

# Film Pioneer Lee Man-hee and the Creation of a Contemporary Korean Cinema Legend\*

Ae-Gyung SHIM and Brian YECIES

## Abstract

*At the peak of Korean cinema's contemporary golden age in the mid-2000s, 1960s auteur director Lee Man-hee and his films were rediscovered and have since become appreciated in ways that Lee himself never experienced. In 2010, his classic Late Autumn was remade as a transnational coproduction for a pan-Asian audience. Four decades after his death, Lee remains one of the most influential directors in Korea's history. To understand his legacy and its sociohistorical conditions, the authors analyze how Lee's provocative genre experimentation reinvigorated the Korean film industry in the 1960s under Park Chung-hee's authoritarian regime, a spirit that remains alive today. Lee's perseverance during this tumultuous period illustrates the complex relationship between the film industry and the state as well as some of the strategies filmmakers used to meet the challenges created by Park's regime. Lee's two best-known films, Marines Who Never Returned (1963) and Holiday (1968), are analyzed to show how creative impulses were sustained by developing a blend of social realism and modernist techniques to explore the human condition. This approach set his films apart from the propaganda and commercial productions of the time, bringing a fresh perspective to Korean cinema that continues to resonate with filmmakers and audiences today.*

**Keywords:** Korean cinema, film genre, film industry, Park Chung-hee, Lee Man-hee, anticommunism

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## Introduction

Since government censorship was rescinded in 1996, South Korean (hereafter, Korean) filmmakers have become well known at home and abroad for their cross-genre experimentation and cinematic inventiveness, innovations that have given rise to a *belle époque* or golden age in terms of both creativity and market expansion. As part of this film renaissance, which reached a peak in 2005, a number of recent transnational coproductions have reprised classic genre conventions, focusing on simple story lines featuring an international cast and/or exotic locations with wide audience appeal.<sup>1</sup>

One film that fits this mold is the English-language Korea-US-Hong Kong coproduction *Late Autumn* (2010), a transnational remake of a highly successful and critically acclaimed 1966 film by auteur Lee Man-hee (1931–1975). This long-lost art-house melodrama, which was previously remade three times in Japan and Korea, explores the relationship between a female prisoner on a three-day prison furlough and a man on the run.<sup>2</sup> The 2010 remake of this classic study of two lost souls who meet by chance stars once-controversial Chinese actress Tang Wei—well known from Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007)—and Hallyu (or Korean Wave) heartthrob Hyun Bin and is set against the idiosyncratic backdrop of Seattle in the United States. While it failed at the Korean box office, *Late Autumn* was the highest grossing Korean film ever released in the Chinese film market at the time, creating a box office record of over US\$9.5 million (60 million RMB) in revenue over a two-week period in March 2012 (Hwang 2012). *Late Autumn* used the sensibilities of Lee's original film and attempted to appeal to a pan-Asian audience by casting two very popular actors involved in a whirlwind romance

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  2. The other remakes of Lee's original film are: Kōichi Saitō's *The Rendezvous* (1972), made and set in Japan; and Kim Ki-young's *The Promise of the Flesh* (1975) and Kim Soo-yong's *Late Autumn* (1982), which are both set in Korea.

set in an exotic urban setting. The film was directed and written by Kim Tae-yong, who is famed for his horror film *Memento Mori* (1999), and produced by seasoned Korean producer Lee Joo-ick, whose company, Boram Entertainment, is at the forefront of Korea's international coproduction scene. *Late Autumn* was coproduced by Hong Kong heavyweight Shi Nansun along with prominent Korean music director and investor Cho Sung Woo. The project built on existing relationships that Lee Joo-ick had established with Chinese partners in his earlier international coproductions, such as action director Tsui Hark's *Seven Swords* (2005) and Jacob Cheung's *Battle of the Warriors* (2006), and was given additional international heft by his casting of leading Chinese actress Tang Wei and Korean television celebrity Hyun Bin.

Although one critic panned the film's "clumsy ambition to 'internationalise' South Korean cinema," *Late Autumn*'s commercial success outside Korea points to pan-Asian audiences' growing interest in genre films that have a strong cinematic tradition behind them.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it demonstrates how, in the 2010s, the films of Lee Man-hee have become an early part of this contemporary trend, which now features an increasing number of remakes of older Korean romances and rom-coms as well as new releases in China that are changing the face of Korean cinema. The growing list of these films includes: *Dancing Princess* (2005), *Cyrano Agency* (2010), *Architecture 101* (2012), *Marriage Blue* (2013), and *Miss Granny* (2014)—all of which have proved especially popular with Chinese audiences in their new localized versions.<sup>4</sup>

Today, Lee's films are recognized and respected by directors and critics for his versatility in exploring a wide range of film genres. Almost every Korean filmmaker seems to know his name, and the list of 100 top Korean

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3. See Elley (2010). Although Lee's *Late Autumn* is no longer extant, Korean Movie Database (KMDB) contains about 170 still images from the film, and numerous interviews with its film crew have been published over the years.

4. When *20 Once Again* (2015), a localized version of *Miss Granny* coproduced by CJ E&M and Beijing Century Media, was released in China in early 2015, it generated US\$59 million, making it the highest-earning Korea–China coproduction to date and placing it firmly as China's ninth highest grossing romantic comedies ever. See Priscilla Hendriks, "'20, Once Again!' Tops Charts," *Television Asia Plus*, February 11, 2015, <http://tva.onscreenasia.com/2015/02/20-once-again-tops-charts/>.

films (1934–2012) announced by the Korean Film Archive (KOFA) in 2014 includes six of Lee's films, encompassing a range of genres: the anticommunist war film *Marines Who Never Returned* (1963), the medical thriller *Devil's Stairs* (1964), the film noir *Black Hair* (1964), the melodrama *Homebound* (1967), the human condition film *Holiday* (1968), and the road movie/drama *A Road to Sampo* (1974). Lee's lesser known films include *Break Up the Chain* (1971), a Manchurian Western set in the Japanese colonial period and a major influence behind Kim Jee-woon's blockbuster, *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008). Yet, Lee has not always been celebrated. Even the authoritative *Korean Cinema: From Origins to Resistance* (2007), published by the Korean Film Council, offers few details about Lee beyond the terse claim that he was part of a coterie of master auteur directors whose prolific works contributed directly to the expansion of popular cinema in Korea (M. Kim 2007, 171).

To shed light on how and why Lee's films continue to make an important contribution to Korean cinema, the authors revisit his turbulent career and varied filmography and offer some insights into the beleaguered domestic film industry of the 1960s. This investigation builds on the works of Y. Lee (2004), M. Kim (2007), Paquet (2009), and Yu (2014) by showing how these elements had a major impact on Korean cinema in ways hitherto unrecognized. Over the course of his career until his untimely death in 1975, Lee directed fifty-one films, winning six major industry honors, including the prestigious Grand Bell and Blue Dragon awards (Daejongsang and Cheongnyongsang in Korean, respectively). Among the domestic film community, Lee is generally considered an apolitical filmmaker who prioritized creativity and the exploration of an original aesthetic. His achievements earned him the retrospective title of "Poet of Night"—a name bestowed on him at the Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF, now known as BIFF) in 2005—reflecting his talent for revealing the inner darkness that marked so many of his characters (Y. Cho 2005, 33). Here we focus precisely on this introspective quality and the techniques used to achieve it in order to illustrate how in two of his best-known films, *Marines Who Never Returned* (1963) and *Holiday* (1968), Lee grappled with constraints of censorship enforced by the authoritarian Park regime.

First, a case study of *Marines Who Never Returned* is used to analyze how Lee incorporated overt anticommunist propaganda into his films to procure the large-scale government financing impossible to generate from sources of private funding. With the release of *Marines Who Never Returned*, Lee and his long-time collaborating scriptwriter, Han U-jeong, established themselves as successful commercial filmmakers, exploiting the war film genre and its grand conventions. Then, working closely with another long-term screenwriter colleague, Baek Gyeol, Lee took screen melodrama to a new level—surpassing the so-called golden age of Korean melodrama recognized by previous scholars.<sup>5</sup> The second case study of *Holiday* (1968) examines how Lee experimented with melodrama as a response to harsh government censorship. By creatively melding multiple genres, Lee created a new breed of films that satisfied official film policy guidelines, which dictated the narrative content of all films, while imbuing the conventional melodrama with elements of social realism. In so doing, Lee put a Korean stamp on some of the self-conscious genre traditions developed in the 1950s by American directors, such as Vincente Minnelli, Nicholas Ray, and Douglas Sirk, while also extending the realist work begun by Korean auteurs Yu Hyun-mok, Shin Sang-ok, and Kim Su-yong.

## A New Beginning

On May 16, 1961, General Park Chung-hee led a military coup and successfully seized control of South Korea. Within months of its swift rise to power, his military government had systematized its near-total administrative control over the production, distribution (including both importing and exporting), and exhibition of all films, whether domestic or foreign in origin. This process began with the creation of the Ministry of Public Information (MPI) on May 20, 1961. It managed the censorship process, established the National Film Production Centre (NFPC) on June 22, 1961, and oversaw the passing of the Motion Picture Law (MPL) on January 20, 1962.

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5. See Abelmann and McHugh (2005), Byun (2001), Paquet (2009), and Park (2010).

Almost overnight, the domestic film industry, which had been experiencing newfound creativity since the end of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), turning out accomplished art films, such as Yu Hyun-mok's *Aimless Bullet* (1961), was reduced to the status of propaganda factory in which all productions were classified as either hard (overt) or soft (covert) propaganda (Shim and Yecies 2012). Soon Korea began experiencing rapid and large-scale industrialization, as well as internationalization of trade through policy development across all industry sectors. These areas included agriculture and food production, defense, education, finance, public transportation infrastructure, heavy industry, manufacturing, and energy, as well as the promotion of arts, culture, and entertainment for the masses. Strict film censorship in concert with a raft of other draconian measures designed to both stimulate and control film production was an integral part of these government-led changes. In fact, the Anti-Communist Law was passed in 1961 as an amendment to the National Security Law, promulgated in 1948 and designed to weed out communists, other leftists, and antigovernment sympathizers in general. In this rapidly evolving environment and in particular following the introduction of the government's Anti-Communist Law, director Lee and his peers sought to avoid being labeled as procommunists.

In the same year as Park's seizure of power, Lee debuted as a director with *Kaleidoscope*, a melodrama dealing with conflict and reconciliation within the traditional family circle. The film was warmly received by the critics and with his growing output of war movies and thrillers, Lee rapidly became one of the most popular directors of the period. During the 1960s, the three leading film genres in Korea were melodramas, action films, and comedies respectively, followed by anticommunist and war films, thrillers and literary adaptations. Lee made his first real impact as a director with *Dial 112* (1962) and *The Devil's Stairway* (1964), which were regarded as commercial thrillers in the Hitchcock mode. Lee's interest in war films and thrillers was unusual in Korea during the 1960s. Despite heavy-handed intervention in the domestic film industry, involving a push to produce anticommunist, enlightenment, and literary films (promoting agricultural development policy and traditional culture), the government was unable to hold the lid on the creative energies of the country's filmmakers. In his own

way and often by going against the grain, Lee became an outstanding exponent of these two genres, which came to comprise the bulk of his work. However, Lee did more than create conventional melodramas and anticommunist films. In fact, he became well known for unconventionally blending social realism with the conventions of popular melodrama, turning this genre into “the most efficacious mode of realism” (Abelmann and McHugh 2005, 4). We would also argue that Lee’s anticommunist films were among a small handful of productions transcending crude polemics to become windows onto a society that had survived the trauma of civil war. In this respect, Lee uniquely possessed the qualities lacking in other popular filmmakers of the time, such as Shin Sang-ok, Kim Ki-duk, and Kim Su-yong.

According to previous studies, most anticommunist films produced in Korea in the early-to-mid 1960s were large-scale productions made with support from government bodies like the Ministry of Defense, the Marines, and the Korean Air Force.<sup>6</sup> Such assistance offset the financial burden of making a large-scale spectacle involving many actors and extended reenactments of battle scenes.<sup>7</sup> However, in Lee’s case, the film industry’s reciprocal relationship with the military reached a creative peak with *Marines Who Never Returned*. Often selected by contemporary Korean critics as one of the nation’s finest war films, *Marines* is also considered to be the largest-scale anticommunist war film made in Korea during the 1960s as a result of the extensive support it received from the Ministry of Defense and the Marines. As we have seen, in 2014 the KOFA selected it as one of the top 100 Korean films. Along with films like *A Hero without Serial Numbers* (1966) and *Legend of Ssarigol* (1967), *Marines* earned Lee a reputation as both a master war filmmaker and a top-selling commercial director, a combination not fully explored in previous studies.

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6. See, for instance, Diffrient (2005), Shim (2011), and Y. Chung (2010).

7. For instance, Lee’s first color production, *Harimao in Bangkok* (1967), shot on location in Thailand, was produced with assistance from the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. *Living in the Sky* (1968), about the lives of air force pilots, included impressive aerial scenes shot with help from Air Force Headquarters. For *Bridge over Gobo River* (1970), shot on the battlefields of Vietnam, soldiers and camera crews from the Korean Armed Forces Motion Picture Studio belonging to the Ministry of National Defense were recruited.

### ***Marines Who Never Returned* (1963) and Anticommunist Polemic**

Under President Park's authoritarian rule, productions of anticommunist stories were supported by generous financial subsidies and treated leniently by the state censors. Because the anticommunist genre promoted a cornerstone of national policy, the government was able to use war films in particular as an effective propaganda tool (J. Cho 2001; Y. Chung 2010; H. Kim 2003; Y. Lee 2004; Yu 2014). These films were defined by their ideological content rather than their setting, style or plot; they encouraged a sense of nationalism and positioned the nation in opposition to communist North Korea, while exploiting a mix of genres, including melodrama, comedy, horror, spy action, and of course, war films (Shim 2011). Accordingly, films set in the Korean War quickly gained popularity among audiences eager to watch locally made films containing all the excitement and spectacle for which foreign films were known.<sup>8</sup>

One key example of this ideological emphasis is *Marines Who Never Returned*, Lee's fifth film, which was made on a larger scale than any previous domestic war film. In the early 1960s, war films typically had budgets almost double that of other genres, making them too expensive to create. If the in-kind support received from the military had been translated into hard currency, the actual budget for a war film is likely to have quadrupled. In other words, films like *Marines Who Never Returned* could never have been made without external assistance. In fact, according to cameraman Hong Seong-wook (KOFA 2003, 245–246), the film's unprecedented scale threatened to derail the project on several occasions due to funding shortages. As a result of these delays, the film took six months to complete, as

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8. Kim Ki-duk's war film *Five Marines* (1961) employs a narrative familiar from such Hollywood productions as the World War II commando film *Darby's Rangers* (1958), which was released in Korea in 1960. *Darby's Rangers* tells the story of US Major Darby and the men of his ranger battalion, whom he recruited to fight against the Germans. Most of the battalion were either killed or captured, and only seven returned alive. Set on a smaller scale, *Five Marines* deals with a team of five commandos who blow up a North Korean explosives depot. Chung Hye Seung (2005) discusses how Korean scriptwriters and directors adapted this Hollywood subgenre to Korean cinema.



opposed to the one month or so needed to shoot most films in the 1960s.

When the film was eventually screened, the domestic press praised quite highly the spectacle it offered, the quality of cameraman Seo Jeong-min's widescreen cinematography, and the acting of the all-star cast. The filmmakers' efforts were rewarded at numerous award ceremonies: best new talent (for Seo Jeong-min), best director and best recording at the Grand Bell Award; best cinematographer at the Buil Film Award; and best director and best ensemble cast at the Blue Dragon Award. In order to heighten the film's realism, Korea's Marine Headquarters had sent two regiments onto the set and provided real explosives, tanks, machine guns, and ammunition. The government showed its approval of the film by bypassing the normal censorship procedures—not a single scene was cut (KOFA 2003, 247–248). Given that many films, including Kim Ki-young's *Defiance of the Teens* (1959), Yu Hyun-mok's *Aimless Bullet* (1961), and Shin Kyeong-gyun's *Happy Solitude* (1963), were heavily censored around this time, the lack of cuts was all the more surprising. As a result of this unprecedented contribution by the government, Lee was able to create a war spectacle comprising a series of battle scenes that projected images of brave South Korean marines under enemy fire.

Apparently, the film's spectacle was noticed. According to the Korean Movie Database, *Marines Who Never Returned* sold a massive 227,800 tickets in Seoul.<sup>9</sup> The film's box office performance and the positive publicity it generated for *Marines* proved an unqualified success for both the armed forces and the director, providing the impetus for a succession of anticommunist films (KOFA 2003, 247–248). Thus, *Marines* initiated a boom in war filmmaking that marked the mid-1960s with films like *The Search Unit* (1964), *The Red Scarf* (1964), *Blood-Soaked Mountain Guwol* (1965), and *Courage Is Alive* (1965). The film's success convinced the government of Lee's talent for promoting Korea's armed forces, and it also assured Lee that making films with such a well-resourced partner would help realize his ambitions to direct large-scale productions in the future.

9. See [www.kmdb.or.kr/vod/vod\\_basic.asp?nation=K&p\\_dataid=00852&keyword=돌아오지 않는 해병-url](http://www.kmdb.or.kr/vod/vod_basic.asp?nation=K&p_dataid=00852&keyword=돌아오지 않는 해병-url).

Although *Marines Who Never Returned* ran for two and a half hours, an extraordinary length by the standards of the day, the well-constructed plot and fully developed characters held the attention of audiences throughout. The film follows the events of the Korean War, opening with the Incheon Landing Operation in 1950, an amphibious attack that led to a major turning point in the war in favor of UN and South Korean forces. Thousands of marines are seen rushing to the Incheon beachhead, providing a grand spectacle accompanied by energetic marching music, while a series of close-up shots draw the audience nearer to the action.

After gaining a bridgehead, a marine squad is dispatched to a nearby town to reclaim it from the communists. There they find a little girl named Yeong-hui, the sole survivor of a massacre by communist soldiers. Homeless and without any surviving family, she is treated by the squad like their little sister, and they bring her back to their base. During their final battle against the Chinese army in North Korea, the soldiers make a pact to survive the confrontation and return to care for Yeong-hui. However, at the end of the film, only two members of the squad survive, mourning over the mass grave where they buried their comrades.

The early scenes showing war casualties in Yeong-hui's village create a sense of the brutality meted out by communist forces during the war. Here, the enjoyment of victory is set in contrast to a feeling of tragic loss. As the marines celebrate their success in retaking the village, they enter a factory and find dozens of corpses strewn about. The sharp sounds of flying bullets and hand grenades fade as the men stumble around this horrific scene. Bloodstained bodies hang from the ceiling and line the factory walls. One marine shouts in distress on finding his younger sister among the slain. This scene establishes the anticommunist context of the film by appealing directly to the audience, for whom painful memories of the war would have still been very much alive.

In contrast to the horrors of the battlefield, the scenes showing South Korean marines in their barracks are lively and uplifting. Back at camp, a strong sense of camaraderie is developing among the squad members. A living symbol of a scarred and hopeless nation, the naïve and cheerful war orphan Yeong-hui is fortunate to have found such strong and determined

protectors amidst the carnage of civil war. Yeong-hui calls the marines *oppa* (older brother), an intimate relationship that conjures up an image of men fighting to defend their families, itself synonymous with brave soldiers fighting for the nation. Tragically, this developing sense of family is destroyed during the unit's last battle against the Chinese Red Army. One by one, the marines fall in battle, making it impossible for them to keep their promise to Yeong-hui that they will return to greet her after victory.

While on one level *Marines Who Never Returned* is a conventional anti-communist propaganda film, it also develops the themes of orphaned children, broken families, and wasted youth, adding layers of complexity to its representation of war and the trauma that accompanies it. In revealing the dystopian society and fatalistic worldviews that increasingly haunted the characters in his later films, it differed from conventional so-called "red-scare films," such as *I Accuse* (1959) and *Beat Back* (1956) in Korea, and *I Married a Communist* (1949) and *My Son John* (1953) in the United States, with their stark binary oppositions of *them and us*. The reasons for Lee's thematic explorations are probably varied. Suffice it to say that Lee had served in the military as a codebreaker during the Korean War; he had seen death first-hand and experienced what it was like to be pinned down under fire. According to Lee's close friend, screenwriter Baek Gyeol, Lee's experiences of war had enabled him to reflect on the great questions of life and death and the purpose of war, and he wanted to share this vision of war on screen (J. Cho 2006, 14). Lee's reconstruction of realistic battle scenes in *Marines* portrayed the vast scale of the war as well as its emotionally painful side. In his later films, this emphasis was strengthened and developed into a quest to discover and reveal the human condition.

In pursuing this vision, Lee captured a sense of desperation and desolation at odds with the conventional binary view of North Korea as evil and South Korea and its allies as good. As a result, *Marines Who Never Returned* inspired domestic audiences to rethink the war on multiple levels. For example, in one scene, a Korean soldier is scorned by bar girls who are more interested in the American GIs. A sign outside the bar reading "Off limits to ROK [Republic of Korea] soldiers" underscores the widespread discrimination that took place between Korean and US soldiers who frequented places

of entertainment around US and UN military bases. This scene reveals the little-known dark side of US–Korean relations, a relationship that had been “codified over the years as a set of economic subsidies and sexual transactions” (Diffrient 2005, 44). Rather than celebrating a great victory, as the audience might have expected, the film ends by posing a philosophical question. A brief conversation between the two surviving Korean marines implies that war is simply not worth fighting—a more complex and potentially subversive message than was contained in the great majority of anti-communist films.<sup>10</sup> While receiving the kudos of being called an anticommunist filmmaker and thus seemingly churning out propaganda in support of the state ideology demanded by the Park government’s film policy regime, Lee was focusing on refining his visual tools and creative vision. The choices he made reveal the process of *negotiation* evident in the relationship between political expediency and individual artistic talent.

No matter what inspired these choices, the triumph of *Marines Who Never Returned* created new opportunities for Lee and other filmmakers to work with war-themed spectacles in their films. Its box office success, the critics’ praise for the film, and the government’s positive reaction all signified a consensus about his talent: he was simply the best Korean director working in this genre. After *Marines*, Lee directed at least one anticommunist film each year, creating spectacles that dealt with either the Korean War, the Vietnam War, or North Korean spies.

For the next five years following the release of *Marines*, Lee’s films increasingly explored the darkness surrounding the human condition. His anticommunist war films satisfied the government’s demand for propaganda narratives, while simultaneously enabling him to explore themes relating to the human condition. Yet, his strategy involved more than an emphasis on the gloomy nature of post-war authoritarian society; rather, he invited audiences to contemplate a kind of fatalism seen through the eyes of Lee’s characters. Lee’s attraction to this kind of dark determinism, rooted in his

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10. *Marines Who Never Returned* differed from other Korean anticommunist films, such as *I Accuse* (1959), which recounts a North Korean’s escape from a horrific labor camp, and *Beat Back* (1956), which depicts the true-life story of a South Korean officer during the Korean War, thus perpetuating binary stereotypes associated with the conflict.

own horrific experiences during the Korean War, is a fundamental aspect of his bleak personal worldview. Reiterating the conventional binary opposition of South and North was never going to be sufficient for a director concerned with probing for deeper meaning. Although in the early 1960s, the government initially looked the other way when Lee's blockbuster war films were seen to contain more than conventional, anticommunist polemic, his dark portrayal of society eventually got him into trouble. His attempts to *push the boundaries* of the anticommunist genre were noticed by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), which sought to justify its existence by dragging as many alleged procommunist sympathizers into court as possible. As we will see shortly, Lee fell victim to this authoritarian milieu immediately following the completion of *Seven Female POWs* and *Holiday*, both containing strong elements of social criticism and thus adding fuel to Lee's continuing battle with the censors.

One such battle and thus major turning point in Lee's career and indeed for Korean cinema occurred in 1964 when the making of *Seven Female POWs* placed him in the interrogators' spotlight and then in jail. Since the film is no longer extant, knowing exactly how its story line and aesthetics were handled is difficult to determine. However, newspaper and film magazine articles from the time suggest that *Seven Female POWs* depicted the superiority of South Korea over North Korea—or at least represented the South as a *better place to be*, which is why the censors passed it in the first instance.<sup>11</sup> Yet, although the film passed the MPI's final censorship stage in early December 1964, requiring only minor editing, its ideological integrity was questioned by the public security department of the Seoul Prosecutors' Office and the KCIA, which was then expanding its reach throughout all

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11. According to cinematographer Seo Jeong-min and screenwriter Han U-jeong, Haptong Film Co. (headed by Kwak Jeong-hwan) attempted to appease the prosecutor by hiring an anonymous director, shooting extra footage, and then reediting the film to less than an hour. In this revised version over 100 lines were removed and 10 scenes were cut from the original print (J. Cho 2015b; KOFA 2005, 133, 431). After passing censorship, it was released in July 1965 under a new title, *Returned Female Soldiers*, obscuring the inference in the film's original title that South Korean troops were captured and defeated by Northern forces. Like the original version, the reedited film no longer exists, adding an extra layer of mystery and speculation to Lee's work.

sectors of society.<sup>12</sup> As a result of their views regarding the film's content, Lee was arrested by the Seoul Prosecutors' Office, which had issued an arrest warrant for Lee on December 19, 1964, and the KCIA confiscated all film prints and trailers of *Seven Female POWs*. The warrant was rejected two days later by a criminal court judge, who saw the film himself and deemed it harmless. However, following two months of ineffectual investigation, the Prosecutors' Office interrogated Lee again on February 4, 1965 and formally arrested him for violating Korea's Anti-Communist Law. According to the Law, anyone cooperating with an antinational organization, including communist organizations overseas, was liable to be jailed for seven years and their qualifications suspended. Lee was imprisoned for 40 days until bail was granted in mid-March 1965.<sup>13</sup> The rapid escalation of the case illustrated the regime's determination to suppress dissent, intimidating other filmmakers into sticking to the pathways sanctioned by national film policy. For film critic Lee Young-il, Lee's arrest marked the beginning of an advanced type of thought control.<sup>14</sup> When the case was concluded in early December 1965, Lee was given a suspended sentence: the Seoul Criminal Court stated that while Lee's film might have overstepped the boundaries of what was considered acceptable, the director himself showed no signs of being tainted by communist ideology.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the so-called scandal, the Motion Picture Association of Korea, a key industry trade group established in 1962 that included direc-

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12. Previously classified censorship documents relating to *Seven Female POWs* are now available to the public via the KOFA. They are analyzed in J. Cho (2015a, 2015b).

13. See "Yeonghwa gamdok Lee-ssi yeongjang-eul gigak" (Warrant Rejected for Director Lee), *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 21, 1964; and "Yeonghwa gamdok Lee Man-hee boseok" (Director Lee Out on Bail), *Dong-A Ilbo*, March 16, 1965.

14. Lee Young-il, "Jeongchijeok yeongwan eopdorok pilleum apsuran gongpogam julsu itda" (No Political Involvement Necessary—Merely Confiscating a Film Breeds Fear), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, February 8, 1965.

15. "Chirin-ui yeoporo gamdok Lee pigo-e seongo yuye" (Director Lee of *Seven Female POWs* Fame Receives Suspended Sentence), *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 8, 1965. Although the prosecutors' office appealed the sentence and the case dragged on for four more years, the verdict remained unchanged. See "Lee Man-hee hangso gigak seongo yuye" (Appeal over Lee's Case Rejected, Suspended Sentence), *Dong-A Ilbo*, March 25, 1969.

tors, actors, screenwriters, and technicians, defended Lee by refuting the allegations leveled against him.<sup>16</sup> Prominent directors, such as Han Hyeong-mo and Yu Hyun-mok, expressed their deep concern over the potential spread of government surveillance and the possibility of film censorship occurring outside the MPI's purview.<sup>17</sup> In mid-March 1965, Lee was released on probation after serving a four-week jail term. The harsh treatment meted out to one of their own had united the film industry in some important ways. In retrospect, this scapegoating of Lee, director of what was widely hailed as the quintessential anticommunist war film only two years earlier, seems unbelievable, which in part makes Lee a hero today.

Ultimately, Lee's arrest and trial showed filmmakers how dangerous it was to *push the boundaries* under the Park regime, which had undermined Lee's autonomy and drained his potential for thinking outside the box. Lee's prosecution heralded the advent of a more restrictive censorship regime and a power struggle between governmental bodies. While the Park regime's industrialization agenda facilitated the building of production infrastructure, lower priority was given to developing creative talent. Although Lee's censorship case was finally closed, the physical and emotional distress he suffered left a mark on his future filmmaking activities. From this point forward, Lee directed only a couple of anticommunist films, including *Soldiers without Serial Numbers* (1966) and *Legend of Ssarigol* (1967), which showcased his ongoing loyalty to the regime and his waning interest in making big-budget war films. The popular press welcomed the return of the master war filmmaker by publishing positive reviews of *Soldiers without Serial Numbers*, praising it as his finest film after *Marines Who Never Returned*.<sup>18</sup>

16. "Lee Man-hee gamdok-e gwandaehan jocheo-reul" (Seeking Leniency for Director Lee Man-hee), *Dong-A Ilbo*, February 9, 1965.

17. On March 23, 1965, Yu presented a paper, "Freedom on the Silver Screen," at a public seminar organized by the International Conference for Cultural Freedom, supporting freedom of expression and director Lee in particular.

18. Lee and his screenwriter Han U-jeong used *Soldiers without Serial Numbers* to regain the regime's trust in them as anticommunist filmmakers. Press reviews made positive comments about the film, underscoring Lee's portrayal of the inhumanity of North Korean communists and the mass casualties that they had inflicted. See "Yeonghwapyeong: ganghan seoldeungnyeok jinin bangong yeonghwa 'Gunbeon eomneun yongsa'" (Film

In part, this positive press enabled Lee to continue making genre films under a government that was eager to connect its propaganda with wide audiences.

In turning away from stereotypical anticommunist films and thrillers, Lee's expanded filmography after the mid-1960s shows an increasing number of genre films, such as melodramas, which would presumably receive less interference from the censors. At the same time, his exploration of the human condition deepened, reflecting the inner wounds he had suffered during his battle with the regime. In the end, he was only able to protect a portion of his artistic creativity. Lee's later melodramas, such as *Late Autumn* (1966), *Homebound* (1967), and *Holiday* (1968), were emotionally charged, not through large-scale spectacle but rather by a profound exploration of personal relationships and the human condition. In so doing, Lee engaged with some of the core themes explored in the art-house cinema of the West: employing social realism, experimenting with symbolism, and utilizing sound and *mise-en-scène* as devices for narrative development but with a Korean inflection. These features comprise some of the chief localized elements for which contemporary Korean cinema has become known and celebrated around the globe, thus revealing important links to the past.

### ***Holiday* (1968): A Tale of Living Hell**

Produced in 1968, this black-and-white film—a grim drama exploring the human condition—failed to overcome the final step in the censorship process. When government censors demanded that the ending be changed as a condition for the film's release, director Lee, producer Jeon Ok-suk (Daehan Yeonhap Film Company), and screenwriter Baek Gyeol protested by burying

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Review: A Compelling Anticommunist Film *Soldiers without Serial Numbers*), *Chosun Ilbo*, March 22, 1966; and “Bangnyeoginneun yegakjeok yeonchul, Lee Man-hee gamdok ‘Gunbeon eomneun yongsa’” (Energetic and Intensive Directing of Lee Man-hee in *Soldiers without Serial Numbers*), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, March 23, 1966. The exploration of family relationships and the human condition during the civil war put Lee's signature on the film and added philosophical weight to it, making it one of the leading films of 1966.



the film. While evidence of the film's completion is known through interviews with Baek and others connected with the production, many have long believed it to be destroyed. However, a single print discovered in 2005 by the KOFA offered a rare opportunity to see a film by Lee Man-hee in its pre-censorship state. *Holiday's* first public screening was at the 10th PIFF in October 2005 as part of the Korean Retrospective Section devoted to Lee Man-hee.

In terms of its narrative, *Holiday* focuses on a day in the unsettled life of Heo Uk, a penniless man in his twenties who has gotten his girlfriend Ji-yeon pregnant. Lacking money to meet in a warm cafe on a cold winter's day, the pair rendezvous for a date in a park, buffeted by a cold, gusty wind. Although the couple is in love, keeping the baby is not an option as a result of their financial situation, and they decide to terminate the pregnancy. To raise funds for the abortion, Heo Uk steals some cash from a friend. However, instead of returning directly to the clinic, he spends the night bar hopping and gets drunk with another woman—the pair end up having sex on an empty construction site. Returning to the hospital at dawn, Heo Uk learns that Ji-yeon died during her operation. In what follows, Heo Uk is harshly punished for his sins. Unconvinced that his daughter has died, Ji-yeon's father accuses Heo Uk of blackmail and lashes out at him with his fists. Then, the friend whose money he had stolen finds Heo Uk hiding at the construction site, and beats him up. In shock and feeling helpless, Heo Uk begs his friend to kill him; however, in shock himself, his friend flees the scene.

Delirious with pain and remorse, Heo Uk recalls memories of his life with Ji-yeon. A series of flashbacks, intercut with Heo Uk crying and running down a dark street with blood on his face, portray the couple affectionately spending time together across the seasons—alone on a small boat, on a city tram at night, and strolling in a park. In the role of narrator, Ji-yeon's tearful voice, overlapping with Heo Uk's heavy breathing and whimpering, reveals their plans for making a family together. At the same time, their relationship is marred by arguments stemming from the sense of shame that Heo Uk feels about their poor living conditions, leaving the audience to contemplate the real-world environment that has contributed to the improv-

erishment of this onscreen couple. At the end of the film, Heo Uk boards the last city tram and rides it to the end of the line. After alighting, he stands motionless on the street, undecided where to go or what to do next. Despite this bleakness, but thanks to the support of producer Jeon Ok-suk, one of very few women working in the Korean film industry at the time, Lee had access to adequate funding to make this compelling story about a young man who has lost all meaning in life, and is literally at the end of the line. Having a sympathetic producer like Jeon enabled Lee to work with Kwak Jeong-hwan of Haptong Film Co. and thus gain critical support from the Korean Motion Pictures Producers Association (KMPPA), which was well known for maintaining useful connections with the government.<sup>19</sup>

However, despite this financial security and Lee's personal networks, the making of *Holiday* was threatened by ongoing censorship battles; during both the script and final censorship stages, the filmmakers were accused of presenting a negative image of Korean society. Before finally passing it, the censors had rejected Baek's screenplay several times on the apparent grounds that its portrayal of society was too "dark." According to details that Baek shared with us during an interview at the PIFF in 2005, the original script experimented with a gloomy circular plot in which the prologue and epilogue showed Heo Uk's corpse being retrieved from the Hangan river.<sup>20</sup> This dark technique, hinting at the influence of Hollywood genre films in Korea, is reminiscent of Billy Wilder's critically acclaimed film noir *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), released in Korea in 1956, where Joe Gillis (played by William Holden) is shown speaking from the grave at the start and end of the film.

As part of these censorship battles, the original concept for *Holiday* was rejected because of the ominous atmosphere that it allegedly created, and the narrative was redeveloped along more conventional lines. Still, passing

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19. Kwak Jeong-hwan was president of Seoul Cinema and a powerful producer-exhibitor who underwrote a total of 239 films over his fifty-year career in the film industry. The KMPPA emulated Hollywood's reliance on trade associations, such as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

20. Baek Gyeol (screenwriter), interview by authors, Busan, Korea, October 10, 2005.

the final censorship hurdle was not a *fait accompli* as the characters in the revised version displayed a lack of passion for life and a sense of hopelessness about the future. Thus, despite making a great many changes to the script, Lee was unable to secure the required exhibition license for the completed film. Eventually, censorship officials undertook to pass the film if Lee agreed to change the ending. The deal required Heo Uk to shave his hair and enlist in the military, making a mockery of the emotional turmoil that had engulfed him throughout the film. In this politically corrected version, the original ending involving a desolate protagonist standing alone on a deserted street at dawn would be deleted. For Baek, this alternative ending would have made *Holiday* a propaganda film that endorsed the importance of military service. Lee, Jeon, and Baek all agreed that the revised ending would destroy the film's credibility, and Lee turned down the censors' offer.

By refusing to allow their film to become a vehicle for government propaganda, the filmmakers had found a way to protest against the state and its censorship apparatus in an effective way. As a result of their stand, *Holiday* remained in its original form and was never released. Instead, it disappeared from public memory. Thus, for twenty-first-century audiences, the filmmakers' unsuccessful attempts to gain an exhibition permit have proved a blessing in disguise because it preserved Lee's masterpiece, giving contemporary audiences a rare chance to see it as it was originally conceived. When *Holiday* was first screened thirty years later at Busan International Film Festival (BIFF), it received instant acclaim for its profound social criticism. Its innovative use of extreme long shots and close-ups, along with the alternation of low and high camera angles, confirmed Lee's reputation for experimenting with visual and narrative styles. The subject matter of this long-buried film offered a fresh perspective on youth culture in Seoul during the Park Chung-hee era, a portrait of a forgotten generation desperate to escape the stifling confines of a conventional society undergoing a rapid but dislocating process of industrialization.

In the film, an unemployed youth, Heo Uk, has no goals in life apart from simply outlasting each tedious day. One of his friends, a university graduate and a self-confessed loser, spends his waking hours at a bar. Another friend bathes six times a day out of sheer boredom. Their hopeless

situation has drained their vitality; they are living as if without a pulse. Through these depictions, the young people in *Holiday* have fallen victim to despair and depression and an overwhelming sense of helplessness, attitudes that, as critics pointed out some thirty years later, would have set the filmmakers on a collision course with the censors (Huh 2005).

Lee's critique of society is largely delivered through his unique visual style and his innovative use of the *mise-en-scène*. The most outstanding examples of the latter are the scenes set in a Namsan hilltop park, swept by a gusty, swirling dust storm so thick that it muffles the couple's conversation and obstructs their view of each other and the audience's perception of them. While Ji-yeon is waiting for Heo Uk at the park, she is overwhelmed by the wind and swirling sand threatening to blow her away. This symbolic use of the *mise-en-scène* suggests the couple's volatile and murky future, while also building a sense of alienation. Thus, Lee discomforts and disorients his audience by confronting them with a large-scale, surreal sand storm set in the middle of Seoul. While his use of this alienation effect was perhaps less sophisticated than many of the conventions used today, Lee was able to remind his audience of Korea's current social malaise by using this technique. The ending in particular is used to drive home this point. The film ends with Heo Uk standing at the end of the tramline, contemplating the end of his life as he stares blankly behind him at the tram tracks that lead back towards the city. His deep melancholy is reflected in his broken narration: "Seoul, [Mount] Namsan, the tram, the bar owner, the landlady. Sunday and everything. . . I loved them all. . . Soon the sun will rise. Shall I go out onto the street? Shall I meet people, or drink coffee? Now I don't need to wait for Sundays. I don't need money for coffee. No, I'll cut my hair first. I'll cut my hair first." His nonsensical ramblings signify his status as a lost soul. After experiencing the death of his girlfriend, nothing has changed for Heo Uk—or, at least, nothing can ameliorate life's banality, except possibly committing suicide, which forms the subtext of the coda. Perhaps he should have listened to the female fortuneteller, who at the start of the film warned Heo Uk to avoid women—or at least to take care with them—or risk losing everything.

In short and through the type of visual and narrative experimentation

employed in *Holiday*, as well as his subsequent films, Lee Man-hee became one of the few directors in the 1960s and 1970s who eluded full control by Park's censorship regime and its *thought police*, the KCIA. At the same time, *Holiday* demonstrates how Lee overcame political obstacles in his own creative manner, persevering through Korea's suffocating production environment under Park. Although his professional survival hinged on a delicate web of negotiation between producers and the government, Lee never fully submitted to the aesthetic dictates of the regime.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the techniques used in two quintessential Lee Man-hee films, *Marines Who Never Returned* and *Holiday*, which depicted Korea's repressive social environment during the authoritarian Park Chung-hee period. Whilst there are limitations to this approach, including limited access to materials regarding industry and audience reception and a lack of oral history recordings involving all of the major players, plenty of other evidence can be found to demonstrate the resistant narratives employed by director Lee and screenwriters Baek Gyeol and Han U-jeong, which set them apart from many of their contemporaries. For all of these reasons and for those explored in detail previously, the authors believe in the inherent value of presenting this part of Korea's national film history to new and existing generations of readers across the fields of Korean studies, cinema and media studies, and cultural studies. The lessons learned here from the *forgotten master* Lee are deep and meaningful, and also highly relevant today.

Throughout the 1960s, Lee's talents, expressed across a diverse range of genres, were both praised and envied by many of his fellow directors, including Kim Ki-young, Yu Hyun-mok, and Shin Sang-ok. The praise he garnered from his peers was in stark contrast to the intimidation and physical threats that Lee and other creative artists experienced under the Park regime. Under Park's repressive regime, control over artists was manifested in two main forms: overt physical coercion, as demonstrated by Lee's treat-

ment, and covert *thought control*, which was the intended outcome of physical detention. In turn, Lee's court case had a chilling effect on other filmmakers. Ultimately, the kind of censorship that resulted from self-regulation was exactly what the regime sought, both because of its huge potential impact on artists and its ease of administration. Lee's arrest and imprisonment clearly show that he was a direct victim of state-sponsored coercion, and yet he also devised ways to keep his creative spirit alive.

To achieve this end, between 1966 and 1970, while continuing to make anticommunist films, Lee began experimenting with melodrama, using sentimental love stories that were the staple of the genre to explore the human condition as a vehicle for social criticism. In taking this approach, Lee sought to satisfy his artistic aspirations by working with this popular and deeply traditional genre, introducing elements of social realism while experimenting with symbolism and exploring the potential of sound, production design, and props as devices for developing the narrative. In this way, Lee outwitted the censors and managed to slip away from the control of Park's censorship regime. While he continued directing propaganda films, such as *Harimao in Bangkok* (1967), *Living in the Sky* (1968), and *Bridge over Gobo River* (1970), Lee used his achievements as an anticommunist filmmaker as a bargaining chip to further his career. He achieved this aim through overt cooperation with the government, using propaganda filmmaking as a way of gaining official favors and staying out of jail. He maintained creative control over his films by directing and cowriting them personally, avoiding the big production studio environment dominated by companies like Shin Film. Thus, Lee's collaboration with the government was a means for him to gain personal and professional access to the larger film projects he coveted. For an artist working in this environment, complying with the government was not a choice, but rather a survival strategy.

All strategies aside, as the regime's political leadership became entrenched, its quest for power and control of its citizens' activities increased. Elements of this kind of coercion still persist today, which underpins the logic and rationale for revisiting the case studies in the present article. That is to say, despite its outstanding achievements, the authors plainly see how the Korean film industry is still not wholly free from government interven-

tion.<sup>21</sup> In 2005, newly formed MK Pictures headed by veteran female producer Shim Jae-myung in conjunction with CJ Entertainment produced *The President's Last Bang* (2005), a black comedy directed by Im Sang-soo that follows a series of events surrounding the assassination of Park Chung-hee. The film became the subject of legal action by Park Ji-man, the son of former president Park Chung-hee (as well as brother of current President Park Geun-hye). While MK Pictures fought these proceedings with passion, CJ Entertainment responded to the negative publicity and political pressure generated by Park's family by reneging on its investment and withdrawing its prearranged distribution deal for the film. CJ Entertainment's attempts to distance itself from the controversy over *The President's Last Bang* sent a clear message about the limits of artistic freedom extended to a director by the largest corporate producers and their lack of support for fighting censorship.

Even today, the Korean film industry is not immune from attacks on freedom of expression from official quarters, and the government crackdown initiated by President Lee Myung-bak has continued under the current administration of Park Geun-hye. In 2014, the BIFF committee became embroiled in a row with Busan Mayor Seo Byung-soo, who also was chairman of BIFF, over the screening of *Diving Bell* (2014), a documentary that criticized the government's botched rescue and support of survivors and their families linked to the *Sewol* ferry disaster in April 2014. Although the controversial film was screened at the festival, BIFF director and cofounder Lee Yong-kwan was forced to resign his position following pressure from Mayor Seo.<sup>22</sup> Seo's actions were widely seen as interference with freedom of expression, prompting the Korean film community to speak out about the

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21. Nor is the Chinese film industry, where Korean filmmakers are now heading in droves to work across the entire production ecosystem, free from government intervention. For more details on contemporary Korean-Chinese film encounters, see Yecies and Shim (2016).

22. See Lee Hyo-won, "Busan City Government under Fire amid Debate over Film Festival's Independence," *Hollywood Reporter*, January 28, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/busan-debates-independence-film-festival-767864>.

government's apparent abuse of power.<sup>23</sup> As a quasi-government body, Korean Film Council (KOFIC) also hit back, slashing its funding of the film festival in 2015 and leaving BIFF in a particularly vulnerable position.<sup>24</sup> This type of intervention, exacerbated by a lack of policy support, is one of the biggest challenges that Korean filmmakers and Korean cinema face more broadly today and was the rationale behind the industry's threats to boycott BIFF in 2016.<sup>25</sup>

Today, the ways in which Lee protected his integrity whilst maneuvering through the obstacle course set up by Park's military regime has left a significant legacy for contemporary directors, including the expanding list of Korean directors remaking Korean films in China. More to the point, his relentless opposition to the constraints of censorship provided a source of inspiration to contemporary filmmakers, such as producers Lee Joo-ick and Shim Jae-myung, as well as directors Im Sang-soo, Jo Geun-hyeon, Kim Ki-duk, and Kim Sun, who have experienced indirect censorship from both governmental and private sectors in recent years. In addition to the *Diving Bell* case, this aggravated trend toward censorship in Korea is exemplified by the "Restricted" rating given by the Korea Media Rating Board to Kim Sun's political satire *Self-Referential Traverse: Zeitgeist and Engagement* (produced and shown in the Seoul Independent Film Festival in 2010 and then released in 2015) and Kim Ki-duk's controversial drama *Moebius* (2013), by the filing of law suits and retraction of funding showcased in *The President's Last Bang* (2005). Additionally, this type of censorship has posed significant funding difficulties for the making of Jo Geun-hyeon's *26 Years* (2012), a fictionalized story about a group of people who lost family members during the 1980 Gwangju Massacre and became intent on assassinating President

23. Jean Noh, "South Korean Film Groups Protest for Freedom of Expression," *Screen Daily*, February 13, 2015, <http://www.screendaily.com/screenasia/south-korean-film-groups-protest-for-freedom-of-expression/5083268.article>.

24. Yu Yeon-seok, "'Gwaessimjoe?' Yeongjinwi, Busan gukje yeonghwaje jiwonguem daepok sakgam" ("Being Defiant?" KOFIC Slashes Funding to the BIFF), *No Cut News*, May 5, 2015, <http://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/4408368>.

25. Ben Child, "South Korean Film-makers to Boycott Busan Film Festival over 'Freedom of Expression,'" *Guardian*, April 20, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/apr/19/south-korean-film-makers-boycott-busan-film-festival-sewol-ferry-documentary>.



Chun Doo-hwan, the perpetrator blamed for this incident. At the same time, the part of Lee's filmography that explores the human condition showcases his experimentation with genre diversity and genre hybridity, demonstrating why he is revered by contemporary directors like Kim Jee-woon and Bong Joon-ho, as well as producers, such as Lee Joo-ick (H. Lee 2013).

Sadly, Lee's career ended all too soon. In 1975, he died of liver disease at the age of 45, while editing his last film, *A Road to Sampo* (1975), a road movie about two men accompanying a girl back to her hometown. This film, a meditation on the more tawdry aspects of urbanization, became one of his best-known works, receiving no fewer than seven posthumously bestowed awards at the 1976 Grand Bell Award, including best picture and best director. Although his professional life as a director hinged on negotiations with powerful producers and an authoritarian government, he never gave up his quest for artistic independence and his exploration of the human condition. Rather, Lee outwitted the censorship apparatus by creating his own pathway to accommodate his creativity and provide him a critical viewfinder on the world. His passion for filmmaking along with his unceasing exploration of crossover genre aesthetics and narrative techniques has left contemporary filmmakers with a powerful legacy.

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