Book Review

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Dreaming to Change the World through Cinema: *Film Workers in Cold War South Korea*

Celluloid Democracy: Cinema and Politics in Cold War South Korea. By Hieyoon Kim. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023. 182 pages. ISBN: 9780520394377.

Areum JEONG

How might cinema envision democracy? What possibilities would those cinematic worlds offer? How might such practices redefine Korean democracy? Hieyoon Kim's *Celluloid Democracy: Cinema and Politics in Cold War South Korea* explores how South Korean film workers envisioned democracy through cinema, roughly from Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945 to the end of the dictatorship in 1987. Among these film workers were "film critics calling for a more equitable system, teachers creating grassroots film networks, filmmakers reinventing the right to express themselves, women activating a new film language and platform against misogyny, and students changing the representation of the marginalized and the dispossessed" (p. 2).

Kim explains how this group of film workers created an alternative space for imagining democracy through inclusive representation in and distribution of cinema. This space, which Kim calls "celluloid democracy," is where film workers expanded cinematic spaces from theatres to classrooms and campuses and made the "un- and underrepresented visible in the public sphere to circumvent the state's censorship" (p. 2).

By doing so, their works revealed how powerful leaders and institutions used cinema to achieve their own means. Kim shows how these film workers

Areum JEONG is an assistant professor in the Korean Program at Arizona State University. E-mail: areum.jeong@asu.edu.

challenged the status quo and how celluloid democracy "evolved as a mode of cultural practice anchored to ethical and aesthetic concerns that challenged undemocratic representation and distribution" (p. 2). Kim demonstrates that cinema is not an unchanging entity, but rather a set of representations that is constantly evolving to reflect changing circumstances and politics.

Kim conducted extensive research in Korea and the US over many years and interviewed numerous Korean film workers. Readers are introduced to stories that most scholarly works of Korean film have overlooked or neglected.

While the research builds on previous scholarship on Cold War cinema, Kim expands and contributes to the field in several significant ways. Her book explores the role of cinema changing the status quo (p. 5), as film workers wonder how cinema could be an "instrument of social transformation," striving for "a more just representation and a more just distribution" (p. 6). While the film workers' actions might not be viewed as political activism in the traditional sense, Kim does see it as a form of activism while drawing attention on little-known figures and case studies. In addition, she describes how film workers came up with alternative definitions of democracy despite the constraints in Cold War South Korea (p. 7). Finally, Kim examines the ways in which the Cold War and its aftermath shaped the archives and memories of film workers (p. 8). The case studies that the research examines are not located in national archives of the US or Korea. This raises the question of what does and does not get archived, reminding us about the gendered and institutionalized canon and scholarship and the elitism of institutions.

Yet when conducting archival research, Kim discovered that these film workers' stories are not mentioned in the official archives. In discussing her research methodology, Kim references Diana Taylor's idea of the archive and the repertoire to emphasize the importance of embodied knowledge. To shift the systems of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, Taylor examines the tensions between the archive (enduring materials such as texts and other documents) and the repertoire (ephemeral social practices such as

spoken language, gestures, and ritual that enact embodied memory in performance), centering on the latter. Rather than separating the archive and the repertoire, Taylor views them as two connected systems that transmit information. Taylor argues that the repertoire operates both on its own and with the archive, to create and sustain cultural memory. While interviewing film workers, Kim moves away from trainings in Euro-American oral history. In this sense, her research decolonizes Korean Studies, and becomes an archive and performance of care that documents and remembers how these film workers were cultural producers in Cold War Korea.

The first chapter, "To Democratize Cinema: Filmmakers, Critics, and Bootleggers in the US Occupation," discusses how Korean film workers recognized the oppressive film policies of the US occupiers and challenged the status quo in the late 1940s. The United States Army Military Government in Korea, contrary to its claim of bringing democracy to Korea, implemented regulations that controlled the Korean film industry and benefited Hollywood feature films rather than Korean productions. Challenging such neo-imperial control, Korean critics produced a discourse of "film colony" that condemned the US occupation. At the same time, Korean bootleggers interfered with the operation of American films. Kim views such acts as an "expression of agency, a choice of their own that appropriated the system of which they were a part" (p. 29).

Chapter two, "In Search of Democracy: Cinema in the Postwar Classroom and Its Grassroots Network," offers an inspiring account of seven teachers who worked as primary media distributors, exhibitors, and programmers in the 1950s. These teachers designed their curriculum with new film-mediated discussion practices and built a grassroots network of AV educators. To these film workers, democracy was "a set of sensibilities that needed to be cultivated in themselves and in children through deliberate cinematic practices" (p. 36). Kim recounts their quotidian practice of dreaming of and working for democracy through their teachings in an extremely touching manner.

The third chapter, "At the Margins of Freedom: *A Day Off* (1968) and

Film Censorship," focuses on how Yi Manhui's 1968 film *A Day Off* (*Hyuil*) was censored by the Ministry of Culture and Public Information, and analyzes the three available texts of the film—two versions of the script and a film print. Kim's reading of the texts reveals how the film's creators imagined freedom as they navigated the revision process. In addition, she argues that the creators actively resisted censorship by withdrawing the film from public release and refusing to revise it according to the government's orders.

Chapter four, "Beyond the Marginalization of Women: Khaidu as a Feminist Experimental Film Collective," examines how Khaidu, a women's film collective, fought against the marginalization and misrepresentation of women in mainstream Korean cinema by creating feminist, experimental cinema and carving out spaces for women in film festivals, symposiums, and performance.

The last chapter, "Toward a New Cinema: The Seoul Film Collective's Aesthetic and Political Subversion," looks at how young film enthusiasts, raised under the military rule of Park Chung-hee and deeply affected by the Gwangju Democratic Uprising, came together to envision a new kind of cinema that represented marginalized voices, rejecting commercial and propagated cinema. In doing so, Kim analyzes how their works that represented diverse beings of society constitute a kind of counter-history challenging official histories.

This book stands in solidarity with those who dream and fight to change the world. This could not be timelier as Korean cinema is more popular than ever after the commercial and critical success of *Parasite* (2019) and *Squid Game* (2021). Mainstream Korean cinema remains male-dominated, with marginalized or women's voices absent or occupying very small roles. In addition, there has been a disturbing revisionist trend in Korean documentaries regarding former dictators. I would highly recommended *Celluloid Democracy* to readers in Korean studies and film and media studies.

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