

CRITICAL ASIAN CINEMAS



Soyoung Kim

# Korean Cinema in Global Contexts

Post-Colonial Phantom,  
Blockbuster and Trans-Cinema

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# Korean Cinema in Global Contexts

# Critical Asian Cinemas

*Critical Asian Cinemas* features book-length manuscripts that engage with films produced in Asia and by Asian auteurs. "Asia" refers here to the geographic and discursive sites located in East and Central Asia, as well as South and Southeast Asia. The books in this series emphasize the capacity of film to interrogate the cultures, politics, aesthetics, and histories of Asia by thinking cinema as an art capable of critique. Open to a wide variety of approaches and methods, the series features studies that utilize novel theoretical models toward the analysis of all genres and styles of Asian moving image practices, encompassing experimental film and video, the moving image in contemporary art, documentary, as well as popular genre cinemas. We welcome rigorous, original analyses from scholars working in any discipline.

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*Soyoung Kim*

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in the hospital with a hole literally drilled into my throat to enable me to breathe. I saw people dying around me, but one day the snow fell. I asked my mother to take me outside. She pulled my wheelchair away from the eyes of the nurses. As we watched the white snow pile up on the tarnished red bricks of the hospital in Seoul, she told me about her trip to meet her father, who had left his home when it was under colonial rule in the early 1940s. She saw the corpses sprawled on the Manchurian plain ablaze with the surreal crimson sun from the train window. I dedicate this book to my mother, who co-directed that interflowing sequence of cinema, fever, the train, the snow and the sun. She is my light and so is cinema.





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# Introduction

**Keywords:** trans-cinema, postcolonial archive, cine-mania, inter-Asia, trans-Asia screen culture, comparative film studies

With the benefit of hindsight, it strikes me as quizzical – how could I have set out to conceptualize “Korean cinema” in English, at a time when Korean cinema was still unknown in the Anglophone world? In between writing and editing more than thirteen books in Korean on the issues of gender, colonial modernity and cine-media, I also wrote essays in English, initially to dialogue with friends including the late Paul Willemen and Chris Berry, and then to contribute to *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* and other journals. Produced over two decades, the essays collected here do not appear in the chronological order of their publication. Instead, they are organized thematically. This introduction offers a context to bring out the connections between the essays and also to outline the formation of the South Korean cinema culture that was triggered by the cultural turn after the people’s movement, which ushered in democracy at the end of the 1980s.

When I returned to Seoul from New York to research my PhD thesis proposal in 1993, I was trying to conceptualize “colonial modernity” and its effects on Korean cinema during the Japanese colonial occupation (1910-1945). I searched for available films, but there were none in the Korean Film Archive. When I brought up my interest in Korean cinema for my PhD thesis, my advisor understandably told me that it would be impossible to write a thesis about an unknown cinema on which there was almost no scholarship in English. That was even before I confessed that there were no colonial period films available in the archive. However, in stark contrast to the empty shelves at the archive, Korean film culture, energized by an emerging cinephilia, was about to take off around 1995 with new film-related institutions, magazines and journals. I was asked to be involved with founding the School of Film and Multimedia at the Korea National University of Arts, where I set up a Cinema Studies Department. The Busan International Film Festival was launched in 1996. In 1996, I was involved as

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a founding programme director for the Seoul International Women's Film Festival and a founding co-programmer for the Jeonju International Film Festival. During this dynamic formation of film culture through various film festivals, I wrote a piece titled "'Cine-mania' or Cinephilia: Film Festivals and the Identity Question," demonstrating the conjuncture of cinema, politics and economics in an emergent "cine-maniac" identity. I presented it at an international conference during the Gwangju Biennale in 1997, where internationally renowned scholars such as Meaghan Morris, Chen Kuan-hsing, Naoki Sakai, and Gayatri Spivak met various Korean academics and cultural practitioners for the first time.

With the shift in mood from authoritarian regime to civil society and at the inception of the cultural turn, I was able to publish a series of books in Korean. They included *Cinema: Blue Flower in the Land of Technology*, a monograph on cinematic modernity and gender issues, as well as the anthologies *Hollywood: Frankfurt* (a translation) and *Cine-Feminism: Reading Popular Cinema*. While working on these books and building these institutions, I had the privilege of joining the editorial collectives of *Traces: A Multilingual Journal of Cultural Theory and Translation* and *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. This experience informed my research and writing for years to come. I was particularly inspired by the politics of translation theoretically accentuated in *Traces* and the construction of a decolonizing inter-Asian referencing system in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*.

"Modernity in Suspense: The Logic of Fetishism in Korean Cinema" was written for the first issue of *Traces*, under the theme of "Specters of the West and the Politics of Translation." To examine local film in a situation at once peripheral and colonial but presently in a global capitalist state, I employed theoretical concepts that could illuminate a set of predicaments in a cinema and a culture that had been created in a manic mode of condensed capitalist development, not to mention seemingly semi-perpetual partition. One such concept is translation as cultural practice. The essay unfolds the translation of the word "fetish," revealing its complexity through the layers of meaning attached to it in its translation into Korean.

In 2000, I set up the Trans:Asia Screen Culture Institute at the Korea National University of Arts. "Trans" in the name points at criss-crossing and multilayered signifying processes of translation and transformation. In the process, "trans" transforms itself from being a prefix to becoming a noun and a verb. I chose the Sino-Korean term 역 (易) to communicate this multitude of meanings. "The Birth of the Local Feminist Sphere in the Global Era: *Yeoseongjang* and "Trans-Cinema" was written with "trans-cinema" thrown into relief. This essay responds to a marked proliferation of different forms



of feminist production in South Korea. Feminist websites provide a case of activism in the way that they are linked to both existing and newly formed feminist publishing houses, street protests, performances and women's film festivals. I propose the use of the terms "*yeoseongjang*" (which I take to mean "women's sphere") and "trans-cinema" as a counterstrategy to the operations of legitimation, de-legitimation and exclusion that permeate the dominant discourses, institutional practices and habits of signification underlying the formation of canons and archives, cinematic and otherwise. In particular, "trans-cinema" articulates modes of cultural production as alternatives to the Korean blockbuster, often by reinhabiting the various digital communication devices most closely identified with the global capitalism essential to the blockbuster's hegemony.

After laying down the groundwork for the discipline of cinema studies in Korea during the formative period of the cultural turn, I was able to publish a book in Korean on colonial modernity and the horror cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, entitled *Spectres of Modernity: The Fantastic Mode of Korean Cinema*. Completing this book attuned my research to a more trans-Asian and inter-Asian mode of comparison, encouraged by my encounters at *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*-related workshops and conferences. The four essays "Inter-Asia Comparative Framework: Postcolonial Film Historiography in Taiwan and South Korea," "Postcolonial Genre as Contact Zone: *Hwalkuk* and Action Cinema," "Geopolitical Fantasy: Continental (Manchurian) Action Movies during the Cold War Era," and "Comparative Film Studies: Detour, Demon of Comparison and Dislocative Fantasy" use the emergent framework of comparative film studies to illuminate the unresolved site of the colonial cinema of Joseon (Korea) under Japanese rule. They accomplish this by mobilizing terms such as "detour and "dislocative fantasy," departing from the usual mode of the demon of comparison to situate and conceptualize Korean cinema in inter-Asian, trans-Asian and transnational comparative film studies.

Within this context, I would like to start this book here with the notion of *gae* (개 [開]), or "openness," to illustrate the historical and epistemological conditions of early Korean cinematic culture, which were largely responding to this opening to Western modernity. What *gae* signified in relation to emerging modernity was the period of *gae hang* (opening the ports, 1876-1897) and the period of *gae hwa* (becoming open, or the time of enlightenment, 1897-1910). This opening to the world was a highly ambivalent process, to say the least. It sparked an immediate sense of emergency and crisis, mixed with the slightest bit of suspended hope. Hence, as is discussed in the first chapter of the book in relation to early cinematic culture, its



trajectory was predictably different from the notion of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*), even though the 1897 general assembly of the people shares some characteristics with the public sphere.

The modern public, public space, and the cinema formed in this Korean trajectory of *openness* had to come to terms with the contradictions within it. The fear and hope embedded in openness have haunted the historical sites of Korean culture and cinema from *The Border* (*Kukkyung*, 1922), purportedly the first “Korean” film set on the border, to *The Yellow Sea* (*Hwanghae*, 2010). The sense of crisis conjured up by the contradictions in *gae* (openness) is overlaid with the long political reign of a succession of states of emergency and the present kind of “entertainment republic” where the Korean wave rules. It might seem odd at first to see an overdetermined leap of this kind from state of emergency to “entertainment republic,” but critical inquiry into colonial and postcolonial Korean cinema requires an understanding of this seemingly incongruous trajectory. This book uses concepts like “state of emergency” and “modernity in suspense” to show how cinema both manifests and participates in constituting the genealogy and archaeological layers of these condensed images of politics and culture. The vibrant landscape of early cinematic culture elsewhere is well-elaborated in the works such as *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (1991) by Charles Musser. But very few works are written on precolonial and non-Western cinema, where the “international” presence of imperial powers renders a remarkably asymmetrical topography of local cinematic cultures. The combined practice of speech and screen in the form of a film accompanied by a *pyonsa* narrator (also known in Japanese as a *benshi*) staggered onto the early modern scene, which was troubled by premodern Joseon in transition as well as Western and Japanese powers. The resulting asymmetry is the first layer of modernity in suspense, which is addressed in the first chapter and the first part of this book.

With the primal scenes of early cinema illuminated, this book poses theoretical and historical inquiries into the cinematic culture known as Korean cinema, whose significant films from its founding moments are lost, even though the stories about them are abundant. These lost films – such as *Arirang* (1926) – have become urban legends and templates for the cinematic culture to come. In the process of writing these essays, I have seen the retrieval of a handful of colonial films, which also contributed to my thoughts about the idea of suspension. The situation compels one to think about how to theorize the postcolonial archive, in order to make a phantom cinema conceptually visible. Given the country’s complex encounter with modernity outlined above, writings on Korean cinema inevitably require



critical frameworks that are attentive to loss, absence, ruptures, fragments, noises, traces and suspensions, which mark the perilous but surprisingly prosperous trajectory of Korean cinemas, including colonial cinema from 1910 to 1945, and the postcolonial cinema of South Korea from 1945 to the present. Part 1 of this book, “From Pre-Cinematic Culture to Trans-Cinema,” collects a series of essays that attend to this problem and how to understand it.

I believe comparative film studies can offer us an ironic detour to theorize the colonial era film-with/out-films situation. Let us call this a comparative mode for an impoverished cinema of an impoverished archive. So far, two kinds of academic inquiries have been made that attempt to address the problem of the extreme paucity of films in the film archive, both driven by a quest for historiography and theorization. One is the quest for the origin of a pure Korean cinema. This approach has driven the first and second generation of film historians and critics. The second approach is exemplified by several current academic works, which have dealt largely with the propaganda films of the late 1930s and mid-1940s, with a heavy focus on censorship. They investigate the cinematic apparatus of the time. Some writings also focus on film and literature in the 1920s and 1930s, including an emphasis on the film novel, which was a genre of newspaper writing, and the influence of film techniques on literary expression, spectatorship and regulations. These essays are well researched and focused, but they are also seamlessly sutured, without acknowledging the postcolonial condition of knowledge production with almost no films in a highly fragmented and scattered archive.

This suturing act might be the anxiety of academics towards the theory and historiography of their own subject – a “fantasmatic unity” produced by disavowal of missing reels and an insistence on an ultimate canon centring on *Arirang* (1926) as a phantom film. In lieu of the film, the literary texts about the film have predictably become favoured research objects. These works are still useful, but they also create an intriguing trajectory of film studies with/out films, because they fail to problematize this loss, either as a point of departure or as an intervention. Theorizing and historicizing “unseen” and “unmade” films (i.e., scripts), or the few leftover films from the colonial period, appears to encourage other forms of investment. This process is a restoration of film culture that relies on written texts: text-based epistemophilia displaces scopophilia by relying on the script, the synopsis and a small and inconsistent collection of retrieved films. This obviously poses a problem, because film theory needs to deal with the “indexical dimension of substances and forms of expression and content to see an articulation of socio-historical dynamics and aesthetic processes at work





in textual operation,” as Paul Willemsen puts it. Composing film theory without films is a daunting task, if not impossible. Even more demanding is conceiving a film theory out of the colonial past, where “knowledge production is one of the major sites in which imperialism operates and exercises [...] its power,” which affects the current condition of knowledge production (Chen Kuan-hsing 2010, 211). Therefore, theorizing Joseon film requires two modes of consciousness: attention to film theory with/out films and the postcolonial condition of knowledge production. In an uncanny way, the contemporary predicament of a hollow archive echoes the colonial one where lack of local film production was lamented.

My writings are inspired by a sort of semiosis of fragments and guided by genealogy in looking at phantom films in an empty and even hollow archive. I have tried to make meaning out of the damaged afterlife of Korean cinema. I am interested in what is excluded from the canon, and what exceeds archival conservation. My focus includes not only films, but also their audiences, not only texts, but also contexts, and not only objects, but also events. Sometimes I have been tempted to write about historicizing film theory during the colonial period as a detective narrative. In a maze of lost films, one needs the eyes of a detective to find a lead in the hollow stacks of the colonial archive. The colonial film archive meanders through dark alleys infested with feverish people in search of a lost object; a phantom film, which easily lures us into another maze.

As much as I am keenly aware of the forceful and coercive threads of the political and the economic in weaving a history of Korean cinemas, I also find it crucial to recognize a disjuncture and a gap of cultural and politico-economic history as well as the specificity of film history. To touch upon the layers of historical time and cinematic time, *Korean Cinema in Global Contexts: Postcolonial Phantom, Blockbuster and Trans-Cinema* looks at the transformation of South Korean cinema from national to transnational, from cottage industry to local blockbuster mode, and from celluloid-based cinema to digitally diversified trans-cinema. The film texts analysed in the first part of the book offer privileged access to a critical understanding of Korean modern and contemporary history.

The first essay, “Cartography of Catastrophe: Precolonial Surveys, Postcolonial Vampires and the Plight of Korean Modernity,” looks across three centuries at the trajectory of the South Korean cinema from its contentious emergence in 1897 to its current global dissemination around 2011. The cinemas of the precolonial Great Han Empire (1897-1910) and the contemporary postcolonial Republic of Korea (1948-) are compared and the negotiations between the national and the transnational, which have



run from the catastrophic to the cartographical as South Korea maintains a state of emergency, are also discussed. These historical pairings expose the uncanny resemblances and effervescent differences generating, in the words of Derrida (2002), “the enervating mobility preventing one from ever stopping,” leading to “a perpetual suspension, a suspension without rest.” The first chapter takes the readers into an unfolding across three centuries from pre-cinema to trans-cinema, from an American surveyor to the candlelight rallies against the Free Trade Agreement between Korean and America and from E. Burton Holmes’s visit to Joseon to a Korean priest’s imaginary journey to Africa in Park Chanwook’s *Bakjwi* (*Thirst*, 2009).

To situate postcolonial South Korean cinema in its critical contexts, one of the crucial legal and political measures that should be taken into consideration is the long reign of the state of emergency from 1948 to 1991. The state of emergency was proclaimed nineteen times and the security status of martial law was proclaimed seven times. This highly mobilized state of emergency was made possible by the partition and the Cold War, as well as the promise to build a prosperous postcolonial capitalist and modern state out of an impoverished former colony. A state of emergency suspends law. It also suspends every moment of daily life. This suspension affects the legal and the political arena as well as cultural and daily life. During the period of capitalist modernization, this suspended mode was sustained by people’s aspirations mixed with terror, fear, anxiety and tension. It was also a process of torturous complicity arguably characterized as mass dictatorship.

Because of colonization and partition, the Korean nation is always understood as something caught up in and, of course, divided by the forces of modernity and imperialism. It is seen as somehow in tension with modernity – both Western and Japanese modernity – and, consequently, modernity continues to be imagined as an unattainable yet somehow desirable state that always exists elsewhere. Non-synchronous synchronicity became the temporal logic before neoliberal globalization. The pressure of global synchronicity produced another layer in the form of the cultural and cinematic forms this book examines. And, in a larger context, this book is also an endeavour to work across culture and politics. For example, understanding how the golden age of South Korean cinema coincides with the state of emergency is a puzzle.

The notion of the state of emergency is the critical thread which articulates the politico-economic with the cultural. After mapping from pre-cinema to trans-cinema and from precolonial to neoliberal globalization in “Cartography of Catastrophe: Precolonial Surveys, Postcolonial Vampires,” it is the second essay, “The State of Fantasy in Emergency: Fantasmatic



Others in South Korean Film,” which continues to interrogate the dynamic of the state of fantasy and emergency enunciated through cinema. Looking at contemporary South Korean films, this essay relies on the conceptual double structure of the “state of fantasy” as articulated in cinema and the “state of emergency” in South Korea’s history to explore the engagement of those films with a set of global-local issues of corporeality and migration that arise in the age of cognitive capitalism.

It is the emergency culture and politics that exploded in the Gwangju Uprising and the resultant massacre of civilians in 1980 which finds its way into Lee Chang-dong’s film *Peppermint Candy* (*Bakasatang*, 2000). The fourth essay in this collection, titled “Do Not Include Me in Your “Us””: *Peppermint Candy* and the Politics of Difference,” analyses the film to understand the historical burdens borne by Korean society. I argue that the trauma played out in *Peppermint Candy* is an endemically male trauma, and the gendered trauma of Korean society rather than “general” trauma. This gendered trauma, which is displayed under the pretence of “progressive” political historiography, renders women’s traumas invisible and unrepresentable in public discourse. The male-gendered trauma also blurs the classification of perpetrators and victims by making use of “homosocial” bonding as a platform for spectatorial identification. Considering the complex problematic of historical representation on film, both the critical positioning of historical materials as well as the modes of cinematic representation deployed is taken into consideration.

If the critical engagements with the notions of catastrophe, state of emergency and suspension suggest trauma embedded in representational politics, another cinematic layer to be analysed is festival culture. The fifth essay, “‘Cine-mania’ or Cinophilia: Film Festivals and the Identity Question,” interrogates the conjuncture of cinema, politics and economy in an emergent identity position known as “cine-mania.” In the sixth essay, “The Birth of the Local Feminist Sphere in the Global Era: *Yeoseongjang* and ‘Trans-Cinema,’” I adopt and adapt “*yeoseongjang*” and “trans-cinema” as specific counterstrategies deployed within feminist cultural-political practices to reframe our understanding of Korean cinema history and intervene in that history.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, Korean cinema began to gain world recognition on the international film festival circuit, and the intellectual challenge posed by this transformation animates the second conceptual framework addressed by the chapters in Part 2, “Korean Cinema in a Trans-Asia Framework.” World recognition was amplified by the emergent Korean wave of film, music and television dramas. In 2012, “Gangnam Style” became a ubiquitous marker



for the Korean wave. Now that Korean cinema has become established as a global cinema that challenges and expands our understanding of the dialectics of national and transnational cinema, it is crucial to examine South Korean cinema with an attention to the intricate dis/continuities, ruptures and intermediations of various constituencies, layers and shifters in national, inter-Asian regional and transnational contexts. To address such foci in ways that can be meaningful both locally and cross-culturally, a comparative approach is taken in Part 2. Animated by the framework of comparative film studies, it interrogates an array of intricate historical connections between Korean cinema, Hong Kong action cinema and other East Asian cinemas as well as Hollywood. This part traces the trajectory of South Korean cinema from its contentious emergence in the peripheral Hermit Kingdom known as Joseon through two “golden ages” to its global dissemination. Korean cinema has been conditioned by and has responded to colonial modernity (1910-1945), Americanism, an authoritarian regime and globalization. Concomitantly, Korean cinematic articulation of gender, class and modernity is deeply affected by a highly condensed capitalist mode of production and reproduction. The perilous but surprisingly prosperous Korean cinema illuminates the traversal of historical crises and epistemic upheavals, including not only political upheavals like colonialism between 1910 and 1945, the Korean War, and the various authoritarian regimes, *gae*, the impact of the people’s movement in the 1980s and the significant turn to popular culture that provided the platform for the Korean wave and global Korean cinema.

This book tries to go beyond a national cinema framework to see the emergence of a cinematic modern world from a once peripheral country. It departs from existing academic works in its attempt to touch upon the various layers of historical time. Over many years of gestation, the essays in this part of the book have developed a coherent critical and contemporary framework that addresses relevant historical questions. One issue – postcolonial film historiography – is dealt with the first essay in this section, “Inter-Asia Comparative Framework: Postcolonial Film Historiography in Taiwan and South Korea.” This essay lays a template for my turn to Asia, which finds its way into Part 2 not only as an area of interest but also in terms of the politics of affect and social geographic imagination. The arrival of “Asia” as a circuit of knowledge production in cultural studies, cinema studies and gender studies demand the critical framework of decolonization emphasized by the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* journal movement, and it also encourages a comparative mode of writing about East Asian cinemas.



This essay analyses how postcolonial historiography is inscribed in cinema. Two representative films from Taiwan and South Korea, *The Puppet Master* by Hou Hsiao-Hsien and *Chwihwaseon* by Im Kwon-taek, are compared, not only to understand the working of decolonization in cinema but also to understand the impact and effects of colonial history. The notion of postcolonial film-making as an alternative construction of the archive is evoked to locate film practice in the intersecting spaces of repository, historiography, cinematic representation and social memory. The two films are cited as instances of illuminating retrospection on fractured pasts; the almost-invisible archive and the future are cinematically envisioned by suggesting a sustainable postcolonial episteme in the age of global spectatorship.

In the eighth essay, "Postcolonial Genre as Contact Zone: *Hwalkuk* and Action Cinema," I argue that shifting the focus from a doubled vision of Europe and Asia to that of Hong Kong and Korea aims to transform the grounds of comparison and contribute to inter-Asian cultural studies by taking a look at the Hong Kong connection in Korean action movies. The ninth essay, "Geopolitical Fantasy: Continental (Manchurian) Action Movies during the Cold War Era," looks at Asianism in Korea's "continental" action movies of the 1960s and 1970s. One of the first of these films was made by Jung Changhwa. Jung later worked with the Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong, where he made *Five Fingers of Death*, which went on to be a big hit in the United States and was later quoted by Quentin Tarantino in his *Kill Bill* (2003-2004).

The ninth essay casts a wryly hopeful glance at pan-Asian hit *My Sassy Girl*, the first Korean wave movie of its kind, to open up a space of proto-feminist discourse. The film's strong appeal to young women in Asia suggests an inter-Asian anagram.

The final essay in this collection, "Comparative Film Studies: Detour, Demon of Comparison and Dislocative Fantasy," takes the framework of comparative film studies to illuminate the unresolved site of the colonial cinema of Joseon (Korea) under Japanese rule by mobilizing concepts such as detour and dislocative fantasy to depart from the usual demon of comparison.

Overall, this book tries to mobilize a polysemic notion of Korean "national" cinema by exploring the intersection of theoretical and historical understandings of Korean cinema. Writing the book presented several challenges. It necessitated not only the analysis of the available films but also of the absence of those that have been lost. Furthermore, critical assessment could not be accomplished by locating Korean cinema within longstanding theoretical debates. Instead, a new theoretical framework needed to be



developed. In writing about a troubling “national” cinema in trans-Asian and global contexts, what I have tried to keep in mind over the past fifteen years is the possibilities of “cinema otherwise” and the geopolitical “fantasy of elsewhere” that Korean cinema offers in its continual states of emergency. This work has been a search for a heterotopia where the wind blows to open up a breathing space against all the odds of colonial rule, authoritarian regimes, fascism, partition and the manic capitalist drive in a condensed mode. I can only hope that this book might engage its readers to envision it with me.

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