immediate release, Uyŏng’s individual struggle (“closed room”) seems to be pointless. Yet the true hope lies in social reform to be performed by collective struggle (“open space”), although the realization of social reform had to be postponed to an indeterminate future.

Those who submitted *For a Talented Young Man* and other activist films for the Open Cinema Festival organized the filmmaking collective Changsan’got mae (1988–1993) in order to make a feature-length film. This collaborative investment gave birth to its first feature, *Oh! Land of Dreams* [hereafter, *Land of Dreams*] (*O! Kkum ūi nara*, 16mm, 90min, Dir. Yi Ũn, Jang Dong-Hong [Chang Tonghong], Jang Yun-Hyun) in 1988. This film tested the limits of established cinematic conventions in South Korea in several ways. It came out as the first film in the country that dramatized the Kwangju Uprising with explicit anti-Americanism.

⁵³ Seoul Visual Collective, *From Periphery to Center* (Seoul: Sigak kwa ŏnŏ, 1996), pp. 31–32.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Land of Dreams also brought about the first legal case in which the Film Law was enacted to control the production and distribution of 8mm and 16mm films. The Film Censorship Board accused the film of breaking two legal provisions: first, the fourth provision limited filmmaking business to legally registered companies; and second, the twelfth provision that stipulated that for public exhibition a film should pass a review conducted by the Film Censorship Board.⁵⁵ Thanks in part to this legal dispute the film drew more than 100,000 viewers across the country,⁵⁶ although each screening ran the risk of the blockading of the exhibition place by the police and the confiscation of the film reels.

The narrative of the film adds a tragic tonality to the typical narrative of activist cinema. The protagonist Chöngsu attends Chonnam National University in Kwangju when the civil uprising breaks out in the city. He is portrayed as an activist student engaged in underground movement activities and teaching in a night school for teenage workers. His devotion to social activism has earned a great deal of respect from his pupils especially Kuch'il, a shoeshine boy. The camaraderie built between Chöngsu and Kuch'il continues to the climactic moment when South Korean paratroopers launch a final attack against the civilians of Kwangju who are willing to die a heroic death. At the last moment, however, Chöngsu becomes unnerved by fear and deserts the militia base leaving Kuch'il behind. On the other hand, the ten days (from May 18 to 27) in the "liberated" city allows Kuch'il to appreciate a "true democracy", which Kuch'il describes in the statement, "Nobody contemptuously called us lousy shoeshine boys. Even the college students treated us as their equals calling us comrades. I won't live like a petty street boy anymore. I will do my part to protect this hard-earned democracy." Kuch'il's awakening to a communal democracy makes a stark contrast with Chöngsu's betrayal of the same value.

Leaving Kwangju, Chöngsu makes a clandestine journey into Tongduch'ön a military town built around a U.S. Army camp. In the city, smugglers and prostitutes are living a parasitic life on the bounty of American soldiers. These underclass people have an acute sense of their living conditions, but they cannot escape from the control imposed by the U.S. Army. The theme of American domination is reaffirmed in a flashback sequence in which Chöngsu, while in

⁵⁵ The Board of Morality in Performance Arts was established in 1975 and dismantled in 1999.

⁵⁶ Seoul Visual Collective, *From Periphery to Center* (Seoul: Sigak kwa önö, 1996), p. 33. However, the precise number of the viewers that *Land of Dreams* drew remains nebulous. Yi Yong-Bae, a former member of Changsan'got mae, estimated 200,000, while Hong Ki-Sun (Hong Kísön), a former member of the Seoul Visual Collective, reckoned 300,000. See, Association of Korean Independent Film & Video, *The Spellbound Memories, Independent Cinema* (KIFV: Seoul, 2001), p. 191; p. 217.

Kwangju, is reading a wall-poster that reports the departure of a U.S. battleship from the port of Okinawa to the Korean peninsula. One of Chöngsu's associates says in a soliloquy that the U.S. Navy has been deployed in support of the Korean Army, not the people of Kwangju. In addition, the closing scene zooms in on an American flag fluttering over the U.S. Embassy building in Seoul. Implied in this iconography is an apocalyptic condition, in which South Korea has fallen into the clutches of a neo-imperialistic U.S.

For a 16mm independent film, *Land of Dreams* garnered phenomenal popular success. It was reportedly screened more than five hundred times in 150 different places across the country.⁵⁷ More importantly, *Land of Dreams* served to dismantle film censorship in South Korea. In response to the indictment against the film, Changsan'got mae filed a legal appeal based on the Constitutional Law, claiming that the twelfth provision of the Film Law that justified film censorship in the preproduction phase was a violation of freedom of speech. The top court decided the case in favor of the complainants in 1996. In the aftermath of this historical judgment, the Film Censorship Board was officially liquidated in 1999.

Changsan'got mae's second film was *The Night before the Strike* (*P'aöp chönya*, 16mm, 90min, Dir. Yi Ũn, Yi Chaegu, Jang Yun-Hyun, Chang Tonghong, 1990). The highest praise for the film came from the fact that it was the first feature-length film, independent or commercial, which tackled labor issues. Whereas *Land of Dreams* relies on a student activist character as an agent who witnesses and testifies to the heroic deaths of the people in Kwangju, *The Night before the Strike* minimizes the role of the intellectual interlocutor and places the laborers who have a grasp of labor problems and defend their trade union in the foreground.⁵⁸

In fact, the emergence of the *minjung* characters in *The Night before the Strike* addresses the changes in the socio-political atmosphere in the late 1980s. When

⁵⁷ Association of Korean Independent Film & Video, *The Spellbound Memories, Independent Cinema* (KIFV: Seoul, 2001), p. 191; p. 217.

⁵⁸ Not only in subject matter, there were also a great deal of differences in the degree of expertise in filmmaking, equipment, and finance invested in the two films. According to Yi Yong-Bae, most crew members of *Land of Dreams* were amateur filmmakers, who had had little experience in the making of feature-length films. Arriflex, Bolex, and Scoopic cameras used for the film were rented from university film departments. The production took approximately six months (from June to December in 1988), costing 9,338,000 Wön (approximately \$13,042 in 1988). By contrast, *The Night before the Strike* doubled the production cost up to 21,204,000 Wön (approximately \$29,615 in 1990), which included the rental fee of equipment, such as a 30-m rail, a circular rail, and a circular dolly. Although a Bolex EBM and a Canon Scoopic, mobilized for shooting, were also rented from university film departments, experienced stage actors were hired to play the main roles. It took approximately one year and two months (February 1989 to March 1990) to make this film. (Yi Yong-Bae, Email interview with the author, 9, 17 October 2009)

the members of Changsan'got mae conceived the film project in February 1989, South Korea was still in the aftermath of the massive eruptions of labor struggles that had started in July 1987. After the June Civil Uprising in 1987, which realized the abolition of military rule and the installment of direct presidential elections, approximately 3,000 labor conflicts erupted in July and August of that year.⁵⁹ This so-called Great Struggle of Workers resulted in the multiplication of labor unions; the number of which surged from 2,752 in June 1987 to 4,086 in December 1987, to 6,142 in 1988, and to 7,783 in 1989. In tandem with the growth of the labor movement, the subject matter of the people's literary movement (*minjung munhak undong*) was gradually channeled into labor issues.

When Changsan'got mae started the production of *The Night before the Strike* in 1989, an increasing number of artists had already begun to portray labor disputes in their literary creations. For instance, Pak Nohae, a renowned labor activist and poet, presented twelve poems in *Labor Liberation Literature*, a monthly literary journal that invigorated people's literature after its first publication in April 1984. Ten out of Pak's twelve poems portray the embattled lives of sweatshop workers and extol the anti-capitalistic struggles of laborers and unions. The narrators of the poems commonly maintain the first person perspective, making it appear that the lyrics are personal statements by actual laborers. A narrative that presents the real-life struggles of laborers also accounts for the dramaturgy of *The Night before the Strike*.

The plot of the film concerns a group of laborers working for a metal processing factory. The opening scene entitled "Fall 1987" summons up the memory of the Great Struggle of Workers in 1987. An anonymous man agitates, albeit abortively, his co-workers to engage in a combined action to improve the sub-human conditions of the dining facilities that the factory management operates. Yet the voice of instigation merely echoes in the air, implying the absence of a union that could represent such a demand. A year has passed from the incident to the present, in which a hazardous working environment—let alone low wages—still plagues the workers. The labor versus management conflict is disclosed in casual dialogues between employees: "To the managers, we are not humans. We are like dogs. Nobody could find machines as cheap as we are." However, the factory owner speaks aloud, "Union?! Over my dead body! The student bastards made such a fuss about democracy or something. Now the factory bastards are following their way? No way!"

A turning point comes when Wan'ik, a student-turned-labor activist, joins the group of workers to persuade them to build a union. Wan'ik at first sight appears

⁵⁹ Kang Chunman. *Promenade through Modern Korean History: 1980s III* [*Han'guk hyōndaesa sanch'aek-1980s III*] (Inmul kwa sasangsa: 2003), p. 181.

as an activist hero who is assigned to take up the entire process of union building. But the story avoids the conventional narrative typical of such activist cinema by giving the task of union building to Wŏn'gi a blue-collar worker. Wŏn'gi is a three-dimensional character, who hides his anguish over the hazardous working conditions and the unorganized workers' weakness, whereas Wan'ik remains virtually a stock character, who follows the movement line without revealing any internal conflict. The narrative also employs an indeterminate character Hansu who enables us to see the multiple and even self-contradictory aspects of the *minjung*. Reminiscent of Chongsu, the feeble-minded student activist in *Land of Dreams*, Hansu does not seem to be an activist hero at first sight. During the preparatory phase of union building undertaken by his colleagues, Hansu even works as a spy for the factory managers. He tries to justify his action by citing that he is obliged to support his younger brother and is soon to be married. However, his fiancé Mija encourages him to participate in the construction of the labor union. The fateful encounter between labor and capital takes place in the climatic sequence in which the union organizers occupy the factory building to hold a sit-in as a last resort to fight the management. But hired union-breakers outnumber the workers and eventually quell the protest. Infuriated by the atrocities committed during this suppression of the workers, Hansu takes the initiative of leading another wave of workers' protest, heroically emerging as the new union leader.

The final shot captures Hansu's torso occupying the center of the screen, which symbolizes the birth of a hero. In other words, the effort to organize a union is headed by Wŏn'gi and his comrades, but their endeavors do not so much lead to the construction of a union as pave the way for the birth of the new leader Hansu. The narrative progression as such is designed to lead audiences to identify with the psychological development of the individual protagonist. Thus, the film conforms to the psychological realism endorsed by Hollywood cinema rather than the socialist realism demonstrated by Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925) for example.

With all its merits and demerits, *The Night before the Strike* evoked sensational responses. First of all, the Film Censorship Board enacted the fourth and twelfth provisions of the Film Law, as was the case with *Land of Dreams*, to make the public exhibition of *The Night before the Strike* illegal. The prosecution indicted the film on the ground that "the story instigates strikes and justifies third-party intervention in labor disputes that the Labor Law prohibits."⁶⁰ Changsan'got mae pressed ahead with public screenings that started on April 8, 1990. On the second

⁶⁰ *The Korea Times* (April 10, 1990), cited in The Seoul Visual Collective, *From Periphery to Center* (Seoul: Sigak kwa ŏnŏ, 1996), p. 86.

day (April 9) of the exhibition, riot police forced their way into the exhibition place, Art Theatre Hanmadang in Seoul, and took the film reels and the projector as well.⁶¹ Yi Yong-Bae the producer of *The Night before the Strike* and Kim Myung-Gon the representative of the Art Theatre Hanmadang became wanted by police for the instigation of labor strikes.⁶² The incidents sparked a stream of protests by the members of Changsan'got mae and other movement organizations. Resistant action unfolded in the forms of public campaigns against the legal ban and in favor of the open exhibition of the film.

University students and union workers constituted the majority of audiences in the course of open exhibitions. Due to the threat of police infiltration, the audiences had to be on the constant lookout for the police force. Under these circumstances, film exhibition in itself became an act of political resistance. Yi Yong-Bae provided an on-the-spot description of the open screening for this study. Some of his recollections deserve a quotation to understand the film's exhibition and viewing as a resistant action.

There were enormous responses. A number of workers went to so much trouble to pay a visit to the university campuses where open screenings were taking place. Some of them were even arrested. Donation boxes that were constantly being passed around the audience were filled with coins and paper bills. We conducted an open-air screening in the Acropolis Square of Seoul National University, which required a special device for 16 mm film projection. Fervor, sweat, suspense, and tears always accompanied each viewing session. It was a common scene that at the finale of the film, audiences sang together *The Way of the Laborer* (the theme song of *The Night before the Strike*), sharing their residual emotions. I vividly remember a scene in which some women workers clasped the hands of the projectionists to console them for their hardships but to equally encourage them in an unyielding struggle for the film's exhibition.⁶³

Changsan'got mae made its last work, *Opening the Closed School Gate* (*Tatch'in kyomun ūl yŏlmyŏ*, Dir. Yi Chaegu, 16mm, 86min) in 1992. Set during the teachers' struggle to establish the Teachers Union in 1989, the story concerns a progressive high-school teacher and a group of students under his mentorship. When the school authorities manage the school in an undemocratic way, the teacher with the help of his students is determined to protest against it. *Opening the Closed School Gate* did

⁶¹ *Mal* (June, 1990) cited in Seoul Visual Collective, *From Periphery to Center* (Seoul: Sigak kwa ōnŏ, 1996), p. 86.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Yi Yong-Bae, Email interview with the author, July 11, 2006

not surpass *The Night before the Strike* in terms of popularity. However, when the Film Law once again banned the public screening of the film, Changsan'got mae took advantage of the case together with that of *Land of Dreams* to appeal on the grounds of the Constitutional Law, claiming that film censorship violates freedom of speech. As mentioned earlier, Changsan'got mae won the legal case in 1996 and the Film Censorship Board was dismantled in 1999. Changsan'got mae was itself disbanded in 1993.

The series of activist films discussed thus far remains as a living testimony of the materialization of people's cinema and its popular appeal. In a way, the activist films were the outcome of the small-group filmmaking popularized by student filmmakers in the course of the 1980s. Yet, the theoretical elaboration of people's cinema was hardly produced by the student filmmakers. This was presumably because the activist filmmakers thought, "action speaks louder than words." However, the number of independent films had accumulated to the point that an extensive theoretical review of the products of people's cinema became desirable. The "national cinema thesis (*minjok yŏnghwaron*)" was promulgated to achieve that aim.

PEOPLE'S CINEMA: NATIONAL CINEMA

In 1989, Yi Hyo'in and Yi Chŏngha drafted and published the "national cinema thesis" in an attempt to outline the pending tasks of the South Korean cinema movement. They maintained that the existing terminologies for new cinema, such as small film, open cinema, and people's cinema, were employed without sufficient theoretical elaboration. Therefore, they submitted a national cinema thesis, claiming it to be the first indigenous film theory for new cinema derived from the socio-cultural conditions of South Korea. Despite its self-claimed distinction from the preceding nomenclatures that qualified new cinema, the national cinema thesis should be thought of as an extension of people's cinema practice, because instead of providing examples of films that may belong to the new category of national cinema, the designers of the thesis invested existing independent films made in the name of people's cinema with new political and ideological meanings.

The national cinema thesis deserves attention in three respects. First, it came out as an indigenous film theory built upon the considerations of the political economy involving South Korean cinema. Second, its theoretical spectrum encompasses not only independent cinema but also established commercial cinema with its practitioners. Third, it adopted film theories developed by Kim Jong-Il (Kim Chŏngil), the leader of North Korea. The last point may vitiate the claim of being "indigenous" that the first point stresses. However, the meaning of

indigenous may vary depending on how the meaning of the term “national” in the term “national cinema thesis” defines the divided state of the Korean peninsula.

The time when the national cinema thesis was produced coincided with a watershed moment in the history of the South Korean film industry. The fifth revision of the Film Law in 1985 adopted a registration system in place of a licensing system to deregulate the film production business.⁶⁴ But at the same time, the revised law abolished the foreign film importation quota, which had been granted to major production companies with the capacity of making at least two films a year. The separation of foreign film importation from the domestic film production business allowed for an unprecedented market space for international cinema. The number of imported films rapidly increased from 20 to 30 on average between 1981 to 1985, rising to 175 in 1988, and 264 in 1989.⁶⁵ Accordingly, the domestic market share of imported films rose from 65.8% in 1985 to 79.8% in 1989, 67.0% in 1986, 73.0% in 1987, and 76.7% in 1988.⁶⁶ By contrast, the domestic share of the film market plummeted from 34.2% in 1985 to 20.2% in 1989 via 33.0% in 1986, 27.0% in 1987, and 23.3% in 1988.⁶⁷ As such, South Korean film production was unshackled from a licensing system only to be faced with an uphill struggle against foreign films, the majority of which were Hollywood productions. To make the situation even worse, the first U.S. and South Korea film negotiation in 1985 reached an agreement that the South Korean government should open its domestic film market to U.S.-based film production companies by 1987.⁶⁸ In order to legalize this U.S.-South Korean agreement, the South Korean government enacted the sixth revision of the Film Law in July 1987. In January 1988, the government officially permitted foreign film companies to conduct direct distribution as well as advertisement and production of their films in South Korea.

The national cinema thesis should be examined in these politico-economic conditions in South Korea. Yi Jōngha, in his “The Organizational, Practical Duty and Task of the National Cinema Movement,” (1989) points out the “colonized nature” of the South Korean film industry, which is revealed in “the domestic cinema constantly outmaneuvered by foreign cinema, the film production capital

⁶⁴ Cho Chunhyōng, “South Korean Film Industry and Policies: 1980–1997” in Yu Ji-Na (Yu Chi’na) et al. (Eds.), *A Study of South Korean Film History 1980–1997* [*Han’guk yōnghwasa kongbu 1980–1997*] (Seoul: Ich’ae, 2005), p. 155.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 156.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 165.

only accruable by selling the purchase rights of foreign films, (...) and low wages for employees in the film industry.”⁶⁹ Along with such adversities, the direct distribution of Hollywood cinema assured a strong possibility that the cinema movement would be able to mobilize not only the independent cinema sector but also the people employed in the commercial film industry. Addressing *minjok*, the single national identity shared by all Koreans, the national cinema thesis regards all types of domestic filmmaking practice as elements of a potentially nationalistic movement against the cultural foray of alien forces, especially Hollywood cinema. Thus, the key polemic of the national cinema thesis resides in the united front built across the commercial film industry and the independent cinema sector. Yi Hyo'in in “The Imminent Task and Duty of National Cinema” (1989) argues that the preceding cinema movement in the 1980s limited its scope to noncommercial independent films.⁷⁰ Resulting from this sectarian attitude, as Yi argues, was “the solipsistic way of thought which is imbued with imperialist ideologies such as art for art's sake or film auteurism, and isolated from the other sectors of social movement.”⁷¹ To Yi, Changsan'got mae's *Land of Dreams* only displaces the imperialist nature of U.S. foreign policies into the realm of the psychological conflict of the petit-bourgeois intellectual.⁷² If Yi's interpretation is correct, the film becomes a far cry from being a work that meets “the demands of the agitation and propaganda for social reformation initiated by the labor class.”⁷³ Yi Chŏngha makes a similar diagnosis on the activities of the Seoul Cinema Collective (1982–1986) and its accomplishments such as *Blue Bird* (1986). Yi Chŏngha maintains that “the filmmaking activities of the collective have stood on the petit bourgeois ideology, which contains the revolutionary theme of people's cinema within the screen and never allows the working class audiences to take up actual revolutionary actions.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, Yi Hyo'in maintains that the popularity of *The Night before the Strike* is obviously an accomplishment made by the independent cinema sector, but the film's Hollywood-style narrative reveals an ideological limitation.⁷⁵

The second most important tenet of the national cinema thesis is that the

⁶⁹ Yi Jŏngha, “The Organizational Practical Duty and Task of the National Cinema Movement” in *National Cinema I* [*Minjok yŏngbwa I*] (Seoul: Ch'ingu, 1989), p. 61.

⁷⁰ Yi Hyo'in, “The Imminent Task and Duty of National cinema” in *National Cinema I* [*Minjok yŏngbwa I*] (Seoul: Ch'in'gu, 1989), p. 14.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷⁴ Yi Chŏngha, “The Organizational Practical Duty and Task of the National Cinema Movement” p. 58.

⁷⁵ Yi Hyo'in, Email interview with the author. 19 March 2007.

national cinema movement should be conducted “as a means of the working class movement, from the perspective of the working class, and in the interests of the working class.”⁷⁶ The identity of the working class upholding the national cinema thesis corresponds to the anti-bourgeois nationalism implicated in Third Cinema developed in New Latin American Cinema. However, the national cinema thesis files a caveat that mere efforts to portray working people on the screen are prone to be a condescending form of petit-bourgeois individualism. This point slightly differentiates the national cinema thesis from its Latin American counterpart. With all the variations in different national contexts, the practices of Third Cinema have overall sought a revolutionary cinema movement in the very act of filmmaking. For instance, Jorge Sanjinés, one of the founders of the Bolivian Ukamau Group, maintains that the bourgeois ideology underlying the Western concept of art does not easily change, but filmmakers may purge it “through contact with the people, by integrating them into the creative process, by elucidating the aims of popular art, and leaving off with individual positions.”⁷⁷ The filmmaking process and the resultant film as well should be considered to be the ultimate locus where the cinema movement against bourgeois ideology and imperialism takes place. Yi Chŏngha maintains that “third world” cinema movements like Third Cinema arose partly under the influence of “revolutionary auteurism” in the West, so that they defy a mechanical application to the South Korean context.⁷⁸

Unlike Third Cinema, the notion of the working class in the national cinema thesis refers not only to the subject of a revolutionary cinema but also to the working people who are engaged in a variety of film-related institutions: the companies engaged in film production and distribution, the governmental institutions involved in cultural policies and film law, and the laboratories creating cinematic art and techniques. It follows that the united front endorsed in the national cinema thesis should entail solidarity among the entire workforce of all cinema institutions. Putting forward this united front and working-class initiative as the prerequisite for a cinema movement, the national cinema thesis claims that the two guiding principles are to penetrate into the actual filmmaking and social movement which “national filmmakers”⁷⁹ are required to undertake in order to reform the film industry and the cultural bureaucracy. Yi Hyo’in, in his discussion

⁷⁶ Yi Hyo’in, “The Imminent Task and Duty of National cinema,” p. 14.

⁷⁷ Jorge Sanjinés and the Ukamau Group, *Theory & Practice of a Cinema with the People*, (Trans.) Richard Schaaf (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1989), p. 39.

⁷⁸ Yi Chŏngha, “The Organizational Practical Duty and Task of the National Cinema Movement” p. 53.

⁷⁹ Yi Hyo’in, “The Imminent Task and Duty of National Cinema” p. 33.

of creative methods to realize a national cinema, asserts that “the practitioners of national cinema should be national filmmakers who have internalized the working-class world-view and working-class ideology.”⁸⁰ He goes on to argue that “the narrative of national cinema is to portray the working-classes’ struggle for national liberation and its revolutionary accomplishments.”⁸¹ For the narrative elements, Yi suggests typical settings, typical characters, and typical events by which to realize the “national theme” in the most effective way.⁸² To sum up, the following four principles sustain the practical methods of the national cinema thesis: working class ideology, people’s perspective, national theme, and typicality of narrative elements.

In their accounts of the “national cinema thesis,” Yi Hyo’in and Yi Chŏngha barely mention the Juche (Chuch’ae) doctrine, the ruling principle of communist North Korea, and *On the Art of Cinema* (*Yŏnghwa yesullon*, 1973), a treatise attributed to Kim Jong-Il as an extension of the Juche doctrine on film art. Yet, some circumstantial evidence confirms the influence of Kim Jong-Il’s film theory on the four principles that the “national cinema thesis” endorses. An in-depth discussion of the idea of Juche and its artistic application lies beyond the scope of this study. However, *National Cinema I*, the printed vehicle of the national cinema thesis, provides an introductory study on film theory developed in North Korea. Under the title of “North Korean Film Theory,” the article discusses state policies in the promotion of literary creations in North Korea. The guiding principles of literary creation in North Korea are “the execution of the Chosŏn Labor Party’s policy on art and literature, allegiance to the Party as well as the labor class and the people, adherence to socialist realism, and the cultivation and innovation of a traditional national culture.”⁸³ Aside from the Party-related provisions, including socialist realism, the remaining principles stress allegiance to the labor class and the people and the enrichment of the national culture. These befittingly correspond to the three creative principles advocated by the national cinema thesis: working class ideology, people’s perspective, and national theme.

With regard to the principle of typicality in the national cinema thesis, its forerunner is found in Kim Jong-Il’s *On the Art of Cinema*. Published in April 1973, *On the Art of Cinema* accentuates the importance of the typical character on numerous occasions as is shown in the following passage:

⁸⁰ Yi Hyo’in, “The Imminent Task and Duty of National Cinema” p. 33.

⁸¹ Ibid., 35.

⁸² Ibid., 37.

⁸³ Paek Ch’ihan, “North Korean film theory” in *National Cinema I* [*Minjok yŏnghwa*] (Seoul: Ch’in’gu, 1989), pp. 140–160.

A human question raised by literature can be settled correctly only through representative human images which can serve as examples for people in their lives and struggles. Therefore we can say that the value and significance of any human question raised by a literary work is determined by the virtues of the typical character who plays the main role.⁸⁴

Kim further suggests that the typical character acquires the most realistic portrayal in a typical life, so that “works of art and literature should always give a rich and detailed description of typical lives, in which people are shown as they really are.”⁸⁵ He concludes this rationale by arguing that “the typical life of our people today is expressed in their noble struggle for an independent and creative existence. Indeed, a revolutionary life is the most typical life, one which is lived in the main current of historical progress.”⁸⁶

Another striking similarity between Kim Jong-Il’s film theory and the national cinema thesis is to be found in the role of the film director. The following passages demonstrate Kim’s general conception of the director in *On the Art of Cinema*.

In the capitalist system of filmmaking the ‘director’ carries that title, but in fact the right of supervision and control over film production is entirely in the hands of the tycoons of the filmmaking industry who have the money, whereas the directors are nothing but their agents.⁸⁷

[By contrast] in the socialist system of filmmaking, the director is [...] the chief who assumes full responsibility for everything, ranging from the film itself to the political and ideological life of those who take part in filmmaking. [Therefore,] the director becomes the commander of the creative group and pushes forward the creative work as a whole in a coordinated fashion, giving precedence to political work and laying major emphasis on working with people who make films.⁸⁸

Although Kim hardly tackles film auteurism developed in European art cinema, he takes a critical stance on the notion by stating that “the director should not be over-egotistical in his analysis and judgment of a production” since “ignoring the opinions of other creative workers” will hinder “the establishment of a firm

⁸⁴ Kim Jong-Il, *On the Art of Cinema* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), p. 7.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 113–114.

consensus on any production.”⁸⁹ In short, Kim Jong-Il’s socialist film theory prescribes two qualifications of a film director. First, a film director should always work with the creative production group in which the division of work is well established. Second, the director should work as the ideological leader for the members of the filmmaking group.

Yi Hyo’in said that he had been most impressed by the North Korean film theory dictum of placing a higher value on ideology and group production than on artistry and individual work.⁹⁰ It seemed to him to be a strong alternative to customary filmmaking in South Korea, which in Yi’s view had been deeply plagued by “the personal apprenticeship, morally degenerate contents, low technical quality, and the tendency to trivialize the social responsibility of art.”⁹¹ Indeed, Yi’s commentary on the role of film director virtually repeats Kim Jong-Il’s view on the same subject.

The director should push forward the cinematic creation in which ideology and theme unfold in the narrative under the guidance of a revolutionary world view. In order to perform this task, the director should be in charge of the general progression of artistic creation, the management of the creative group, and the ideological guidance for the group members. All of these roles will lead the director to greater historical and societal tasks. In a word, the director should not merely supervise the theme of a film and call ‘Ready! Action!’ complacently out of the bourgeois ideology.⁹²

The National Security Law (est. 1948) in South Korea has outlawed favorable approaches to the doctrines officially circulated in North Korea. By the time that Yi Hyo’in and Yi Chōngha promulgated the national cinema thesis in 1989, Kim Jong-Il’s writings on cinema were unavailable in bookstores or in school libraries in South Korea. Yi Hyo’in testified that Paekbong mun’go, a pro-North Korean Japanese publishing company, had translated Kim Jong-Il’s manuscripts on directing and acting into Japanese, while the Ministry of Reunification in South Korea possessed a copy of the Japanese translation for public reference.⁹³ Also available at the library of the Ministry of Reunification was *Chosun Cinema* a monthly journal published in North Korea.⁹⁴ Thus, Kim Jong-Il’s film theory

⁸⁹ Kim Jong-Il, *On the Art of Cinema* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001), p. 117.

⁹⁰ Yi Hyo’in, email interview with the author, 19 Mar 2007

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Yi Hyo’in, “The Imminent Task and Duty of National Cinema”, *National Cinema I* (Seoul: Ch’in’gu, 1989), p. 40.

⁹³ Yi Hyo’in, email interview with the author, 19 Mar 2007.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

obtained through the Japanese translation and *Chosun Cinema* enabled Yi Hyo'in and Yi Chŏngha to formulate the practical methodology of the national cinema thesis.

The cold-war machines like the National Security Law blocked the flow of information regarding North Korea into the intellectual community in South Korea. For instance, Yi Hyo'in recalled that he had not seen a single North Korean film before Kim Jong-II's film theory electrified him to conceive of the national cinema thesis.⁹⁵ The dearth of knowledge about North Korea drove intellectuals and university students to Japanese texts or North Korean radio broadcasts to envisage the realities of North Korea. In the process, the Juche doctrine increasingly won the minds of student activists.⁹⁶ The principle of Juche (*juch'ae*: autonomous body) endorses *chajusŏng* (self-reliance) as the most important attribute of a nation-state and its people. The idea of *chajusŏng* also accounts for the communist state's anti-American policies: this aspect strongly appealed to a large segment of the students involved in political activism in South Korea. It seems natural that Kim Jong-II's film theory based on the Juche doctrine seemed convincing to the designers of the national cinema thesis, who worried about the direct distribution of Hollywood cinema. Yi Hyo'in described this situation by saying that he saw the "light" in the North Korean film discourse.⁹⁷

Further research is desired to see how the clandestine encounter of the two Koreas in the name of national cinema evolved in the later development of South Korean cinema. Yi Hyo'in himself commented that the national cinema thesis served to make the need for a cinema movement accepted as an important part of the social movement between the late 1980s and the early 1990s.⁹⁸ For instance, United International Pictures (UIP), the joint management by Paramount, Universal, and MGM/UA, began direct distribution with *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, Paramount, 1987) in 1988 in Seoul.⁹⁹ During September and October in 1988, South Korean filmmakers in solidarity with the employees in the film industry began a series of protests against direct distribution, calling UIP the "public enemy" of South Korean cinema.¹⁰⁰ The Association of Korean Film Directors issued a declaration entitled "Down with American Cinema!" on

⁹⁵ Yi Hyo'in, email interview with the author, 19 Mar 2007.

⁹⁶ Kang Chunman. *Promenade through Modern Korean History: 1980s III* [*Han'guk byŏndaesa sanch'aek-1980s III*] (Inmul kwa sasangsa: 2003), pp. 186–187.

⁹⁷ Yi Hyo'in, email interview with the author, 19 Mar 2007.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Cho Chunhyŏng, "South Korean Film Industry and Policies: 1980–1997" in Yu Ji-Na et al. (Eds.), *A Study of South Korean Film History 1980–1997* [*Han'guk yŏnghwasa kongbu 1980–1997*] (Seoul: Ich'ae, 2005), p. 167.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

September 17,¹⁰¹ and on September 23 all the first-run movie theatres in Seoul held a combined shutdown in defiance of direct distribution.¹⁰² The protests culminated on October 27 and 28 when the Committee for the Demand of the Abolishment of Direct Distribution and the Establishment of a Domestic Film Production Law carried out a public campaign in front of the House of Representatives.¹⁰³ As such, the idea of a national cinema drew unanimous support not only from independent filmmakers but also from employees in the mainstream cinema industry. However, the popular reception of national cinema did not consider the theoretical specificities such as anti-bourgeois nationalism, but merely took it as cinema with a pure national theme unadulterated by Hollywood influence. The national cinema thesis grew into a popular view that valorizes all domestic films as a creative activity for the preservation of national culture in opposition to Hollywood cinema. Thus, the most far-reaching legacy of the national cinema thesis is the idea of national cultural sovereignty. The South Korean film society has enacted this notion in its consistent struggle for the preservation of the screen quota system from 1988 to the present.

CONCLUSION

Fourteen independent filmmaking collectives established the Association of Korea Independent Film & Video (KIFV) in September 1998.¹⁰⁴ The KIFV from its inception claimed itself to be the sole guardian of the needs and interests of independent filmmakers in South Korea. In the inaugural declaration, however, the KIFV members never used the term people's cinema, whereas many of them had endeavored to materialize the concept in theory and practice in the 1980s. Instead, they used "independent cinema (*tongnip yŏnghwa*)" to indicate all types of independent filmmaking practices.¹⁰⁵ This new term seems to have been strategically chosen in an attempt to accommodate not only politically resistant films but also films on other themes. Indeed, departing from the cause of socio-political movement, independent films broadened the spectrum of themes and narratives in the course of the 1990s. Independent films began to advance characters who were situated in a multiple nexus of social relationships: in the process, diverse aspects of ideology, culture, and politics in contemporary South

¹⁰¹ Cho Chunhyŏng, "South Korean Film Industry and Policies: 1980–1997", p. 168.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ The Association of Korea Independent Film & Video (KIFV), *Korean Independent Film & Video [Han'guk tongniptyŏnghwa ūi modun kŏl]* (Seoul: KIFV, 1995), p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Korea have provided a variety of subject matter for cinematic scrutiny. However, it should be noted that “the people” is originally an amorphous concept. The people as a concept functions as an invisible territory where various social relationships and processes take place. As its components are constantly moving, breaking the old social nexuses and forming new ones, the people create a discourse which is always in the process of becoming. In this sense, “independent cinema” was proposed to capture the new contour of people’s cinema in an age of de-politicization.

The same holds true for the national cinema thesis. The national cinema thesis as a theoretical elaboration of people’s cinema regarded “national” as the principle to be materialized in the form and content of resistant cinema. The popular reception of national cinema was also confined to efforts to realize the Korean cultural identity in film narrative. Independent cinema, however, liberates the national from the politics of resistance and cultural identity. Instead, the national only functions as an invisible territory where the aforementioned social relations and processes reside. Since individual subjects are constantly moving, breaking old social nexuses and forming new ones, the national becomes a discourse which is always under the process of becoming. On his comments on the Third Cinema question, Paul Willemen says:

Cultural identity no longer precedes the discourse as something to be recovered; it is by trying to put an understanding of the multifarious social-historical processes at work in a given situation into discourse that the national-cultural-popular identity begins find a voice. Tradition(s) can no longer be seen as sacred cows: some are to be criticized, other to be mobilized or inflected (...). Nationalist solidarity thus gives way to the need for critical lucidity which becomes the intellectual’s special task. ¹⁰⁶

The “intellectual’s special task” to satisfy the “need for critical lucidity” also accounts for the role accorded to South Korean independent cinema. The national is equivalent to the cultural field where the independent cinema works for a critical lucidity. However, independent cinema is not a mirror reflecting the objects forming the national, but is the subject itself that fills the bowl of the national. The various human relationships that the films of independent cinema capture in their narratives are nothing but aspects of the national, the object of critical lucidity.

¹⁰⁶ Paul Willemen, “The Third Cinema Question” in Michael T. Martin (Ed.), *New Latin American Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1997), p. 241.

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