

## Coevolution of Conventions and Korean New Wave: Korean Cinema in the 1970s and 80s

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### Abstract

*Changes in Korean cinema during the 1970s and 80s served as the foundation for its takeoff in popularity in the 1990s. During this period, traditional Korean film production ideology and conventions were present, and the Korean New Wave can be said to be the result of the coevolution achieved while competing against such conventions. In this paper, I designate the main trends and films in Korean film history during the 1970s and 80s as the “Korean New Wave.” Korean New Wave encompasses the entire activities of the film movement group and the Korean film directors from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. I discuss Gwang-su Park, Myung-se Lee, Sun-woo Jang, and Ji-young Jung as representative directors. However, Korean New Wave is not a sudden occurrence but rather a social and historical consequence. Its pre-history comprises Yeongsang sidae (The Age of Image) centered on director Gil-jong Ha of the 1970s as well as the New Wave prequel represented by Chang-ho Bae, Jang-ho Lee, and Kwon-ta Im in the 1980s. Beginning as a prelude to the New Wave, Barambuleo joeun-nal (A Fine Windy Day, 1980) by Jang-ho Lee and continuing with Neoegae nareul bonaenda (To You from Me, 1994) by Sun-woo Jang, or even to the establishment of the Busan International Film Festival in 1996, Korean New Wave was a consequence of co-influences, collaboration, competition, and struggle between the old system of Korean cinema and the new challenges it faced. However, the elements of New Wave were made obsolete by the topographical changes of the film industry and audience culture that came after the mid-1990s.*

**Keywords:** Korean New Wave, Jang-ho Lee, Kwon-taek Im, Chang-ho Bae, Sun-woo Jang, Gwang-su Park, Myung-se Lee, Ji-young Jung, Gil-jong Ha, *Yeongsang sidae*

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## Introduction

This article aims to look at the major historical flows that developed before the Korean New Wave around 1990 in Korean film history. The unfair laws and institutions of the time created a deformed production environment, and the Korean film aesthetics simply adapted to the environment, and employed it, or passively resisted it conversely. This kind of aesthetics formed the Korean New Wave. Therefore, I would like to begin with an understanding of such film institutions and major cinematic flows.

Before the third revision of the Motion Picture Law in 1970, importing foreign films into Korea was controlled by the government through the quota system. The fourth revision of the Motion Picture Law proclaimed in 1973 (during Chung-hee Park's regime) was on a permission only basis for opening a film company. It was not changed until the fifth amendment of the Law in 1984 that allowed for the freedom to establish a film company. The advent of Korean New Wave in the 1980s was connected to the changes in Korea's laws and policies as well as in the social environment and culture. It was not until 1995 that a promotion-oriented law (instead of direct control) called the "Promotion of the Motion Picture Industry Act" was born. This represented a remarkable shift compared to the status quo of more than two decades previous. Therefore, it is possible to label the 1990s as the renaissance period of Korean cinema, particularly given that we refer to the 1970s as its "dark ages." Instead of concisely listing the trends and customs of Korean films during the 1970s and 1980s, I try to elaborate on the persistent trend of pursuing novelty without completely deviating from contemporary film customs at the time. Korean films in the 1970s were under the control of laws and policies, i.e., the institution-dominated consciousness and behavior of Korean filmmakers, the production permit system, the harsh bifarious censorship and management of the film industry, and the propaganda film production through the Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation (the predecessor of Korean Film Council) as well as the granting of import quota to production companies presenting *Usu yeonghwa* (quality films). This situation, during which critical descriptions and ideas were banned, discredited Korean films, but the policy of granting foreign

film import quota to the production companies producing the quality films represented an opportunity to produce decent films based on literary works. Kwon-taek Im's films were a case in point. His anti-communist film *Jeung-eon* (Testimony, 1974) was made in response to a policy that allowed him to benefit from a large investment by the Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation. Moreover, *Jokbo* (The Family Pedigree, 1978), produced for the purpose of being certified as a "quality film," was anti-Japanese and simultaneously encouraged the audience to reconsider the concept of nationhood and a blood-related people. In addition, the Korean film industry was in a severe recession in the 1970s, which continued at a somewhat mitigated level during the 1980s. Compared to the popularity of foreign films, Korean films suffered and were cold-shouldered by audiences. Korean films of this time seemed to be produced either in order to obtain the import quota for foreign films through the selection of quality films or to fulfill the annual production mandate of a production company. The malformed production and distribution structure around local distributors and monopolist producers aggravated such institutional problems. This distribution structure and trend toward major-oriented films existed until the 1980s; productions that used the name of existing film companies were a strange phenomenon that were extant until the mid-1980s.

In the 1970s, however, Korean filmmakers working within their independent ecosystem produced films with a certain conventional system that adapted to the institutional context. Dealing with the ordeals faced by women, such as the sacrifices they make for their family, the failure of love according to traditional values, and being objects of voyeurism, as primary subject material, family melodramas were consistently produced, equating nationalism with "family-ism." The films were called "hostess melodramas" and became popular in the mid-1970s, demonstrating an emerging youth culture trend as well. The ordeals of women continued in these films, and the conflicts between classes were implicitly described, for instance, in Jang-ho Lee's *Byeoldeului gohyang* (Heavenly Homecoming to Stars, 1974) and Ho-sun Kim's *Yeongjaui jeonseong sidae* (Yeong-ja's Heydays, 1975). These films were also a considerable success at the box office and showed the potential for a revival of Korean cinema. Simultaneously, there

was a trend in youth films dealing with love and the customs of young Korean generation, influenced by a somewhat rebellious youth culture. The emergence of “hostess melodramas” and youth films gathered enough momentum to establish *Yeongsang sidae* (The Age of Image), led by director Gil-jong Ha, who had returned to Korea after studying in the U.S. Although this group did not have a direct impact on the Korean film scene since it was established, *Yeongsang sidae* nevertheless became a major impetus and stylistic guide for younger filmmakers who wanted to overcome the existing Korean films that were markedly behind the times.

There were also action films that mixed with the concepts of nationhood, Korean ethnicity, anti-communism, and anti-Japanese sentiment but were low-quality films based primarily on nationalist tropes. In addition, “high-teen film” gave a humorous portrayal of teenagers’ anxieties and dominated theaters. Children’s films on the innocence of childhood also emerged. Historical dramas, popular in the 1960s, were still produced according to Chung-hee Park’s policy, and anti-communist films were also a major genre of this period.

Although Ki-young Kim, Soo-yong Kim, Sang-ok Shin, Hyun-mok Yu, and Man-hee Lee who made important Korean films in the 1960s kept directing films in the 1970s, they failed to direct films that were comparable to their works in the 1960s. However, Director Kwon-taek Im, who made his debut a little later than them, drew attention in the mid-1970s through *Wangsimri* (Wang Sib Ri, My Hometown, 1976) and other films dealing with serious social themes. He subsequently created major works that would become leading Korean films during the 1980s. In a diachronic manner, the development of Korean films began with the critical mind of *Yeongsang sidae* (The Age of Image) in the 1970s, although the development was mostly unclear and insignificant. Since then, Korean filmmaking has been led by Jang-ho Lee (who actively deals with social themes) and Chang-ho Bae (who introduced a global level of production standards through his pursuit of styles). The Korean film industry was still in a recession during the 1980s, albeit in better shape than in the 1970s, and old conventional films aiming only for commercial success were mass-produced. The major genres of the 1970s were repeated but had different features adapted to context of

the 1980s. Erotic films began to be produced in earnest, as the Doo-hwan Chun administration (which was taken over by the military) implemented tolerance policies for sexual depictions on the screen. *Aema buin* (The Ae-ma Woman, directed by In-yeob Jeong, 1982) brought sexual factors to the forefront and was made into a series for over a decade. *Maechun* (Prostitution; dir. Jin-sun Yu, 1988), which focused on portraying prostitutes via voyeurism, became a phenomenal box-office success.

The 1985 revision of the Motion Picture Law and the resulting alleviated censorship were favorable conditions for the birth of Korean New Wave films. Its advent was the result of the 1987 democratization struggle that created a direct presidential election system as well as of the struggle of laborers who had not been guaranteed basic labor rights. Korea's presidential election became a direct system after 15 years of indirect elections since the enactment of the 1972 Constitution (so-called Yushin Constitution). This meant that new activities of Korean filmmakers were able to take place. Therefore, this article mainly deals with the factors that have been the foundation of the acute development of the Korean films and industry since the 1990s. The rapid growth of the Korean film industry from 1993 onward can be expressed as a concomitant expansion of Korea's largest companies, including Samsung and Daewoo, into the film industry. The success of a romantic comedy *Gyeolhon iyagi* (The Marriage Life; dir. Eui-suk Kim, 1992) and a nationalist film *Sopyonje* (dir. Kwon-taek Im, 1993) also contributed to the change in fortune for the Korean film industry. The establishment of the Busan International Film Festival in 1996 is also a symbol of the growth that commenced around this time.

I would now like to discuss the Korean New Wave of the 1980s and the tendency and manpower that led to such a significant change in Korean film history during the 1990s. Although there are various definitions of Korean New Wave, I seek to establish the filmmakers who led Korean New Wave as being collective delegates, despite being separate individuals.<sup>1</sup> In addition, I will mention the films to be classified as New Wave prequels

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1. It is more appropriate that I consider individual directors who made their debut in the early and mid-1990s within the context of the 1990s.

that preceded the Korean New Wave in the 1980s and found it difficult to break from unfavorable conditions and familiar contemporary conventions. Furthermore, the context of the 1970s' *Yeongsang sidae* cannot be omitted from this narrative. Nevertheless, I do not argue that Korean New Wave, New Wave prequels, and *Yeongsang sidae* are causally linked. On the contrary, I propose that the Korean New Wave should be seen as an outcome or a process following critically challenging New Wave prequels instead of being directly influenced by the latter. Moreover, Korean New Wave films followed past Korean film conventions to the extent that "the filmmakers tried to make their films look more lustful as they emulated the stereotyped sex scene as if it were mandatory" (Kim 2005, 44). Korean New Wave films and the conventions competed each other and evolved, creating the aspects of coevolution. For instance, in *Geudeuldo wuricheoreom* (dir. Gwang-su Park, 1990), the rambunctious son whose father is the briquet company owner and who lost his mother due to the father's adultery has violent sex, which represents the society destroying people each other. This scene is also an adaptation from the conventional sex scenes at the same time. In other words, the realistic expressions (for its interest good of box office success) and the conventional establishment compete and develop mutually, i.e. coevolve in the cinematic environment. The conventions evolved into the more brutal and obscene elements in the 2000s, and thus the memes (cultural genes) of the New Wave have obsolesced. Finally, it should be noted that there was a film movement that functioned as a cradle for cultivating talented individuals for the formation of Korean New Wave, even in the context of political oppression. This film movement included some activities such as small study groups, publications, and exchanges between film crew; however, said movement is briefly considered here as it is difficult to investigate the true nature of the movement without devoting considerable attention to the topic.

### ***Yeongsang sidae* (The Age of Image)**

*Yeongsang sidae* refers to a "declarative" film movement that lasted for approximately three years from July 1975 to June 1978. This was done in

accordance with Gil-jong Ha's proposal to "come together and join forces instead of just passing over the success of a series of box-office hits" (Hong 1979, 69). This movement needs to be viewed on four levels: (a) emerging filmmakers opened the way of revival during the film industry recession in the 1970s; (b) filmmakers contemplated filmmaking ideology and sought for new films albeit with rough ideas; (c) filmmakers made a new attempt, although a failed one, to break from the existing conventions; and (d) filmmakers embraced the effects of resistant youth culture of the hippies in the U.S. as well as the tendency of Korean national culture in their difficult. A total of eight films were produced in *Yeongsang sidae*, but it is difficult to find common aesthetic elements among them to the point of dividing them into the categories of "Formal experiments of modernist films," "Pursuits of ethnographic culture," and "Solidarity with youth culture." There is also a mix of trends in one film; hence, the films can be categorized as "Formal experiment of modernist films," including *Eodieseo mueoshi doieo dashi manari?* (Where Will We Meet Again?; dir. Pa Hong, 1977) and *Kot-gwa baem* (Flower and Snake; dir. Won-se Lee, 1975). The category of "Pursuit of ethnic culture" includes *Kotgwa baem*, the modernized version of the Cheoyong's story in the Shilla dynasty; *Hanne-ui seungcheon* (The Ascension of Han-ne; dir. Gil-jong Ha, 1977) which dealt with shaman and soul; and *Eodieseo mueoshi doieo dashi manari?*, which was about a man who spiritually wanders while watching Korean traditional mask dance. Some films under the category of "Solidarity with youth culture" include *Babodeul-ui haengjin* (The March of Fools; dir. Gil-jong Ha, 1975), which allegorically deals with the anxieties and social resistance of the younger generation and *Geurae geurae onuel-eun annyeong* (Yes, Good-bye Today; dir. Jang-ho Lee, 1976), which shows the struggles of poor young men and women. In particular, the characters of the films in "Pursuit of ethnic culture" are often portrayed as ones with sexual delusions, a portrayal seen as both a long-running device for box-office success and an expression of politically pent-up individual freedom. This can also be seen in the box-office hit film *Gyeowul yeoja* (Winter Woman; dir. Ho-sun Kim, 1977), which explicitly illustrates sexual openness. Moreover, the epics of *Yeongsang sidae* films with young protagonists were adapted from contemporary popular novels.

Ho-sun Kim, In-shik Byun, Won-se Lee, Jang-ho Lee, Gil-jong Ha, and Pa Hong founded *Yeongsang sidae* on July 18th, 1975. *Yeongsang sidae* announced the declaration as follows: “We are aware that there are films, but there is no film art on this land. ... Have we ever had a single movement such as ‘Nouvelle Vague’ or ‘New Cinema’ on this land?” (Byun 1985). Comparing Korean film to “a turtle in Bikini Atoll,” the coterie of *Yeongsang sidae* lamented the non-artistic nature of Korean film and regretted that there was no attempt to make new films in Korea. At the time, the Korean film scene also suffered from the censorious military dictatorship of Chung-hee Park and market erosion created by television dramas. The filmmakers who raise Hyun-mok Yu their voices include Jang-ho Lee, Ho-sun Kim, and Won-se Lee, all of whom used to work as assistant directors for veteran filmmakers of the 1960s, such as Sang-ok Shin, Hyun-mok Yu, and Soo-yong Kim. Gil-jong Ha, who criticized the Korean film scene after returning to Korea from the U.S.; Pa Hong, full of the spirit of experimental film; and a critic In-shik Byun, all also expressed their opinions. In reality, their films had already been popular before the founding of *Yeongsang sidae*: *Byeoldeului gohyang* (Heavenly Homecoming to Stars; dir. Jang-ho Lee, 1974); *Yeongja-ui jeonseong sidae* (Yeong-ja’s Heydays; dir. Ho-sun Kim, 1975), and *Teukbyeol susabonbu: kimsuim-ui ilsaeng* (Special Investigation Headquarter: A Life of Miss Kim Su-im; dir. Won-se Lee, 1974). In particular, *Byeoldeului gohyang* was mistaken as the origin for hostess melodramas, and *Yeongjaui jeonseong sidae* for the source of films that voyeuristically portrayed the “urban survival of young women.” Said films, however, were all based on original novels by popular novelists of the time, reflecting the energy of the time. These films were also related to resistance and consumption of Korean youth culture, which is a modified reflection of American hippie culture, with markers such as jeans, long hair, and acoustic guitars. Even this passive resistance in films and pop music might have become a concern for those in power, and the up-and-coming stars in Korean pop culture were dragged into a marijuana scandal and forced to suspend their activities.

The activities of *Yeongsang sidae* have been focused around Gil-jong Ha, who died young after he worked passionately. However, there was another main leader Jang-ho Lee who depreciated it: “it was nothing more



than a combination of popularity rather than a unity of wills” (Chung 1987, 134). Gil-jong Ha caused a sensation in his first film, *Hwabun* (The Pollen of Flowers, 1972), with the insertion of places and characters with political metaphors and homosexual codes. Although the film also aroused plagiarism controversy as to whether he copied *Theorem* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1968), Gil-jong Ha was the only person who had knowledge of Western auteur films at the time. He was a “man with a sense of the auteur, seeing Korean film that had been only regarded as means of entertainment from a human civilization perspective, and he tried to encourage awareness of the unique role of the media so as to identify human problems” (Ha 1977, 28).

Gil-jong Ha’s signature film was *Babodeul-ui haengjin* (The March of Fools, 1975), which was adapted from the original novel by popular author In-ho Choi. It was so popular that it would create Byung-tae’s Syndrome, named after the main character, in which young people imitated Byung-tae’s long hair and maladjusted behaviors. The film, however, did not necessarily conform to the spirit advocated by *Yeongsang sidae*. Byun (1977) questioned: “Were the films made by the new generation so new, indeed?” Ha (2009b) himself also mentioned, “the film was only my effort to access to (a decent) film” at the time of its release, but a few years later he changed his stance to the following: “[it was a] film with fresh sensual images, rapid tempo and live dialog that is completely different from previous films, and it built up an image that you have never seen in the existing Korean films.” It is, however, apparent that the film created a collision by retaining some traces of censorship, as he was conscious of censorship, and that it consists of superimposed episodes in an irrevocable and polyphonic narrative according to Bakhtin’s unfinalizability. It also has carnival-like characteristics in space (the square) and language (the ridicule) and reveals grotesque images (the body) (Yi 2017, 34).

There are a variety of assessments on the *Yeongsang sidae* films, and it is difficult to define its activities when it encompasses such a wide range. *Yeongsang sidae*, which lacked consistency and continuity in terms of film aesthetics, is not suitable for consideration as an art “movement.” It is more reasonable to regard *Yeongsang sidae* as a group that suggested new aesthetic

questions and enjoyed box-office success while sharing characteristics of the Korean film scene in the mid-1970s. Thus, films such as *Babodeului haengjin* and *Eodieseo mueoshi doieo dashi manari?* should be read both aesthetically and politically. These films occupy the same context as *Babo seoneon* (Declaration of Idiot; dir. Jang-ho Lee, 1983), *Seonggong sidae* (The Age of Success; dir. Sun-woo Jang, 1988), and *Gagman* (dir. Myung-se Lee, 1988).

### Prequel of Korean New Wave in the 1980s

Each New Wave has different characteristics: Neo-realism, Nouvelle Vague, American New Cinema, New German Cinema, Shochiku Nouvelle Vague, and Taiwan New Cinema, etc. Even Nouvelle Vague did not have as unified a style as expressionism and Soviet Montage did, and it can be divided internally into several groups. The categorization and the object of Korean New Wave are also unclear in terms of cinematic concept and unified artistic trends. It could, however, be called Korean New Wave if we look into the film tendencies of the mid and late 1980s (in terms of Korean film history and society) instead of being perpetually conscious of the Big Other, i.e., Western culture. Although the criteria of judging a New Wave requires knowledge of both forms and styles as well as practices and unique tendencies, a more important factor is an “eventness” of the time and space that it belongs to.

The “officialization” of Korean New Wave was based on the publication of *Korean New Wave: 1980–1995* (Yi, 1996). The book covers a range of films from Jang-ho Lee’s *A Fine, Windy Day*, which deals with a social topic, to Kwon-taek Im’s *Mandara*, which seriously questions the “Korean-ness” of Korean films, as well as Sun-woo Jang’s *Neoege nareul bonaenda* (To You from Me, 1994) and the period shortly before the establishment of the Busan International Film Festival in 1996. In a strict sense, I will classify the films by Gwang-su Park, Myung-se Lee, Sun-woo Jang, and Ji-young Jung as Korean New Wave, and the works before them will be classified as prequels. The prequel filmmakers aimed at breaking with existing Korean film production norms of the 1970s and practicing cinematic ideals.

Nevertheless, they could not completely separate themselves from the conventions of the past. The reason was not that the directors consciously wanted to break off the conventions of the past, but because the qualitative differences were naturally formed since they were preoccupied with social themes or cinematic expressions at that time. In addition, the filmmaking attitude of the prequel directors had no change in quality, for example, sex scenes were arranged without any narrative concern, but rather only for box-office success.

I will mainly focus on Kwon-taek Im, Jang-ho Lee, and Chang-ho Bae during the Korean New Wave prequel period. Currently, Kwon-taek Im is also well-known internationally along with Chan-wook Park and Joon Ho Bong; however, the most popular director in the 1980s was Chang-ho Bae. Jang-ho Lee is a director who deals with social themes and is also widely known to the public for making films close to soft pornography but with political implications such as *Eoh Wu-dong* (1985) and *Mureup-gwa mureup sai* (Between the Knees, 1984). Until the early 1990s, Lee was also the most widely known director internationally. It was not until the 1980s that Kwon-taek Im made serious films on Korean history, society, and human affairs. At the same time, he also directed the action film *Janggun-ui adeul* (The General's Son, 1990); *Sopyonje* (1993), which was the biggest box-office hit in Korean film history; and *Chihwaseon* (2001), which won the Cannes Film Festival's Best Director Award. The reason he should be recorded as one of the Korean New Wave prequel filmmakers is because he dealt with the ideological issues based on his historical experience of confrontation between the left and the right wings of politics and has practiced challenging pride in film language while showing compassion for human beings and human complexity. He made his films with "his longing for a fierce life toward his ideal world" (Chung 2003, 457), most of which were breathing with the times, although he could not secure approval from the left-wing audiences owing to his particularly neutral attitude. The theme, subject matter, and style of *Mandara* (1981) became a cinematic example for future Korean New Wavers and seemed to show a third way out of foreign influence. *Gilsotteum* (1986) also showed a side road to wisely thinking about the issue of reality on a different level through Kwon-taek Im's unique

philosophy on human beings, which poured cold water on unificationism in Korea as if he were aware of the short-term confusion and contradictions of German reunification in advance. Coincidentally, he created *Aje Aje Bara Aje* (1989), which depicts the conflict between Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism in the early years of the collapse of the Communist bloc. The film was both a Buddhist methodological debate and a cinematic debate on political correctness. The critique on Im's style by up-and-coming critics, including Chung (1987) and Lee (1995), in the 1980s centered on his long takes, mise-en-scène, and camera movement. The polyphony of the characters in his films along with his philosophy on the world and style evoked and enhanced the themes, while giving them dialog at the same time. Never before had a film called for dialog as much as Im's films on ideology, history, and life complexities, instead of positing its own idea(s).

Jang-ho Lee's films can be divided into those dealing with social issues and popular entertainment films. The former category includes *Barambuleo joeun-nal* (A Fine, Windy Day, 1980), *Eodum-ui jashik-deul* (Children of Darkness, 1981), *Babo seoneon* (Declaration of Idiot, 1983), and *Gwabuchum* (Widow Dance, 1984); the latter includes *Mureupgwa mureup sai* (Between the Knees, 1984), *Eoh Wu-dong* (1985), and *Yijangho-ui oi-in gudan* (Jang-ho Lee's Baseball Team, 1986). The former are an indication that film also can be one of the national folk arts reflecting reality, as Korean literature and art do. The latter have shown the potential for independent production as they became successful through developing new subject materials or different box-office codes from existing Korean films. Dealing with three young men who came to Seoul from the countryside, *Barambuleo joeun-nal* was remarkable for having only evoked reality. Displaying Christianity and people's lives on the basis of Liberation Theology, *Eodum-ui jashik-deul* and *Gwabuchum* indirectly demonstrate that the ecumenical movement played an important role when the democratic movement was oppressed by Doo-hwan Chun regime. More importantly, however, what Korean society demanded of the Korean film industry in the 1980s had been realized on the screen: the real as it was in a rough form. More unusual was *Babo seoneon*. The film was a result of the extreme choice of the director who became frustrated with pre-production censorship. He

completely ignored the linearity of narratives and the suture of styles and extemporaneously featured a prostitute and disabled men. The surrealistic film, despite its unrealistic settings, evokes an extreme aspect of reality and reveals the oppressive nature of institutions and ideology existing beyond the text. Perhaps it was *Nageune-neun gileseodo shuiji anneunda* (The Man with Three Coffins, 1987) that defined Jang-ho Lee as a Korean New Wave prequel filmmaker. Having made only box-office hits for about three years, it is likely that Lee made this film because of his artistic ambition or a sense of responsibility arising in response to expectations from the audience that he would make films with both artistic value and social matters. In this bizarre film about the reality of Korea's division and death or reincarnation, some pathos from Lee's particular loose plot is even more powerful despite its heavy debt to the original novel. Although the landscape of a man and a woman walking along the frozen river in a long shot is very dry, they are hapless beings in their own stories. The man's bag contains the remains of his dead wife, and the woman talks about her work warming old men's bodies in a dislocated way, as if it were not hers. As time passes, the man scatters his wife's ashes in the yard of the inn, which is not in the original novel. The content and the feeling of characters omitted between scenes must be the pathos of the film. Jang-ho Lee's film, a strange combination of right-wing populism and left-wing Christian thought, was something to admire (and to be critically overcome) for the young cinephiles of the 1980s. As seen in his confession, saying "I could not make a work reflecting my own life," (Yi 1994a) his films did not offer alternatives or undergo deep consideration. However, the fascination in the wild popularity of his films was a target of admiration for his efforts to at least go to "where it should be," although they were not completely divorced from the existing conventions of Korean films. Moreover, the surreal yet frightening novelty shown in *Nageuneneun gileseodo shuiji anneunda* also suggests "the possibility of a Korean art film."

Chang-ho Bae is known as a successful director in that most of his films ranked high in the top five Korean box-office hits of each year. His success stemmed from the modernization of cliché, adhering to conventional visual grammar at the global level, instead of keeping Korean styled convention and clichés. He was a movie buff, and mainly produced love stories based on

“the grudge on American B-movies dominating the Korean box office” (Yi 1994b). His biggest box-office hit, *Gorae sanyang* (Whale Hunting, 1984), seemed to be an extension of *Babodeul-ui haengjin* (1975). The screenwriter of both films is In-ho Choi, and the protagonists’ names are the same as those in the novels. Although the effects of the original would not be ignored, the success of *Gorae sanyang* was because of the fascination people had for the stars, and the interesting plot beyond the preposterous setting and description of existing Korean films. In the form of a road movie, the story about a man rescuing a speech-impaired woman detained in a prostitute village and driving her home is a variant of a *Sleeping Beauty* plot. In addition, the achievement of a desire by “an angel to be protected” and “a prince to be temporarily deprived” in the era of oppression achieves some catharsis for the audience. In the final scene, the villain chasing the main characters merely turns when he discovers that the woman has become able to speak. This shows the consistent theme of Chang-ho Bae’s films: “mercy and love.” His naïve consciousness was appealing to the public because he was naïve. Some of the most popular films with pure feelings of love and optimism on the world include *Gipun uri jeolmeunnal* (Our Joyful Young Days, 1987) and *Annyeonghaseyo hananim* (Hello God, 1987). Having trouble with censorship while he produced his debut work. *Kobang dongne saramdeul* (People in the Slum, 1982), a love story in a poor town, Bae also directed *Geuhae gyeowuleun tateuthaetne* (Warm It Was That Winter, 1984) about a sister and a brother separated during the Korean War and *Gipgo pureun bam* (Deep Blue Night, 1985) dealing with a consequential tragedy of the American dream. Most of his filmography included melodramas. The scope of audiences for director Bae’s films encompassed from the elite class to young cinephiles, and his box office success was a prequel showing the potential of Korean films, but the real respect accorded to him was because of his perception of style. It was in *Gipun uri jeolmeunnal* that his unique perception of style and of film language was consciously and earnestly revealed. His new images, generated through lens and editing techniques, are brilliantly presented in the scenes where Young-min is waiting on a rainy day and in which he enters a café to meet a blind date. Bae initiated this attempt in the long take of *Hwang Jin-I* (1986); subsequently, the number

of shots in his films halved from those previous, and his long takes more than quadrupled. His previous six films had an average duration of 628 shots and 10.2 seconds per shot, whereas his three films since *Hwang Jin-I* have had an average duration of 224 shots with 31.2 second per shot (Lee 1994). His attempt at creating long takes was most pertinent to prepare for Korean New Wave in the 1980s because he created a clear awareness and self-consciousness of film style language rather than a mere preference for long takes. Subsequently, Bae's rather decorative long takes would become the basis for the evolution into long takes (showing the real shooting spot and the foresight of the future) that led narratives such as the murder scene in *Salin-ui chueok* (Memories of Murder, dir. Joon Ho Bong, 2003).

### **Korean New Wave Films**

The other notable works of the 1980s, other than box-office successes by the directors Kwon-taek Im, Jang-ho Lee, and Chang-ho Bae were largely recognized by up-and-coming critics. These were *Mandara* (1981), *The Man with Three Coffins* (1987), and *Hwang Jin-I*. The critics had to do with several film movements other than film criticism. The young critics in their 20s working in *Seoul yeonghwa jipdan* (Seoul Film Group), *Minjok yeonghwa yeonguso* (National Film Institute), *Nodongja news jejakdan* (Workers' News Production Group), and *Jangsan gonme* participated in social movements of the time while advocating for the independent film movement. *Paeop jeonya* (The Night Before Strike, produced by *Jangsan gonme*, 1990) was the representative creation of the movement, and the quarterly magazine *Film Language* was the representative critique. The editors of *Film Language* later played a leading role in the establishment of the Busan International Film Festival. In addition, the young cinephiles from independent film groups grew up to be representative Korean filmmakers, or later served as leading critics. Therefore, Korean New Wave needs to be viewed in three dimensions: films, activities (film movement), and the trends encompassing all of them. For instance, director Chang-ho Bae had nothing to do with the film movement of the 1980s, but he had a consensus with film youth eager



for new films. Moreover, the young from independent film groups formed a certain trend by participating as staff in the production of Jang-ho Lee films. The film movement played a pivotal role in creating such a trend, as it introduced foreign films with historical significance and signaled new film productions beyond the level of social movement logic that should be reflected in films. In this article, however, I will mainly focus on Korean New Wave films.

The late 1980s was a time of generational change in the Korean film industry amid the lingering existence of the older generation. The 1987 democratization process, and Korea's expansive economic development, demanded new films for a new culture. Although there are many important directors from this period, I would like to mention Gwang-su Park, Myung-se Lee, Sun-woo Jang, and Ji-young Jung in terms of the trends of Korean New Wave and their connection to the prequel genre.

Gwang-su Park was recognized as the leader of Korean New Wave for *Chilsu-wa Mansu* (Chil-su and Man-su, 1988) and *Geudeuldo uricheoreom* (Black Republic, 1990). The main characters in *Chil-su and Man-su* are a cynical and lethargic man (Man-su) with a left-wing father and his friend Chil-su, an ostentatious man; and the film was set in native Dongducheon, a U.S. military base town in South Korea. The characters cannot stand the misunderstanding and coldness of society, so they undertake an unintended performance of resistance. *Geudeuldo uricheoreom* tells the story of a labor activist who goes through an incident after fleeing to a coal mine village and then leaves again. The two films do not make revolutionary or provocative assertions, and their narratives and styles are plain. At that time, however, they gained attention because of their representation of poorly embellished time and space and the emergence of characters that exist in reality but had never been expressed in films. In other words, "a strange Chungmuro film" made an appearance all of a sudden. Park had a dislike for the elitism of the social movement theory at that time, which seems to stem from his empathic understanding of the May 1968 riots that he absorbed (partially betraying the people's demands) while studying in France. Park's films could become New Cinema only with the situation setting, and the motif alone, but his features are not limited merely to that. The locations and mise-en-



scène techniques featured in the two films (such as a self-dwelling room, a night duty room, bus-riding streets and the streets in a coal mining town) are very unfamiliar in Korean films and therefore create tension and discomfort. Furthermore, the television screens showing news have documentary effects. Thus, Park was able to become the first New Wave director by presenting spaces, characters, and events that had not been depicted in Korean films before. In the 1990s, he also attempted to create his artistic magnum opus in *Geu seome gagoshipta* (To the Starry Island, 1993) dealing with the tragedy of conflicts between the left and the right wings of politics, and *Areumdaun cheongnyeon Jeon Tae-il* (A Single Spark, 1994), the story of Tae-il Jeon burning himself to death as a way to sacrifice his life to improve working conditions in Korea.

Myung-se Lee's debut work *Gagman* (1989) is a comic heist road movie in which a delusional small-time comedian, a stupid barber, and a modified femme fatale rob banks to finance their film production. Lee said, "The previous Korean cinema was an experiment and accumulation by seniors, but the real film was born just now," (Yi 1994c) but it was not simple puerility. In *Gagman*, the main characters look like those of "Korean cinema" in that their working (robbing) condition is poor and that the characters' behavior is ridiculous. The parodies in this film (including of some Korean films, Hollywood films, and the Odessa stairs from *The Battleship Potemkin*) give us the impression that he poured all his film knowledge into the film. It was the first "film about film" in Korean film history and the gloomy cinephile's requiem on the lamentable reality of Korean cinema. In creating this film, Lee became a true cinephile surpassing Chang-ho Bae from whom he had learned filmmaking. Owing to Lee, Korean filmmakers could have the hope that they could make comedic films beyond political correctness or conventional trends. He then directed *Na-ui sarang na-ui shinbu* (My Bride My Love, 1991) and *Cheot-sarang* (First Love, 1993) with extreme emphasis on mise-en-scène. The reality of mise-en-scène, with its verisimilar imitation in *Nau-i sarang nau-i shinbu*, leads us to a sweet time and space set by narratives, which is actually a de-realistic time and space that makes us forget the otherwise hard realities. The film did not involve any social issues such as gender, politics, and economics of the time

nor a common love triangle but only a “factory of dreams and comfort.” Contrasting with Gwang-su Park in this regard, Lee enriched the Korean film scene of the time.

Ji-young Jung made his debut at a late age and was recognized as a director making psychic dramas and melodramas in the 1980s; he is known as the leader of the Korean democratization movement in the Korean film industry. His performance in 1987 stood out, and he later led the struggle against American direct distribution in cinemas, and the movement to revise the Motion Picture Law. In other words, he was one of the pillars of Korean New Wave in the 1980s. The films that most befit his public image as a fighter is *Nambugun* (North Korean Partisan in South Korea, 1989), a story about partisans in South Korea during the Korean War and *Hayan jeonjaeng* (*White Badge*, 1992), a story about the aftermath of the Vietnam War. It was surprising that the director who made popular films would deal with the issues of partisans and the Vietnam War, as topics that even young and liberal filmmakers dared not produce. Both films aroused ideological debates. *Hayan jeonjaeng* was more dramatic (by depicting the internal psychology of a character whose mind and family were destroyed by the Vietnam War) than *Nambugun*, which drily described a historical event. In the post-war Korean society full of complexities, the two films served to create important momentum for other creators to expand the limits of material selection and self-censorship.

Sun-woo Jang is the director who fulfilled the three elements of Korean New Wave: adopting social themes, expanding film languages, and escaping self-censorship. Jang, a former member of a Korean traditional theater club in college, composed the narratives in a logically divided sequence like traditional theatrical epics, and exploited the exaggerated situations and lines like the play in his debut film *Seonggong sidae* (*The Age of Success*, 1988). The film (depicting the struggle of condiments salesmen) is supposed to criticize the unlimited competition of capitalism, but its logic and narrative is simple, and the cinematic acceptance of the traditional theatrical style lacks symbolism and loses its verisimilitude. Nevertheless, it is significant that a Korean film criticized the commodity fetishism of capitalist consumer society. Later, he presented *Umukbaemi-ui sarang* (*A Short Love Affair*,

1990), the most featureless popular film of his works. It was akin to his inner literary confession, as an excuse for his own life, which he chose amid the chaos from the failure of the presidential election due to the split of democratic camp and from the downfall of the East-European bloc. Soon after, he directed *Gyeongmajang ganeun gil* (The Road to the Racetrack, 1991) filled with dialogs related to the boring but desperate love, lust, and snobbish desires of a man and a woman who used to live together in France. It is a contemplation of Korean society emerging as a postmodern society, and a story telling that those who have lost their way should pay attention to the surrounding, especially as the last scene where the protagonist spills milk demonstrates. In the film, Jang uses a long take with two persons in (often seen in Sang-soo Hong's films) instead of a shot-reverse shot, and exhibiting some props (a sign) and sounds (a bouncing tennis ball as there is a sexual intercourse) implying *Blow-Up* by Michelangelo Antonioni. Thus, Jang began to distance himself from the values and goals of his youth, which were the source of his transformative ethics and knowledge. This trend went even further in *Neoege nareul bonaenda* (1994). In narratives filled with explicit lewd jokes and sexual acts, the characters are described as more cynical and dysphemistic. Consequently, the new (destroyed) ethics, instead of conventional ethics, are justified. In the film, novels are reduced to reading materials; sex is no more than exchange value; creativity has never existed in the first place; and everything imitates everything else in a hybrid, hyper-realist way. Jang also created *Hwa-eom-gyeong* (The Avatamska Sutra, 1993), dealing with the Buddhist pursuit of truth and *Kkonnip* (A Petal, 1996), which describes the terrible aspect of Gwangju via a metaphor for desperation. Considering the collapse of the East-European bloc and the drastic changes in Korean society, Sun-woo Jang was the first director who successfully captured the zeitgeist on film, even though he quickly adapted contemporary controversial novels to his film. In doing so, and having been born in 1952, he became the youngest director with anti-traditional and -ethical attitudes who made the films that other, younger directors had never attempted. Moreover, by declaring that Enlightenment and Reason would no longer exert its prior power through his film, *Neoege nareul bonaenda* (1994), he demonstrated that Korean New Wave cinema was over.

## Conclusion

To describe Korean New Wave in the 1990s, it is essential to understand the changes Korean cinema underwent in the 1970s and 1980s. Although Korean film production ideology and conventions existed even in the 1990s and Korean New Wave did not completely break away from the practice, it can be said that Korean New Wave is the result of the coevolution in which it competed with the conventions and presented new images of its own.

This article demonstrates that *Yeongsang sidae* has meaning as “a manifesto to revive” and had an indirect influence on cinephiles of the 1980s, although it did not have a consistent aesthetic practice. I focused on Kwon-taek Im’s themes and polyphonic character descriptions, Jang-ho Lee films’ sociality and independent survivability, and Chang-ho Bae’s completion of his film conventions at the global level and search for style in the chapter dealing with the New Wave prequel genre. Moreover, Korean New Wave was discussed in relation to Gwang-su Park obtaining real time and space on the screen, Myung-se Lee first showing the manner of a cineaste, Sun-woo Jang suggesting the spirit and sense of the times with different methods, and Ji-young Jung revealing the forbidden history of Korea for the first time. The journey of Korean cinema began from a prelude to the New Wave, *Barambuleo joeun-nal* (*A Fine Windy Day*, 1980) by Jang-ho Lee and continued with *Neoege nareul bonaenda* (*To You from Me*, 1994) by Sun-woo Jang. Further, the result from its struggle and recognition at a global level was the establishment of the Busan International Film Festival in 1996. Both were the consequence of an internal competition within Korean cinema. In particular, Korean New Wave was a direct consequence, co-influence, collaboration, competition, and conflict between Korean cinema’s old system and new challenges. As aforementioned, there is no common aesthetic elements among *Yeongsang sidae* films, the prequels of New Wave, and Korean New Wave films. It is reasonable to understand the films in terms of a form of their reception and subjugation. *Yeongsang sidae* films crudely revealed their introspection, self-criticisms, and critical minds. The New Wave prequels converged those critical minds into diverse forms and finally brought them to a conclusion as a complete aesthetic form. Korean

New Wave was the process that the filmmakers matured the prequel conventions into Korean cinematic realism. The features of Korean films after the mid-1990s are based on the Korean New Wave films; quality of films, appropriate genre conventions with reality, critical minds with a sense of humor, and comments of animadversion in and out of season. These new memes of Korean New Wave, however, could not last in the topographical changes of the film industry and audience culture past the mid-1990s. The memes, which are concentrated in combative realism and experimental attitudes, gradually degenerate and end their lives as mainstream trends.

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