
BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, “South Korean Golden-Age Comedy Film: Industry, Genre, and Popular Culture (1953 -1970),” examines the socio-cultural and political aspects of comedy films made in South Korea in the 1950s and 1960s, the era in which the South Korean nation mobilized in the name of “development” and “progress.” Comedy film enjoyed particular growth and popularity during the post-war reconstruction movement (late 1950s) when the film industry began to take shape; the democratic social atmosphere in the aftermath of the April Revolution (1960) enveloped the whole society; and the government-centered film industry waned with the dawn of Yushin, President Park Chung Hee’s drastic measures to control the society (1971). While operating at a far remove from the depressing images of post-War devastation and the propaganda images of the South Korean totalitarian regime, comedy film was both incredibly popular, and can be appreciated as a politically maneuvered genre. I trace the socio-political and industry origins of the production of the comedy film genre, and examine its cultural contexts and effects through the Syngman Rhee regime (1948-1960) to the April Revolution, and into the pre-Yushin Park Chung Hee era (1961-1970).

I argue that structural changes in the South Korean film industry, especially its highly gendered and state-orchestrated consolidation, were critical to the image production, film language, and frame and narrative structures of comedy films. On the other hand, the style of comedy film -- distinguished by its remarkable generic hybridity and considerable transnational circulation -- appealed to the Korean audience. The comedies combine colonial popular performance (e.g., akkŭk, a Japanese-influenced, Korean style vaudeville), the visual techniques and mise-en-scène of Classical Hollywood film, and the star-power of comedians. Transnational
and cross-cultural fantasy, I argue that, is disjunctively combined with didactic/state-centered
descriptions of family and gender, and thus, comedy films both satisfied and disciplined the
industrial, national, and popular needs of immediate post-colonial South Korean society as it
struggled to cultivate a modern developed nation.
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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation’s point of departure was my intellectual curiosity about a series of sensational film titles—Male Maid (Namja singmo, 1967), Male Hostess (Namja kisaeng, 1968) and Male Hairdresser (Namja miyongsa, 1968)—produced in the late 1960s in South Korea. When I first visited the Korean Film Archive in the summer of 2002 for pre-dissertation research,—in stark contract to today’s developed facilities, I found only a few copies of old Korean film videotapes that were available to the public, and I only knew about this series of films only by title. Luckily enough, I found some videotapes of these films that an old Korean movie fan donated for film studies, and thus, I had the opportunity to watch over one hundred old Korean films. When I first watched these films that were coarsely recorded from regional television programs, I could not but be disappointed by their filmmaking quality. At the same time, however, somehow these unique films fascinated me. I laughed because of the strange and funny performance of old comedians as well as the strange meeting of didactism and comedic episodes. Then, I came to learn that these titles were part of a larger corpus of films that I call “gender comedy,” which first appeared on the South Korean film scene in the mid-1960s, including titles such as I Prefer Being A Woman (Yŏjaga tŏ cho’a, 1965) and Bachelor Kimch’i (Ch’ŏnggak kimch’i, 1966). Knowing that this genre enjoyed enormous box office success especially during the late 1960s, my concern throughout has been to investigate the ways in which these popular films emerged during an authoritarian historical time and the nature of their ideological effects. In order to study this genre’s ideological work, I first focused on its unusual gender transgressions and its relation to other contemporaneous film texts, and I also tried to find ways to understand how the public had responded to these films.
However, while conducting extensive research on South Korean comedy films during the three years of dissertation research, in order to find the genealogy of these films, I had to go back to the Korean Film Archive to watch post-war comedy films. Luckily, again, it was during this time that the Korean Film Archive extended access to the film collection and renovated all the facilities for the public watching. They also started to reproduce old Korean films as DVDs and made them available for public watching.Benefiting from these developments, I could watch more 1950s’ comedy films. I was surprised by these films, first, by their different presentation and film language from the late 1960s’ films, and, second, by the fascinating unfamiliar performances within the film text, which I later discovered to be *akkūk* performances.

After watching these films, I became more interested in the production of South Korean comedy film (i.e., beyond the film text) in general and in the close relationship between the ebbs and tides of the film industry and the transforming social atmosphere in South Korea’s cultural centers.

Comedy films enjoyed growth and popularity during the post-war cinema reconstruction movement (1953-1970) known as the Golden-Age of South Korean Cinema. In particular, it had strong audience appeal when the film industry began to take shape, an era when the democratic social atmosphere in the aftermath of the April Revolution enveloped the whole society (1960). In the late 1950s, so-called slapstick comedy films became especially popular and I dub these “anarchistic comedy” films, referring to their disjunctive style. In the early 1960s, people came to love many Hollywoodized comedy films—movies that were dressed up in more sophisticated filmic language (e.g. linear editing, developed cine-scope cinematography, and better sound effects). And gender comedy became the most popular form of comedy film in the late 1960s,
though it has been always regarded as B film.

In studying comedy films, it is important to trace the history of the comedy genre in complex social webs. Previously, South Korean film critics either ignored these films or dismissed them as unworthy of any serious attention. Those critics that do address this genre are entirely focused on the films’ negative place in South Korean film history. Only a few recent South Korean film studies briefly consider comedies to be interesting cultural phenomena in the context of Korean comedy history overall. These scholars’ repressive approach thus assesses comedy as the product of state ideology; and it oversimplifies the system of popular culture, both its ideological effects and the actual reading habits of people in a specific historical context. In contrast, my aim is to analyze the historical and intertextual genealogy of popular genre-comedy film, viewer reading habits, and various reading positions.

Also, the boom of comedy film corresponds to the legal transformations that ushered in significant changes in the film industry. Looking back on the post-war South Korean film industry, after the promulgation of the Tax Exemption Policy for national film sin 1956, people loved the anarchistic comedy films, which were quite new to the Korean audience. Before the establishment of the first film law in 1962, when the state-backed anarchistic comedy film production company disappeared, many small film companies competed with each other for survival. By these capitalistic free-market competitions, we see the development of more

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sophisticated comedy films, which continued during the Golden-Age era. Furthermore, although the First Film law was promulgated in 1962 to protect national film production, when the Second Amendment of the Film Law in 1966 expanded state control of the industry through a provision increasing the powers of censorship, it resulted in the demise of the Golden-Age, while the B-rated gender comedy prospered in the late 1960s and afterwards.

From the observation of genre production and the industrial transformation of the 1950s and 1960s, this dissertation thus examines the socio-cultural and political aspects of comedy films made in South Korea in the 1950s and 1960s, the era when the South Korean nation mobilized in the name of “development” and “progress.” I argue that the structural changes orchestrated by state intervention were critical to the makings of the images, film language, frames and narrative structures of comedy films. This industrial and genre transition functioned as a life-line for the key film companies, both because the genre was heralded for its broad appeal to the country’s rapidly urbanizing public and because it was effectively mobilized to communicate national ideology. I argue that comedy films thus satisfied both the industrial and audience needs of the immediate post-colonial South Korean society as it struggled to cultivate a modern nation.

By offering a dynamic reading of comedy films produced in 1950s and 1960s South Korea and contextualizing these works in film history, this study first focuses on the ideological function of comedy film and the reading habits of its consumers which offer critical contributions to the historiography of 1950s and 1960s South Korea, particularly with regard to the rise of an authoritarian democratic regime. Politically, South Korea was formally a liberal democratic society since the congress had been formally established according to a democratic
constitution. Moreover, the mass demonstrations resulting in the removal of Syngman Rhee from power in April 19, 1960, became the emblem of South Korean democracy. However, although the South Korean government claimed that their legitimacy rested on democracy, it was actually what Agnes Heller called a “formal” or “institutional” democracy.3 Even in the years after Park Chung Hee’s military coup in 1961 and even more intensely after Yushin in 1972, the government maintained that their authoritarian regime was “Korean style” democracy.4 Hence, while much historical analysis of the 1950s and 60s tends to characterize the Park government as an authoritarian and Fascist regime5 or examines the history of the regime’s political dissidents, the struggles between classes and the student activist movement;6 others merely dwell on the political transformation of these years,7 their economic success8 and unequal international conditions of South Korea and its colonial origins.9 In recent South Korean feminist scholarship, there has been a pervasive emphasis on the study of gender roles and family law in the South Korean patriarchy of the 1960 and 1970s.10 However, few scholars, in either Korean or English,

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have studied the actual lives of ordinary people and their culture as it appeared in the 1950s and 1960s in both the public and private domains. The study of popular culture looking through the comedy film and its consumption, thus, opens up a new way to see this historical time in a different way.

In the realm of South Korean film studies, perhaps the most popular approach to the study of Korean film has been South Korean scholars’ explorations of the emergence of Korean national cinema (the Korean New Wave in the 1980s) with the assumption that cinema directly reflects Korean historical, social, political and cultural ideology in accordance with national historical development. This approach draws upon realist theory, which regards representation as reflection. These types of analysis consider, for example, the function of national ideology in film, which exposes the strong engagement of the state in the film text itself. Or they focus on the development of a single director based on auteur theory or certain thematic conventions of film. Some feminist critics attempt to identify positive images of women within film texts and to explain them as expressive of the relative achievement of gender equality. They rediscover, for example, the figure of the strong mother depicted in many films, regarding it as an indication of women’s active roles in society. While on the one hand this way of reading film helps to clarify specific historical situations in relation to film, on the other hand, this method can be

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12 Chu, op. cit.
charged for its excessive reading of film texts as singular texts created by the unitary means of
auteur, the state apparatus, or both. Furthermore, it often overlooks the meanings of common
cinematic icons, symbols, images and narrative structures within the films. Also, it undervalues
the capacity of the viewers as active social constituents contributing to the meaning of films. In
this sense, reading comedy film texts and analyzing the popularity based on this historical
perspective offers new understandings of 1950s and 1960s’s South Korean cinema.

Reading audience through popular film, however, is not an easy task. In Western
scholarship, many film researchers have begun to show interest in the new dimensions of film
reception and the viewing positions of audiences. These scholars centrally concern themselves
with understanding popular culture. Raymond Williams, for example, argues that the word
“popular” has two ironic and often confusing meanings, which denote, both pejoratively, “mass
taste” and “something that many people like.”16 Pierre Bourdieu has precisely explained the first
meaning arguing that so-called “taste” expresses an elitism that enables some consumers to
distinguish themselves from lower class people.17 Stuart Hall has similarly developed the
historical aspects of mass consumption and commercialism as a powerful tool for mobilizing
certain groups of people.18 “Reader-response-theory” also questions the basis and logic of
audiences’ film selection and viewing practices.19

In the South Korean context, with few exceptions, not many recent film critics study

Publication Inc. 1997.
19 Janet Staiger, “Taboos and Totems: Cultural Meanings of the Silence of the Lambs” in Collins, J., Radner, H.,
Korean cinema reading the intertextual relationships between the viewers and text. If we could find some, for the stardom of South Korean actresses, Yi Ho-kŏl presents a fine analysis of the growth of the female audience and its consumption practices in 1970s South Korea.20 Informed by Western feminist scholars and concentrating more on the film’s reception, Korean feminist scholars also read the text and popularity of melodrama as the “expression” as well as “reflection” of society,21 as opposed to male critics’ characterization of melodrama as “low-brow weepies” and pejoratively “popular.” Accepting both meanings of popular, and speculating on the audience’s responses toward comedy film, this dissertation adds new knowledge to this growing body of South Korean popular culture analysis.

I focus on comedy film’s characteristics, in particular its iconographical and stylistic language, which combined colonial popular performance (foremost among them, akkūk), Hollywood visual techniques and mise-en-scène, and comedian star-power with fantasized and delightful expressions of modernity. By analyzing various stylistic transitions of comedy film and its consumption by a different group of audiences, I examine the meeting of authoritarian rule and quotidian life as revealed through a range of visual and verbal materials, the main locus where the public sector -- state and ideology -- and private people’s life could meet during this early stage of South Korean political formation, namely, its psudo-authoritarian democracy.

In order to accomplish this goal, I look at the diverse responses to comedy film as a significant part of popular cultural discourse in 1950s and 1960s South Korea. I address the ways in which people received these popular comedy films, attending to the audiences’ various social

positions. This project was conducted within two different arenas. First, I did extensive archival research in order to verify specific audience characteristics regarding their gender, class and residential area. I also collected criticism or any other positive or negative responses to comedy in movie magazines, woman’s magazines, newspapers, tabloid publications, and advertisements. Instead of sophisticated cinema magazines, my focal point lies on such popular magazines as *Yŏnghwa chapjji (Cinema Magazine), Kukje yŏnghwa (International Cinema), Yŏnghwa segye (Cinema World)* and *Wolgan yŏnghwa (Cinema Monthly)*, which treat cinema in a relatively light manner. Also various memoirs or literary works that reveal the theater experience of the contemporary period have helped me to understand the social and cultural atmosphere of that time. I also interviewed comedy film directors and comedian, Yi Hyŏng-p’yo, Sim U-sŏp and Ku Pong-sŏ. The intention of my interviews, however, is not to construct a new vision of the film. Rather, I draw on these interviews to supply more vivid and correct information on industrial patterns, censorship, the general atmosphere of theater and movie going practices of that time. Data on demographic change, film consumption, the cultural and historical geography of theaters and significant historical events validate my argument that structural changes in the industry and social reception are tightly intertwined with the production of the comedy genre. While this study is structured around a single genre and within post-colonial South Korean historical circumstances, it also problematizes more generally the ways in which various cultural modalities interacted with the formation of a national culture. By doing so, this dissertation helps to understand the inner dynamics of post-colonial South Korea under authoritarian regimes—a social world that should not be simplified by the oft-applied terms of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic power struggles.
Chapter Arrangement

This dissertation is divided into three parts. Part I (chapter one) offers a historical background of post-colonial filmmaking, the industrial circumstances and national history. It focuses on the national reconstruction movement of post-war South Korea, paying particular attention to filmmakers’ efforts to build the film industry as a national asset. In particular, I examine how the devastating Korean War and the physical destruction of the national landscape and industry contributed to the consolidation of the notion of anti-communist “progress” and “development” among filmmakers, resulting in the building of a state-centered industrial structure that sustained the film industry throughout the so-called Golden-Age of South Korean cinema (1953-1970). I argue that this industrial structure must also be understood in relation to the legacy of Japanese colonial filmmaking.

Part II (chapters two and three) systematically analyzes the mechanism of production and industry and consumption and reception of late 1950s comedy film. Part II also discusses the popularity of the comedy film in the late 1950s. My rationale for focusing on this cultural phenomenon is twofold. On one level, since the genre itself was born into a system of strong engagement between both private and public enterprise (e.g., KEI), both the actions of comedy filmmakers and the government’s encouragement of commercial films revealed certain educational efforts to deliver newly emerging anti-communist liberal democracy as a national ideology to the common people. But on another level, I argue that the 1950s’ comedies’ unique style, combining the various styles of akkûk (Korean vaudeville) and Hollywood cinema (including silent comedy film, classical Hollywood cinema, and contemporary Hollywood comedies), which had been the target of criticism by many film critics, functions as the key
stylistic signifier for a new, popular audience for film, revealing their own desires and subjectivity for South Korean modernity.

In this regard, chapter two explores the beginning stage of South Korea’s Golden-Age cinema with the emergence of circa 70 small filmmaking companies. I focus particularly on one company, Korean Entertainment Inc. (Han’guk yŏnye chusik hwoesa, KEI hereafter), which strategically chose the comedy genre to stage a modernized filmmaking system, based on people’s popular culture consumption habits during the colonial period. KEI’s strategy to be commercially successful with the state’s support produced a distinctive mode of comedy film that managed to express the anti-communist national ideology.

Chapter three examines the unique construction of 1950s comedy film texts, which speak to the transnational and modern desires of the film audience of that era. While many of the film texts were framed by anti-communist didactic structures, I argue that disjunctive filmic moments, which I term “anarchistic modes,” offered visual pleasures keyed to transnational-colonial performance genres (e.g., akkūk), Hollywoodized fantasized mise-en-scène, and even Italian neo-realism. The Double-Arc of Youth (Ch’ŏngch’un ssanggokssŏn, 1957), arguably South Korea’s first commercial comedy film, is the focus of this chapter.

Part III draws attention to two discrete historical junctures, which dwell on the rise and fall of the South Korean Golden-Age of cinema. Chapter four focuses on the period immediately before and after the promulgation of the first film law in 1962. While the films produced during this time period have, to date, been mostly discussed in relation to the 1960 April Revolution—long an emblem of a fleeting historical moment of democracy—they are rarely discussed in the context of the establishment of the robust filmmaking system of the time. Arguing against the
realist aesthetics of the elites which insisted on reading film as evidence of political participation, I pay attention to these films’ distinctively Hollywoodized and coded mode of comedic representational style. I focus on *A Petty Middle Manager (Samdŏng kwajang*, 1961), a film that speaks to production under a relatively stabilized filmmaking industry and distribution system while it meticulously presents the landscape of a modernizing Seoul.

Chapter five discusses the demise of the South Korean Golden-Age cinema when many huge companies faced financial crisis in the late 1960s. Focusing on *Sin Film*, which was the biggest company during the Golden-Age cinema production, and its strategy to make numerous B films, including comedy films, I argue that the state-supported film industry’s *de-facto* demise in the late 1960s was due to the changing population of the film audience and its coarsely but pleasurably manufactured film texts. I focus on what I call “gender comedy” films that attracted large audiences in Seoul’s burgeoning suburbs, reflecting on their marginalized identity and life of late 1960s South Korea, such as the boom of the sex industry, the unequally developed national landscape, and the state’s inability to control or provide a life for these newly structured suburban populations.
PART I: THE HISTORY

CHAPTER ONE

From Destruction to Construction: Golden-Age South Korean Cinema

The Korean War left Korea with a dismal and depressing physical landscape of extreme poverty and destitution, as well as with a formidable anti-communist and militarist political orientation. Soon after the war ended in 1953, however, national reconstruction efforts commenced, emphasizing rapid urbanization and the development of the public sphere based on the first national democratic constitution and free elections. Diverse and intensive debates on the nation-building project also took place. At the same time, the discourse of modernization and development, driven by the desire to become an economic and political power to compete with North Korea, prevailed, and people made incessant demands that the state intervene to protect national industry. Post-war South Korea’s anti-communist developmental regime left little room for the autonomy of Korean civil society. Contemporary historians, thus, tend to evaluate this nation-building project as it appeared—as the government’s authoritative top-down process—because the post-liberation and post-war period was under the heavy control of successive dictatorships.  

It was only the late 1980s that South Korea started to experience a small government and liberalization of economics, politics, and culture after the 6.10 students’ movement in 1987, which resulted in the end of military dictatorship in South Korea.  

As true as such an argument is, however, it is also undeniable that South Korean society formally

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23 To overview the student’s movement of this time, see Namhee Lee’s The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea, Cornell University Press, 2007. Regarding other people’s democratic movement, also see Kenneth M. Wells, South Korea’s Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence, University of Hawaii Press, 1995.
pursued the democratic ideals of its constitution. Then, how should we understand this co-existence of an overdeveloped state and democracy? Here, I want to emphasize that the desires of the nation to become a modern, developed nation were not only projected by the state but also by the intellectuals and citizens of a young state creating a certain discursive cultural space within the limited realm of civil society, a space Pak Myŏng-rim defines as a “premature” democracy.24 In post-colonial South Korea, although it was under Syngman Rhee’s governance, a new national ethos based on liberal democracy was circulated, experienced and practiced by many Koreans, and at the time—the most intensive period of nation-building as a young state—the discourse of modernization and development by the state and by the intellectuals, entrepreneurs and normal people was aggressively discussed and negotiated.

In addition to its socio-political sector, South Korea began intensive post-war reconstruction efforts in its cultural sector—and more specifically, its national cinema industry—during this time period. On the one hand, the cinema industry seems to have followed a democratic process in making film policy reflecting various filmmakers’ voices. Participants in the public sphere, such as newspapers and film magazines, discussed what Korean film policy should be, and this debate had a significant impact on the development of official policy regarding the reconstruction of the national cinema industry. On the other hand, such a democratic process had its own limits because the enthusiasm to reconstruct the cinema industry was, in the end, understood as a fight against North Korean communists. The significance of cinema as the most effective medium for delivering a national ethos has been emphasized both by the state and by many filmmakers. The strong state’s financial support and endowment of

privilege to a certain group of people in making the film industry into a semi-state apparatus, thus, followed.

In chapter one, I trace the complex paths of reconstructing the South Korean film industry from the post-war destruction to the Golden-Age. I argue that the rapid industrial development of cinematic production in the late 1950s in a relatively short time-span was shaped and framed through the interplay between the filmmakers and the state: the film industry was in its beginning stage of “modernization” and functioned as a hybrid of national institutions and private enterprise. The rise of the cinema industry was closely related to the expansion of desire for a developed modern nation on the part of both the state and filmmakers.

I begin this chapter with an explanation of the historical situation of post-war South Korea. Social mobility through state-centered entrepreneurship and through premature efforts to construct a modern democratic nation was a common practice of the time. Also, the socio-political, ideological, and cultural conditions of South Korea were greatly influential in shaping the South Korean film industry into a particular structure, namely a state-sponsored private ownership. To consider the origins of the social structure of the 1950s, this chapter discusses the retrospective history of Korean past. The notion of anti-communistic developmentalism based on a universal theory of progress and social Darwinism, which was inherited from the Japanese colonial period and had strong reminiscence in the post-colonial South Korean social structure, thus, will be another center of this chapter’s discussion.

The Making of Anti-communistic Democratic Nation

From the early modern period, when Western imperial power appeared on the world
stage as a strong power, East Asian nations were regarded as latecomers to the West-centered modern society. Notions of development and progress based on the Western epistemology of “progress” pervaded East Asia and resulted in various social reforms, including the adoption of Western technologies and skills, and even whole governing systems. In Chosŏn Korea, West-centered epistemology also functioned to make enlightenment as a strong discourse and had a tremendous effect on forming Korean people’s cosmology of the world and nation.25 During the colonial period, cultural nationalism, which relied heavily on the Westernised notion of development, contributed to the mobilization of Korea as a homogeneous ethnic nation. The evolution of ethnic Koreans to a more developed state—based on Social Darwinism—was emphasized by many cultural nationalists.26

After the Korean War, developmentalism, which had preceded the colonial and liberation period, emerged as the central discourse of reconstruction. The Korean War (1950-1953) witnessed not only the physical devastation of the Korean landscape but also a revolutionary transformation in the socio-political and cultural realm of Korean society. Before the Korean War and the ban of leftist parties in 1949, the leftists had powerful voices in the political domain.27 In the early period of the liberation, South Korea also had a relatively flexible social system. While North Korea based its planned economy on strong state power and communist ideals, extensive debates were carried out in South Korea to determine the nature of its post-liberation economic system and the extent to which the state would control it.28 Despite the ban on leftist criticism of

national politics after the execution of leftist political leaders in 1949, civil organizations and individuals still attempted to create a leftist cultural and political space, as best exemplified in the active role of the Progressive Party (Chinbodang), which was popular among common people. While moderate progressive political leaders such as Kim Ku struggled against the pro-American policies of the Syngman Rhee regime, political leaders in the post-liberation period demonstrated a strong leadership embracing the notion of national unification.

Though political leaders and citizens supported a strong national unification movement during the post-liberation period (1945-1950), the Korean War and the subsequent occupation of the nation by the two imperial powers of U.S.S.R. and U.S. in North and South Koreas, respectively, perpetuated the 38th parallel division of the Korean peninsula. The U.S. military government residing in Seoul suppressed the left and demolished progressive civil organizations in South Korea while the promulgation of the National Security Law led to the ultimate ban of the communist party in 1949. Instead of trying to unify the nation, the Syngman Rhee government (South Korea’s first republic) sought to mobilize the South Korean nation based on liberal democracy and anti-communism. In the pre-war period, while the national policy of “one nation-one people (Ilminjuůi)” tacitly supported a military attack against North Korea, in the post-war period, it helped to paint two pictures of the Koreas—one based on anti-communism and liberal democracy and the other, a “red” nation, based on communism. The latter was especially true when Rhee was trying to exert political leadership. Rhee argued that

29 The best example would be the execution of Cho Pong-am and the prohibition of the Progressive Party in the aftermath of the so-called Progressive Party Incident (Chinbodang sakkôn).
30 Sŏ Chung-sŏk, Rhee Syngman kwa cheil konghwaguk, Yŏksabip’yŏngsa, 2007.
33 Regarding Rhee’s political power and the people’s poor support of him in every election, refer to Sŏ Chung-sŏk, Ibid.
Kim Il-sung’s sovereignty over the northern part of the Korean peninsula was a temporary state and one which would soon be demolished.

Within the context of Cold War politics and a containment policy by the U.S. that made South Korea, the front line of a U.S.-centered “free world,” anti-communist rhetoric functioned as an extremely powerful ideology to mobilize the people.34 The Korean War became the physical embodiment of the clash of these two ideologies. The massacres of ordinary people by both the South Korean government during the early days of the Syngman Rhee regime (4.3 Cheju Incident and Yōsu-Sunch’ŏn Revolt) and the North Korean soldiers during the Korean War helped to create a great fear of the “reds” (ppalgaeng’i, communists) and mobilize the people. The massacre of landlords by North Koreans also intensified the fear and hatred of communists.35 Through such measures that included aligning its socio-cultural and economic systems with its national anti-communist ideology, the young South Korean state implemented a strong policy of containment of both the “reds” in South Korea and North Korea. Another significant national ideology that proliferated as part of its anti-communism was anti-Japanism, wherein the government propagandized Japan’s relationship with North Korea, which subsequently also branded as an “enemy” with a dangerous “red” ideology.36

Under this social atmosphere of anti-communism in the 1950s, South Korea, as Pak Myŏng-nim once stated, could not but be a “pre-mature” democratic society. He argues, using a

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35 Regarding South Korea’s attitude toward the massacre of Yōsu-Sunch’ŏn revolt, and how it helped to construct a new citizenry and the image of a good state within South Korea, see Im Chong-myŏng, “Presenting ‘Taehanmin’guk (The Great Korea)’ seen in ‘yōsu-sunch’ŏn revolt,’” in Kang In-ch’ŏl ed., op. cit., Yoksabip’yŏngsa, 2006.
strict Marxist concept of middle class and its role in civil society, that South Korean democracy in the 1950s could not but be “pre-mature” given the country’s poor living standards and the lack of a bourgeoisie to provide a check and balance to state power. In Western literature on democracy, the middle class plays a significant role in civil society centered on property ownership.\(^{37}\) Such strict notions of civil society, however, have been revised to acknowledge other factors contributing to a society’s democratic structure, including the organizational heterogeneity and complexity of a civil society. In recent studies of South Korea in the 1950s, the proponents of this democracy theory have shown how many civil organizations were active in the civic sphere and how even a prototypical middle class had been in formation. For instance, Yu Yong-ik discusses the various social dynamics that were present in South Korea in 1950s that were responsible for strengthening the notion of citizenship, creating a new “middle class” in the late 1950s, and expanding ideas of social equality throughout the modern South Korean society.\(^{38}\) Thus, according to his argument, despite certain limits, South Korean society actively pursued modern democratic ideals during this period.

During the late 1950s, public discourses as they took form in popular magazines and newspaper articles appeared full of the spirit of individuality and freedom, as well as hope for reconstructing a better nation.\(^{39}\) This spirit was reflected in many of the popular magazines’s titles: for example, _The Brightness_ (Myŏngnang) or _The Hope_ (Hŭimang). At the level of public sphere, both civilians and the government embraced this free spirit and tried to to incorporate it


\(^{38}\) Yu Yong-ik, “The History of the 1950s from the comprehensive perspective – concentrating on the changes of South Korea,” in Pak Chi-hyang ed., _Haebang chŏnhusa ŭi chaeinsik_, Ch’aeksesang, 2006.

into the national system with the citizens themselves demanding the civil right to participate in policy making. In this sense, Yu’s comments provide insight into one dimension of South Korean society in the 1950s.

As Yu further comments, after the Korean War, many people acquired a chance to become full citizens, thus transforming their previous social relations. The Korean War created a new social hierarchy among the Koreans. Mandatory conscription, mandatory education, a literacy movement, and the institution of local governments liberated them from traditionally classed and hierachical relationships of Confucian ideology practiced throughout the Chosón and Japanese colonial periods. New human and cultural relationships took root where traditional Confucian-based social and cultural systems had existed. Most significantly, through revolutionary land reform, the land-owner (chiju) and land-renter (chönho) relationship that had formed the bedrock of the social class system from pre-modern Korean society to the colonial period became demolished. With the majority of the population being farmers in the 1950s, the land reform had a tremendous effect in wholly reorganizing the classes. While people who managed to obtain land increased their social power, tenant farmers had to relocate to new areas with social statuses. Many people started to leave their villages and move to urban areas with the

41 The transformation of the human relationship in the course of changing social atmosphere, of course, is not a new thing even in the most stable society of Chosón. In the late Chosón and the early modern Korea, the secondary group called “soŏl” played a key role in transforming Korean society to a serious degree. See, Hwang Kyung-moon, Beyond Birth: Social Status in the Emergence of Modern Korea, Harvard University Press, 2004. Also, during the 1940s Japanese war-time, many Koreans took advantage of becoming military officials and police in Korean peninsular and Manchu, while Japan was expanding their empire during this time. See Bruce Cumings, Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History, W.W. Norton, 2005.
42 Sŏ Chung-sŏk, Rhe Syngman kwa cheil konghwaguk, 2007.
post-war inflation causing the bankruptcy of many tenant farmers.\footnote{Although it might be a little bit exaggerated to calculate the migrating population to urban area, Carter Eckert also noted the significance of the transition of the 1950s in Carter Eckert, “The Social Transition and Industrialization during the war-time,” Pak Chi-hyang ed., \textit{op. cit.}} While individual desires to succeed in the urban areas propelled their move, modern systems such as public education opened new avenues to participate in the national economy. Using various traditional socio-cultural institutions such as the kinship structure (\textit{chongch`inhwoe}), school ties, and regionalism,\footnote{Roger L. Janelli, \textit{Making Capitalism: The Social and Cultural Construction of a South Korean Conglomerate}, Stanford University Press, 1993.} people strove to become national and modern subjects. Among these people, the state was often regarded as a patron and protector of the universal interests of the people. Vague but powerful aspirations for universal modernity underwritten by the state motivated the people to articulate their own lives and desires for upward mobility with the future of the nation.

Nonetheless, as many theorists of democracy have warned, democracy under a military regime is dangerous because it can lead to an authoritarian social system. While government and the people both imagined a modern democratic nation that practiced the formal democratic principles of pluralism, human rights, social contract, and political representation,\footnote{On the characteristics of “formal democracy,” refer to Agenes Heller, “On Formal Democracy,” in John Keane eds., \textit{op. cit.} Her keen analysis on the Eastern European society suggests how a democratic society could be a totalitarian society in its character.} unchecked political powers based on militarism and economic might ended up creating an authoritarian state. As such, military dictatorship in South Korea ended only in 1987 when former military dictator Chun Doo-hwan officially renounced his re-appointment as president.

Looking back, it is important to identify the origin of South Korea’s authoritarian social structure, which had sustained it for almost thirty years, within the country’s political system in the 1950s. As noted above, the National Security Law (still in effect) and the banning of leftist
parties made strong resistance all but impossible. The seemingly diverse and democratic South Korea in the 1950s thus always existed within a limited cultural space. As Pak Myŏng-rim has argued, with the ability of citizens to check state power very weak, civil society naturally remained very weak. Instead, civic organizations and modern systems such as public schools were used to propagate government policies and mobilize support for Syngman Rhee during the presidential elections, including the national elections on March 15th 1960. Rife with charges of corruption, the election resulted in the April Revolution.\(^{46}\) With civil society rendered all but powerless with the national ideology of anti-communism, cultural institutions took over the role of shaping political issues. For example, powerful cultural dialogues took place among intellectuals in spheres such as Sasangkke, the most significant cultural and political magazine during the 1950s,\(^{47}\) about national politics and national construction. Rarely, however, were the results of these democratic debates implemented in the social systems.

With the limits and constraints of an immature democratic system, notions of national development and national progress became part of the prevailing national ideology, justifying state dominance and control over the civil society. Important to note in examining the immaturity of the political system and national efforts to implement West-centered notions of development and progress is how closely tied the social structure of South Korea’s post-war period is to the social structure of Japan’s colonial period. Some scholars argue for the origin of South Korea’s modern system in the Japanese colonial period, further stating that it became the driving force of

\(^{46}\) But it is also true that the mass civil rights movement somehow became the strongest interest group of South Korea.

South Korea’s economic miracle in the 1970s. 48 This brand of scholarship, prevalent in the West, thus credits the state with the economic miracle. Useful in tracing the links between the Japanese colonial period and post-colonial South Korea’s social and economic structures, such view, nonetheless, tends to overlook the defects of the Japanese colonial system and its strong political-economic relationship. Designed to benefit the Japanese, the capitalistic colonial structure of the Japanese empire was rarely directly beneficial to second-class Korean, Taiwanese, and lower-class Japanese immigrants in its colonies. 49 Certainly, the capitalistic socio-economic structure of the colonial period played a part. But more importantly, the success of the South Korean post-war economy can be attributed to the exploitation of the lower-class, whose members believed that national wealth meant an increase in the common wealth of the people and who thus sacrificed their lives to this authoritarian system, working 12-hour days with one of

48 For example, Carter Eckert argued that the origin of the South Korean capitalism is from the Japanese colonial period. His research on the Koch’ang Kim’s capitalistic genealogy from the late 1930s to the 1945 demonstrates a genealogy of Korean capitalism from the colonial period to the post-colonial period. See Carter Eckert, *Offspring of empire: the Koch’ang Kims and the colonial origins of Korean capitalism, 1876-1945*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991. His argument was based on the notion that the South Korean military implemented one of the most successful economic reconstruction plans in the world. Though Eckert showed the linkage between Koch’ang Kim’s assets and Samyang, he does not explain how Kochang Kim had accumulated their assets so fast by the time of the Japanese annexation of Korea. The strong relationship between economics and politics is one of the legacies that Japanese colonial empire left in South Korea.

Regarding this tendency of scholarship, see Hagen Koo “Introduction”, in *State and Society in Contemporary South Korea*. This kind of scholarship does not explain the different economic developmental status between North Korea and South Korea in the 1950s. Before South Korea displayed the economic ‘miracle,’ North Korea was far more developed than South Korea, because most of the modern industrial infrastructure was constructed in the North. Scholars were not able to explain the disjunction between the colonial structure of South and North Korea. Also, although Eckert exemplified one successful case of the landed classes’ transfer of national capital to modern industrial capital, most of the land-owning classes had been demolished after the socialist land reform. Most land-owning classes were not able to transfer their assets to the modern industrial system. Compared to North Korea’s planned economy and social structure, South Koreans experienced a huge social, economic and class transition in post-liberation and post-war South Korea, which resulted in the ‘delay’ of development during this time Thus, rather than the direct impact of the heritage of colonial capital used for establishing a company the post-colonial South Korea, the cultural and political structure which disciplined Koreans into Facist social system might have more powerful influence to the post-colonial society.

the world’s lowest incomes.\textsuperscript{50} Under the war-time fascist regime, one rarely found traces of political struggles by the leftists, with many left-wing intellectuals cooperating with the Japanese Empire in its “Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere” scheme.\textsuperscript{51} Such authoritarian and oppressive social structures can be seen as the inheritance of war-time Japan, one of the strongest fascist and capitalist regimes in the world.\textsuperscript{52}

Following the implementation of a modernized social system during the Japanese colonial period, Koreans claimed ownership of their nation-state following the post-war period, to a certain extent, succeeding in creating their own nation-state and their own citizenry. However, most political parties continued to be occupied by members of the property-owning class\textsuperscript{53} with strong relationships to the Japanese colonial government and the American military government during the liberation period. After South Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule, approximately eighty percent of national property on the Korean peninsula was owned by the Japanese. During the American military government,\textsuperscript{54} fortunes were created by buying up the former Japanese assets, named “enemy property” (chǒkssan). Despite regulations to hand over the ownership of the “enemy property” to people in a process termed chǒkssanbura, people with personal connections to the government ended up receiving most of these assets.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{52} Only recently, we can find some research on the 1950s South Korean social structure with relation to the colonial period. Refer to Kie-chung Pang ed., Singing Fascism üi yusan kwa kük pok üi kwaje, Hye’an, 2005. Although these two arguments are not seemingly compatible, I believe these aspects are two sides of the same coin: the South Korean modern national system. Regardless of which colonial legacy was more powerful in the 1950s, both legacies are found in 1950s South Korean society.
\textsuperscript{53} Kong Che-uk, ed., op. cit.
\textsuperscript{54} Kang Man-kil, op. cit.; Also see, Kong Che-uk ed., op. cit.
\textsuperscript{55} Kong, op. cit.
Moreover, with the rapid inflation after the Korean War and steep increase in the value of these assets, the recipients of this “enemy property” were able to maintain and consolidate their dominant socio-economic and political position in post-war South Korea.\textsuperscript{56} This pattern of corruption was repeated in other realms. Due to the collapse of the social infrastructure following the Korean War, the Syngman Rhee government became heavily dependent upon financial aid from the US. With tremendous power over financial assistance, the Korean state distributed it only to certain groups that met its political criteria.\textsuperscript{57} Financial aid to industry through the distribution of bank loans thus became the key element in the formation of a class favored by the state.\textsuperscript{58}

In order to hide their past relationships with the Japanese colonial government during the period of American military government, the political leaders used the discourse of national economic development that overpowered any ideals of political democracy to recover from the war-time destruction. Such discourse facilitated cooperation between the authoritarian government and a newly emergent state-favored class in order to maintain the political status quo and a capitalistic system. Under this system, the government continually manipulated the possibility of an imminent North Korean attack for political ends and strongly emphasized the reconstruction of the nation based on a capitalistic system. Thus, driven by the need to compete with North Koreans, many South Koreans supported a nationalistic ideology that mobilized the country as one solid political and economic system. Due to the previous property owning class’s


\textsuperscript{57} Woo Jung-en, “Looking for the side of the rationality: the political economy of import-centered industry of Syngman Rhee regime,” in Pak Chi-hyang ed., \textit{op. cit.}

control over the national economy and political power structure, South Korea’s weak and elitist civil society endured for more than thirty years.

Now, I return to a discussion of how the film industry’s complex historical background influenced the post-war South Korean filmmaking system during the post-liberation and post-war years, to explicitly demonstrate the ways in which the developmentalist logic put into practice during these years resulted in the making of the “Golden-Age” of South Korean cinema industry.

**National Reconstruction of Cinema: Colonial Origins and Anti-colonial Discourse**

Different from other art forms, making a film entailed a need to learn Western technology and obtain enormous amounts of capital. In a colonial situation, in which filmmaking was first introduced in Korea, Korean filmmakers could not but be heavily dependent upon the Japanese film industry and its infrastructure, due to the lack of Korean capital and workforce. Ironically, even though Korean filmmakers regarded cinema as an art form expressing a nation’s spirit, they were still heavily dependent upon Japan’s technology. Japanese film policy and its changing attitudes toward the Korean filmmaking industry also had a great impact on the Korean filmmaking process during the colonial period. Finally, as noted above, the colonial discourse of developmentalism, which determined the capitalistic political orientation of Japan, also brought pressure to bear on the Korean filmmaking industry. In this section, I will discuss how the Korean filmmaking industry inherited this colonial legacy during the liberation period.

From the early stages of cinema production in colonial Korea, cinema—both in terms of its aesthetics and industry—was discussed in relation to its function of forming national identity.
When Na Űn-kyu’s *Arirang* (1925) became explosively popular among Koreans, many intellectuals noted the special function of film in disseminating national ethos. Virulent debates about what aesthetically constitutes *Chosôn* (national) film and how to make such films have also dogged discussions of Korean cinema. During the 1920-30s, most powerful were the KAPF’s (Korea Artista Proleta Federatio) critiques of “national (minjok)” aesthetics and Marxist filmmaking by the leftists. These groups even criticized Na Űn-kyu’s *Arirang* for failing to delineate the critical social reality of the Chosôn *minjung* (people) although it successfully conveyed nationalistic feelings. With the leftist movement becoming popular under the leadership of Korean communists and Marxist artists, Japan’s first Korean film policy centered around censorship. In the 1920s, the Japanese government established a film bureau to censor films that were supposedly harmful to Korean people by propagating the “bad ideology” of communism.

When the “talkie” was first introduced in *Chosôn*, however, many filmmakers became intrigued not only in film content but also in the technology of filmmaking. Seeing the new possibilities of film technology became an eye opening moment for many filmmakers. “Reconstruction” came to encompass both an aesthetic judgment and the construction of a national film industry capable of making technologically advanced films like Western talkie films. Nevertheless, in order to make a talkie film, the Korean filmmakers had to have access to large facilities equipped with cameras, lighting, and a recording system as well as a studio.

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59 Regarding the debates on this issue, see Kim Chong-uk, *Silok han’guk yǒnghwache charyo ch’ongsō II*, Kuk’ak Charyowŏn, 2004.

60 At the time in Japan, communist ideology had been disseminated widely by Japanese intellectuals, and had started to be controlled. Regarding film policy during the Japanese colonial period, refer to Cho Chun-hyŏng, “The Film Policy during the Japanese Colonial Period (1903-1945),” in Kim Tong-ho ed., *Han’guk yǒnghwache ch’ongch’eaksa*, Nanam, 2005.
Accordingly, the film policy became revised in 1934. Contrary to the previous policy’s emphasis on censorship, the revised policy restricted the number of foreign film imports and highlighted the development of a national industry, helping to promote the making of “Japanese” or “Korean” films. Still, while the Corea Cinema Association (Koryŏ yŏnghwawǒ hyŏphweo) was established to make technologically-advanced “Korean” films, it was at odds with the Japanese war-time policy that prohibited the production of Chosŏn films with the theme of promoting ethnic identity. Instead, with the advanced film technology, this association was forced to make pro-Japanese war-time propaganda films.

In 1939, the first film law was established during war-time Japan. This film law was radical in that it heavily restricted the filmmaker’s autonomy in the filmmaking process, especially with regard to production and distribution. The government confiscated and nationalized private filmmaking facilities so that the film companies could be equipped with the most modernized and technologically advanced system. It was a very protective national film law, complementing the strict control of film content. In particular, this film law regulated the national film industry in order to promote war-time spirit. After the emergence of talkie films, Korean filmmakers had little choice but to cooperate with the making of mostly pro-Japanese war-time propaganda films. The nationalized Japanese film company that emerged after its merging with the existing private film companies was the only location where Chosŏn filmmakers could make films using the most advanced technology of the time. This heavy reliance on this film production system, which became referred to as the “new cinema system”

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61 Yi Hwa-chin, Chosŏn yŏnghwawǒ: sorí úi toip esó ch’inil yŏnghwawǒ kkaji, Ch’aeksang, 2005.
(Yŏnghwa sinch’aeje)\(^{63}\) resulted in the production of propaganda films.

After the liberation in 1945, the legacy of the oppressive colonial cultural policy continued. The U.S. military’s control over South Korea replicated the colonial social structure during the liberation period. The film policy regulated the entire filmmaking process and filmmakers faced strong limitations in making a national film. During the U.S. military government occupation (1945-1948), government policies strictly controlled the mass media, including film and these policies continued to dominate the South Korean filmmaking structure in the 1950s.\(^{64}\) Until 1962, South Korea did not have a national film law. The film ordinances of the U.S. Army (numbers 68 and 115) remained effective until the establishment of post-war South Korea. Basically, these ordinances had two aims: the protection of national film and strong censorship of film content. The protection of (U.S.) national films favored the U.S. by permitting large imports of Hollywood films to South Korea. Meanwhile, the censorship code, also known as “double censorship” (ijung kyŏmnyŏl),\(^{65}\) was directly derived from the notorious Japanese colonial film law. Other than the prohibition in import and screening of Hollywood films, most of the U.S. military government’s film policy was derived from the former Japanese film regulatory system.\(^{66}\) Under these restrictions, making a national film became almost impossible for Korean filmmakers.

Moreover, many propaganda filmmakers who had worked during the Japanese colonial period were employed by the 502 American Army base and continued their careers making

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\(^{63}\) Yi Hwa-chin, \textit{op. cit.}


\(^{65}\) Double censorship involved a literally dual censoring process. First, the film script was censored before the production. From a censored script, filmmakers made a film, which was censored again before screening, which is often called “scissoring (kawuijil).”

\(^{66}\) Pae Su-kyŏng, “The History of Korean Film Censorship,” in Kim Tong-ho ed., \textit{op. cit.}
propaganda films for the U.S. military government. With much of the private equipment and facilities used for cinema production at the Chosŏn Yŏngwha Corporation (Sadan pyŏpin Chosŏn yŏngwha chusikhwoesa), a state-sponsored, united filmmaking company during the wartime Japanese colonial period, returned to the U.S. military government, and the U.S. military government owned most of the filmmaking facilities. Post-liberation South Korean cinema production, therefore, became heavily dependent upon the U.S.-controlled facilities.

The U.S. control of the Korean cinema industry had its most devastating impact on the distribution system and in the form of the economic inequality that it generated. Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s, which had been prohibited during the Second World War by the Japanese government, were released in large numbers in the South Korean cultural space. Just as the Japanese government had banned the importation of Hollywood film, the U.S. military government prohibited the importation of films from other foreign countries, and an American cinema distribution company, Central Motion Pictures (Chung’ang yŏngwha paekūphwoesa, CMP afterwards) monopolized the South Korean film distribution market. According to a newspaper article, almost six hundred Hollywood films were imported and released by CMP, most of them from CMP’s old stockpile.

Even after the establishment of the South Korean government in 1948, American films continued to be predominant until 1962, when the first film law restricted the importation of

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68 Regarding South Korean film history during the U.S. military government, see Cho Hye-chŏng, op. cit.
70 “The Crisis of National Film/ We Need an Urgent Plan!” Seoul Sinmun, April 23, 1948
foreign (mostly Hollywood) films. In the late 1950s, in addition to the films from CMP’s stockpile, contemporary Hollywood films (which we now refer to as Classical Hollywood Cinema), also became widely distributed. Though national film production increased in the late 1950s, the number of foreign films—ninety percent of which were from Hollywood—amounted to 1,264 films, or three times that produced in Korea.  

Leftist Korean filmmakers violently resisted the military government’s film policy in the liberation period, especially after an incident involving a Japanese film law. In 1946, since the military government did not censor the Japanese war-time propaganda films, a theater owner simply changed the title of a Japanese propaganda film and screened it. The original title, *Military Train (Kun’yong yǒlch’a, 1938)*, was changed to *A Young Man on a Sunset Street (Nagyang úi chǒlmun’i)*—perhaps to suggest a “western” film genre and exploit the public’s appetite for Western films. Screening a well-made, Classical Hollywood film was much more profitable for the theater owner than screening poorly-made Korean one. Interestingly, the targets of criticism included not only the theater owner’s commercialism but also the government’s negligence in failing to censor a cultural product containing Japanese colonialist ideology. Despite these outcries, however, the U.S. military government did not make any changes in its film policy.

Meanwhile, the South Korean film industry faced great difficulties in making feature

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72 Han’guk yǒngha charyop’yǒllam, Korean Film Council, 1976, p.78.
films of its own. Filmmakers expressed worry over the decline of Korean film production in terms of the available technology, facilities, and equipment as well as the number of films produced. During the period of U.S. military control, around twelve film production companies produced a total of almost thirty films. Of these, only fifteen to sixteen were feature films; the rest were U.S. military government documentaries. With regards to film techniques, South Korean had been making talkies since the Japanese colonial period. During the post-liberation period, however, the majority of feature films continued to be silent and most in 16mm format. The Korean film industry viewed all these factors as signifying the decline of Korean cinema industry and took the problem seriously. Many people even argued for the total reconstruction of the film industry under state direction.

In the post-liberation period, along with the Korean Cinema Union (KCU) (Chosón yǒnghwatongmaeng), the film organization representing both left and right wing filmmakers, the Korean filmmakers suggested the adoption of the following policies by the Korean government:

1) The government should import the necessary filmmaking equipment required for the recovery of the film industry. The government should also plan to produce films in a wide range of categories such as educational, socially enlightening, cultural feature films, and documentaries.
2) The distribution of all films should be for the national economy and foreign investment should be used to enhance the national culture. Regular cinema theaters should be built, maintained, and operated in order to achieve these goals.
3) A film research center should be established in order to educate and cultivate academics, researchers, and filmmakers. Both artists and engineers should be sent

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75 Yi Yǒng-il, op. cit. p.221.
76 Han'guk yǒnghwacharyop'yŏlram, p.78.
78 Korean Cinema Union (KCU) was the most inclusive “national” cinema organization. Former Korea Artista Proleta Federatio (KAPF) members and pro-Japanese who actively worked for Chosŏn Yǒnghwachoson Corporation, the Japanese government patronized cinema company, joined this group.
overseas for professional training. The government should actively support and offer guidance to privately owned companies in the film industry and initiate programs that foster technical and cultural skills.

4) Film schools and training centers should be founded and projection rooms should be built in urban and rural schools, work places, factories, as well as in farming and fishing villages.\(^{79}\)

From the beginning to the end of this statement, KCU asked for stronger state engagement in the reconstruction of the national cinema industry. Similarly, Sŏ Kwang-je, a famous Marxist film critic from the colonial period, a representative collaborator who made Japanese propaganda films during Japanese occupation, and a member of KCU, advocated a state-centered film policy. He stated that the government should adopt a film quota system to restrict the number of foreign films, impose an import tax to support Korean film production, and build theaters and cinema studios.\(^{80}\)

The filmmakers, meanwhile, requested that the state first establish a national filmmaking infrastructure, stating that the film industry was a significant educational tool for the nation. By specifying the need for cinema in “not only the urban area but also the rural area,” KCU emphasized their notion of film as a significant educational tool for all people in South Korea. These requests presumed the central role of the state in the reconstruction of the national film industry. Moreover, the filmmakers also called upon the government to set a distribution quota on foreign films in order to protect the national cinema industry. Finally, they encouraged the state to support the development of advanced filmmaking skills in order for the industry to compete with film products from other nations.


In short, it seems that Korean filmmakers were heavily dependent upon a state-centered developmentalism, with this attitude basically a result of their colonial experiences under war-time Japan. Many people who worked for the “state-run” studio system of the Japanese film companies, in fact, recall working in a modernized film company and getting a stable salary from the company as a pleasant memory, compared to the hardships they experienced during the liberation period.81 Yi Hyo-in argues that this is the case because the leftists were empowered during this period (before the establishment of National Security Law), and they had a concept of the state as a rational entity. Therefore, they did not expect their pursuit of state-centrism to result in state-despotism.82 However, it does not as appears as if the state-centrism of the leftists is related in any systematic way to the ideological perspectives of the individual members. Although many leftists yearned for a strict, planned economic structure, as opposed to the rightists’ advocacy of a liberal economic system, under the military regime, the nationalization of the cultural industry often led to despotism.

While the filmmakers’ demands for a national film industry were made in clear resistance to the U.S. dominance in the Korean film industry and helped to create a national discursive space, they were also trapped by the logic of progress and development embedded in discourses of South Korean modernity. The government-centered reconstruction of the film industry, in fact, stemmed directly from the Japanese war-time spirit. During war-time, the Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (Taedong’a kong’yǒng) propogated by the Japanese empire relied on a logic that was based on West-centered Social Darwinism and a belief in the total

rationality of the state. Although the Japanese fascist regime was hostile to leftists, many leftists continued to support and participate in fascist war-time politics because of their belief in the rationality, political equality, and social welfare of the state. As such, although the KCU espoused anti-imperial and progressive notions of the nation, their film policy continued to follow the logic of developmentalism. It is not surprising, then, that many anti-communist developmentalists continued to follow a similar logic of progressive civic organization in post-war South Korea.

Rescuing Cinema from Post-War Destruction

During the Korean War, contrary to some scholars’ assertions that there had been some improvement in the refurbishing of filmmaking facilities and equipment during the liberation period (1945), almost all filmmaking assets, including those left over from the colonial period, were depleted. After the war, South Korea had the following filmmaking equipment and facilities:

1) Laboratories: Sangnam United States Information Service film studio; Anti-aircraft Company of the Ministry of Defense; Film Crew of the Troop Information and Education Center under the Ministry of Defense; Jinhae Hyŏpddong Film Studio

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83 Regarding such logics, refer to Stephan Tanaka’s Japan’s Orient: rendering pasts into history, University of California Press, 1993.
84 The staged developmentalism embedded in Marxists’ epistemology actually supports the notions of capitalists in a very ironic way. Although Marxists were critical to the capitalist society, based on Marx’s capitalism and dialects, the prosperity of capitalism was the pre-condition for the communist society. In this way, Marxist notion might function to endure the social steps of exploitive capitalistic state like Japan’s colonial empire assuming the “possible” progress of communist society in the future. The Korean and Japanese Marxists’ ideological shifts supporting the Japanese empire during the war-time, could be understood in this context, although more historical and theoretical analysis might be needed.
2) Cameras: 2 Eyemo Tarret New Models; 10 Eyemos\textsuperscript{86}, 3 Parvos (made in USA); 5 16mm film camera specials, 8 Filmos
3) Lights: altogether about 400kw
4) Recording Machines: 4 (35mm and 16mm)
5) Raw Film Stock: (No spare 35mm or 16mm)
6) A Few Editing Machines\textsuperscript{87}

Given the total destitution after the war, it was almost unimaginable for a private company to take up the enterprise of making a commercial film. During the war, filmmaking was centered on war-time propaganda, anti-communistic films, and war-time documentaries. Moreover, almost all of the filmmaking equipment was owned by the American Army Public Information Bureau residing in Korea (\textit{Chuhan miguk kongboch’ò}), also known as the former 502 U.S. Army. To access the equipment, filmmakers had to line up at the bureau and wait for their turn. Pok Hyesuk, a famous actress of the time, recalled how other filmmakers, who were shooting \textit{The Shadowless Pagoda} (\textit{Muyǒngt’ap}, 1957), were watching her film \textit{Prince in Yam Clothes} (\textit{Ma ūi t’aeja}, 1956) because there was only one camera.\textsuperscript{88} According to a film lighting technician, even the lights listed above were “made in U.S.S.R.” (\textit{ssojje}), imported to North Korea from the Soviet Union during the Korean War.\textsuperscript{89} In order to make a feature film, filmmakers needed a connection with the American Army Public Information Bureau or had to have enough money to create a new facility. The conditions for production of substantial feature and commercial films were also clearly inadequate.

In addition to the psychological and physical trauma of losing half the nation, the post-

\textsuperscript{86} The Eyemo camera is a special camera designed for making documentaries, Kim Mi-hyŏn ed., \textit{Han’guk Yonghwasa: kaehwagi esó kaehwagi kkaji}, Communication Books, 2006, p.111.

\textsuperscript{87} “Hope for the Filmmaking Restoration,” \textit{Yonhap Sinmun}, March 6, 1953.

\textsuperscript{88} Pok Hye-suk, a president of the organization of actors and actresses talked about this miserable situation. \textit{Myǒngnang}, October, 1956.

war South Korean film industry had also faced huge losses within its workforce. Many celebrated filmmakers from the colonial period, such as Choe In-kyu, Yi Myǒng-u, Kim Chǒng-hyuk, Pak Ki-ch’ae and Ch’oe Sǒng-lin, disappeared, either presumed to have been kidnapped by or willingly defected to the North. Such conditions naturally led the Korean filmmakers to adopt national reconstruction discourses in asking the state to aid in the reconstruction of the national filmmaking industry. In the 1950s, given North Korea’s economic prosperity and industrial support from the U.S.S.R, filmmaking was much more advanced in North than South Korea. On October 29, 1945, the U.S.S.R helped to establish a huge studio in North Korea by exporting cameras, lights, and cheap film. In communist and authoritarian societies, the discourse of cinema as a tool of state-propaganda was generally pervasive. The South Korean filmmakers viewed North Korea’s superior film industry as a major threat, adding a sense of urgency and motivation to its efforts to make better films. The South Korean government also observed the cultural and industrial superiority of North Korea as a threat and fell back on anti-communistic ideology, based on imminent threats of attack by North Korea during the post-war period, to shore up its own authority.

The filmmaking industry was not immune to this anti-communist discourse either. With the widespread damage to the filmmaking infrastructure during the Korean War, the rhetoric of anti-communism and the logic of developmentalism prepared the way for another stage of reconstruction of the national film industry. With South Korea seeking to construct a strong nation, some felt that most effective way to do that was to reconstruct the film industry. As noted above, the discourse of the reconstruction of a cinema industry, which had emerged from the

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Japanese colonial and post-liberation period as a spirit of the nation, thus became transmitted and practiced in post-war South Korea.

After the Korean War, strong discourses of developmentalism combined with anti-communism to mobilize the South Korean filmmakers to more vigorously pursue the nationalization of the film industry. As noted above, this sentiment of anti-communism was widely disseminated in the immature democratic sphere by newspapers and magazines. The desire of filmmakers to build a modern and nationalized system began to impact the national film policies, contributing to the prosperity of film production in the late 1950s. The “Golden-Age” of South Korean cinema was thus born where cinema was seen as a tool for ideologically enlightening the people and developing national ethos.

Embodying this spirit was Yi Kyu-hwan, an influential director from the colonial period and a director of the first post-war South Korean box office hit, *The Story of Ch’un-hyang* (*Ch’unhyangjŏn*, 1956), who wrote:

> During war-time, in every nation of the world, the most important role of the cinema is to nurture and fortify the spirt of the people and to show the power of the nation. Cinema should lead people’s *spirits*, and this is why cinema, radio, and newspaper support and co-operate with the state in many countries.\(^{91}\) [emphasis added]

Written in 1954, before his first commercial hits, this article clearly states Yi’s belief in cinema as a significant national institution for nurturing the spirit of the people. Despite the fact that the Korean War had ended a year ago, the war-time spirit is still alive and well in this statement. Without a doubt, what Yi means by “spirit” is anti-communism. When he was in Tokyo, Yi continued to express surprise at the high quality of North Korean propaganda films. Hearing that

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\(^{91}\) *Sinyŏngwhwa*, November, 1954.
a North Korean film was being submitted to the Asian Film Festival, he argued that South Korean filmmakers should also submit high quality films to international film festivals. His statements thus reveal the sense of competitiveness felt by South Korean filmmakers towards their counterparts in North Korea, driving the development of the Korean film industry.

Towards the end of this statement, Yi asserts the effectiveness of mass media as a tool of anti-communist propaganda in asking for the state support of the South Korean film industry:

1) The government should give special cultural awards to the scenario writers, directors, actors/actresses, and staffs who made excellent national films.
2) The government should buy all needed filmmaking equipment from foreign nations.
3) The government should provide proper film screening equipment to theaters.
4) The government should prohibit the import of foreign films which lack suitable aesthetic qualities.

Thus, nationalistic discourses that drew comparisons between a backward South Korean film industry and an advanced North Korean one became a chief means for filmmakers, suffering from the lack of funds and filmmaking facilities after the Korean War, to appeal to the South Korean state to rescue the national cinema.

Some filmmakers went beyond these typical policy recommendations to request more radical reforms. For instance, in an article entitled “What We Request” published in a film magazine, Chŏn T’aek-i, a famous film actor from the Japanese colonial period, states:

I hope that (the nation) can assure the social status of young filmmakers. We need young film artists under the age of thirty. For the prosperity of the filmmaking industry, I even ask for their exemption from military duty.92

Chon was effectively calling upon the state to intervene to give male filmmakers an exemption.

92 Sin'yŏnghwa, November, 1954.
from their military service. Given the fact that it was only one year after the end of the Korean War, this was a very radical proposition that could potentially antagonize many people. Such extreme requests thus reflected the extremely abject situation of the national film industry after the Korean War. The quest for a state-centered reconstruction of the film industry also reflected the nature of the economy of the time, which was state-led, not market-oriented. While this state-centered discourse did not persist far into the future, it nonetheless strongly impacted the national filmmaking policy decisions.

Following the incessant appeals of the filmmakers, the government vigorously promoted the film industry as a significant arena of national development, implementing a tax-exemption for the industry soon after the war in 1954, followed by a reward system in 1958. The latter basically instituted a foreign film import quota for film production companies. Meanwhile, if a Korean film was chosen as a “good film” of the year, that film’s production company was given the right to screen a foreign film. One might wonder why the screening of a foreign film was a reward for making a good national film. The rationale for this policy lied in the higher admission fee for foreign films. With the admission fee for a foreign film three times higher that of a national film, the film production company could make much more money. The reward system, therefore, was highly ironic, considering the fact that it ended up solidifying the unequal admission fees for national and foreign films even though it aimed to enhance the prosperity of national films. At any rate, despite the physical devastation visited by the Korean War, the loss of major directors and film producers who went to North Korea, and the social and cultural turmoil overwhelming South Korean society, the South Korean film industry managed to experience an explosive growth in post-war Korea through the aid of the South Korean state.
The Beginning of the Golden-Age

The efforts of the filmmakers and the government to reconstruct the national film industry began to pay off from the mid-1950s. Buoyed by the strong support of the tax-exemption law and two blockbusters—*The Story of Ch’unghyang (Ch’unghyangjŏn)* in 1955, and *Madame Freedom (Chayubuin)* in 1956—the Korean film industry entered its “Golden-Age.” The commercial success of these two films predicted a boom in the South Korean film industry. Seeing the commercial potential of national cinema, many businessmen jumped into the industry, spiking up commercial investment.93

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<td>Number of Films</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>111</td>
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**Table 1**
**Number of Films Produced in South Korea, from Han’guk yŏnghwa charyo p’yŏllam**

Most significantly, although the number of foreign films screened far exceeded the production of national films, audiences for national cinema increased and began to outnumber those for foreign films.94 In 1959, 111 South Korean films were produced and 71 film productions formally registered—the highest number of film production during the 1950s.95

Scholars commonly consider the tax-exemption policy for national film production, amended in 1954, as a key element in the restoration of South Korean film industry. The purpose of this tax-exemption was to “promote national cinema and to give more profits to the

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93 Han’guk yŏnghwa charyo p’yŏllam, Korean Film Council, 1976, p.47.
94 Choe Kŭm-dong, “We Can Do It, but We Need Brains,” *Kukje yŏnghwa*, April, 1960. In this article, Choe points out that the total audience for national films exceeded that of the foreign film audience. “I am not disappointed that we have more of an audience for national film than for foreign film,” he writes. “We had four to five national films which exceeded 100000 attendees – which is the merging point of plus/minus-, but there is no foreign film which exceeded 100000 viewers.”
95 Han’guk yŏnghwa charyo p’yŏllam, p.48.
filmmakers by exempting national cinema from taxation so that the filmmakers can produce films more cheaply than foreign films.”96 Until this tax-exemption law was abolished in 1960, when the government felt that the film industry had the ability to survive without government support, filmmakers derived great benefit from such indirect financial support. Aside from this indirect support, President Syngman Rhee, as noted before, also demonstrated his belief in the significance of national cinema through the “reward system” for national film production, instituted in 1958, providing further encouragement to South Korean filmmakers.

An even more significant concern for Korean filmmakers and the government was laying the groundwork for a filmmaking infrastructure. As noted before, filmmaking requires large, expensive facilities and equipment. During the 1950s, with government support, the delapidated primary infrastructure also began to be reconstructed. Theaters destroyed during the war were remodeled and the number of new theaters grew quickly.97 Free admission for veterans, was prohibited and modernizing the theaters became a main strategy in resuscitating the national popular culture. In 1957, three major studios—the Samsŏng Studio of Samsŏng Cinema Production, the An’yang Studio of Sudo Cinema Production, and the Chŏngnung Studio of the Association for Korean Film and Culture—were constructed with financial support from the government.98 Most films in the early 1950s were shot in the Samsŏng Studio, which had open-

98 In 1957, Han’guk Ilbo serialized an article titled “Visiting Cinema Studios.” In this article, the reporter visited each studio and wrote a detailed description of it. See “Visiting Studio: Samsŏng Studio,” Han’guk Ilbo, November 3, 1957.; “Visiting Studio: Chŏngnung Studio,” Han’guk Ilbo, November 10, 1957.; and “Visiting Studio: An’yang Studio.” Han’guk Ilbo, November 17, 1957.
sets. An’yang Studio was known as the biggest film studio in East Asia at that time. It took only a couple of years to put such large systems into operation on Korean soil. Home to Sudo Theater and An’yang Studio, Ch’ungmu Street (Ch’ungmuro), the center of Korean filmmaking during the Japanese colonial period, became the South Korean version of Hollywood.

Also noteworthy are the strong connections between the studio owners or the film production companies and the government in facilitating the rapid revamping of the filmmaking infrastructure. In order for a private film company to build such large structures, a government-sponsored bank loan system was necessary. As discussed above, with most of the capital in the 1950s coming from U.S. loans to the Rhee government, the Rhee government was firmly in control of the bank loans. Filmmakers thus had to rely on government largesse to receive financial assistance. Reflecting on her participation in a demonstration by filmmaker to demand the promulgation of the national film law in 1955, Pok Hye-suk, an actress and the president of the Actors’ Association, argued that South Korean filmmakers needed access to easy bank loans:

That is why I demonstrated for a film law…We still do not have such film law. If the government promulgates such a law, we can more easily obtain bank loans and that would help the development of the national film industry.

As Pok stated, getting easy bank loans was one way to make filmmaking easier. However, her requests were not granted. Having a personal connection to government or the bank still remained the easiest way to secure a loan—a method practiced by Hong Ch’an, the president of

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101 During the Japanese colonial period, Seoul was largely divided into two different cultural consumption patterns: North Village (Pukch’on) and South Village (Namch’on). Traditionally, North Village was the district for higher class people, whereas South Village was for poor families. During the colonial period, however, the South Village was used for a Japanese commercial area, and thus more commercialized and developed. Kim Ryŏ-sil, op. cit.
Sudo Film Company and An’yang studio.\textsuperscript{102} Using these loans, he traveled to Hollywood to buy cameras and other filmmaking equipment.\textsuperscript{103}

Another way to obtain the funds for filmmaking was to own a theater. But owning a theater, once again, required ties to the government. During the colonial period, the Japanese owned most of the theaters. During the post-colonial and war-time period, this “enemy property” became auctioned off.\textsuperscript{104} According to the U.S. military government’s endowment policy, the primary right to own a theater was held either by the supervisor of the building housing the theater or by the person holding the lease to this building. This was how supervisors like Hong Ch’an obtained the rights to Sudo and Kuktto theaters. But, as always, those with political connections were more likely to own a theater (i.e., Im Hwa-su, a former ticket clerk at P’yŏngwhwa Theater who used his political connections to acquire ownership of a theater). With the strong support of the government and the implementation of filmmakers’ requests within the state-centered endowment of cultural assets, a new generation of filmmakers like Hong Ch’an and Im Hwa-su ushered in the Golden-Age of South Korean cinema.

The next chapter will investigate the way in which private capital from the film industry became a national asset. Following the logics of development, in the late 1950s, the process of industrialization (kiŏphwa) was emphasized to avoid a weak and primitive industrial structure of filmmaking, a structure which filmmakers perceived as the main reason for the low-quality of film production. It will shed light on the formation of a modernized filmmaking system, explore the process of making commercial genre films, the comedy, for instance, and show how the state-

\textsuperscript{102} Kim Mi-hyŏn ed., Kaehwagi esŏ Kaehwagi kkaji. op. cit.
\textsuperscript{104} The registered “enemy property,” in Song Nak-won, op. cit. p.53.
centered modernization led to the beginning stage of the Golden-Age of South Korean cinema. In particular, comedy filmmakers who were successfully drawing on the discourse of national development will be illuminated. In so doing, the next chapter will also investigate the new, state-backed commercial strategy, which utilized Korea’s old artistic and cultural lineage in tandem with a modern company system oriented around exclusive contracts and a theater-chain system. Finally, the chapter discusses the politics of making an anti-communistic comedy film by a particular company, Korean Entertainment Inc., which strikingly showcases these complex historical and industrial contexts.
PART II: THE 1950’S AND COMEDY FILM

CHAPTER TWO

The Politics of Comedy Film Production

Amid the vigorous debates about government support, the tax-exemption policy, and the booming economy of the film industry in the late 1950s, many people expressed concern that the South Korean cinema industry faced another kind of crisis: cinema’s low quality. These worries arose from the fact that too many film production companies were churning out low-budget and low-quality films, a situation known as the il-sa-il-jak (One Company, One Film, 一社一作) phenomenon. This phenomenon highlights two significant problems faced by the South Korean film industry: the instability of the industry itself and, because of that weakness, the “low-quality” of films they produced.

The process of industrialization and modernization in the late 1950s began from the private relationship between the government and film companies, as discussed in chapter one. Strong support from the government was a precondition to initiate a financially stable company. On top of that, within the limited subsidy from the government, film companies and filmmakers also had to find the best possible way to earn money from their business. To reduce the business risk under these circumstances, many companies chose to cut costs by producing so-called “low-budget” commercial films, often using the human and theatrical heritage of old popular performance, akkūk, which became the filmmaking tradition in the early South Korean Golden-Age cinema production.

Chapter two examines the birth of one film genre of low-quality commercial film productions—the comedy film, and how a new generation of filmmakers in the late 1950s
developed film industry joining in the national discourse of modernization and industrialization. In particular, this chapter examines the backdrop of the boom of comedy film in the late 1950s, and the rise and fall of Korean Entertainment Inc., the era’s main comedy film production company. This chapter will outline how this emerging comedy film company successfully deployed the discourse of national development and modernization to get the attention of the public and the state. It also investigates how various business strategies, such as exploiting personal connections to show-industry people (mostly akkŭk people), led to the emergence of a modernized multi-genre entertainment system. By doing so, this chapter ultimately demonstrates how a film company was established as a relatively modernized company in a very short time span, while overcoming the common label of “low-quality” comedy film in spite of disparagement by elite film critics.

**Il-sa-il-jak, the Defect of National Culture**

The *il-sa-il-jak* phenomenon had been widely acknowledged as the most significant problem of Korean cinema industry since the Japanese colonial period. During the Japanese colonial period, before the appearance of two giant Korean film companies, *Corea Cinema Association* (*Koryo yŏnghwa hyŏphwoe*) and *Chosŏn Film Corporation* (*Chosŏn yŏnghwa chusik hwoesa*) in the 1930s, the Korean cinema industry was commonly described using the pejorative term, *il-sa-il-jak*, signifying a technologically underdeveloped and backward film production structure. Of this phenomenon Yi Yŏng-il wrote:

One of the reasons for [il-sa-il-jak] is because there was not enough capital for production. In Seoul or elsewhere, a film production company was established if it
found an investor. In other cases, a film company was established if it had a camera. Thus, the era of silent films [1920s-1930s colonial Korea] can be called a chaotic period of production companies.\textsuperscript{105}

As Yi pointed out, during the Japanese colonial period, Korean filmmakers considered technical advancement to be impossible due to the small size of Korean production companies and their unstable funding, especially when film making shifted to the era of talkie films that required much more capital and more advanced technology.\textsuperscript{106} As discussed in chapter one, conglomerates like \textit{Corea Cinema Association (Koryŏ yŏnghwa hyŏphwoe)} and \textit{Chosŏn Cinema Corporation (Chosŏn yŏnghwasa)}, with their relatively modern production and distribution system, thus became regarded as models of development for the entire industry.\textsuperscript{107}

This pejorative term appeared frequently in the late 1950s, driving the South Korean film industry to industrialize the cinema industry. If the success of the 1954 tax-exemption for films was judged only on whether it fulfilled its mandate of “producing cheaper film for our people,” then the number of films produced would seem to measure the success of film production. However, many film companies filed for bankruptcy after producing only one film. Indeed, that is what the term \textit{il-sa-il-jak} literally meant—the bankruptcy of film companies after making one film. Once agains, the term seemed to indicate the primitive conditions and backwardness of the Korean film production system. In particular, critics asserted that \textit{il-sa-il-jak}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{105} Yi Yŏng-il, \textit{op. cit.}, p.132-133.
\bibitem{106} In Hollywood tradition, making sound film is always related to the issues of building studio system, because at the beginning stage of making and recording sound was only possible within the studio. This sound making system within studio contributed to the beginning of Hollywood studio system. Refer to David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson eds., \textit{The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960}, Columbia University Press, 1985. Likewise, when “talkie” was first introduced in Korea, making a sound film was always discussed with building studio.
\bibitem{107} For detailed business strategies and their move to join the Japanese war-time New Cinema System, see Yi Hwa-jin, \textit{op. cit.} It is notable that the power of developmentalism and heavy dependency on capital, the basis of any industry, was the most significant factor in deciding the content of the film.
\end{thebibliography}
indicated the lack of a modern (capitalist) system that reinvested a company’s profits back into the film industry, enabling its growth and maximizing industry profits. In the South Korean system, where the theater owners were exempt from entrance taxes for the screening of national films, the theater owners became the main source of capital for film production, greatly limiting the funds for filmmaking.

In order to obtain a certain amount of profit with minimal risk, many film directors in the late 1950s thus made film with low budgets then moved onto another business. For instance, even the producer of *The Story of Ch’unhyang* (*Ch’unhyangjŏn*, 1955), the first box office hit in the post-war era, did not make a second film.108 *Samsŏng* Film Company (*Samsŏng yŏnghwas*), which made a huge box-office success, *Madame Freedom* (*Chayu puin*, 1956), went on to making several more films109 but it was an exception. Rather than the profits of one film being reinvested into another film, the profits were usually lent to a private loan company at a high interest rate. Such investment decisions occurred again and again, restricting the development of the film industry and resulting in the *il-sa-il-jak* phenomenon. In short, unless a film company owned a theater and directly profited from the screening, film production companies found it very difficult within the structure of South Korean cinema to get sufficient funds to make a second film. Thus, *il-sa-il-jak* contains two implicit criticisms of low-quality production and the lack of a modern industrialized film production system.

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The “Low-Quality” Problem

Much criticism of il-sa-il-jak focused on the problem of “low quality.” According to the famous film critic, Hō Paek-nyŏn, “this year (1957, the year that South Korea started to make many feature films), we did not produce any films that show the beauty or poetry of cinema.” Terms like “beauty” and “poetry” emphasize the aesthetic aspects of films, which national films, in his view, should also include. Although it is hard to judge what “beauty” and “poetry” exactly mean in this context, it is clear that critics did not look kindly upon the commercialism and low-budget nature of filmmaking resulting in the il-sa-il-jak phenomenon. Some even viewed it as a national defect. Interestingly, he blames the lack of a producer-system on the South Korean filmmaking industry—a system based on the Japanese conglomerate studio system that was previously viewed by many filmmakers to be ideal—insisting that the lack of proper filmmaking facilities produces films bereft of “beauty.”

As exemplified in Hŏ’s comment, elite film critics frequently mentioned the aesthetic qualities of the films, continuously provoking the question of what Korean national cinema should be. As noted in chapter one, leftist filmmakers also strove to answer the question of what constitutes Chosŏn (Korean) films during the colonial period. Likewise, during the late 1950s, debates also raged within the film magazines of “What is Korean realism?” and issues of whether Korean realism should be modeled on Italian neo-realism and the ideal of participation (angajyumang). Criticizing the heavy-handed employment of low-brow (and low-quality)

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111 I will discuss in more detail the dominance of aesthetical discourse of “realism” in South Korean modern history in chapter four. For reference, see Kim So-yŏn, “How A Stray Bullet became the best ‘Realism’ film of South Korea?”Yŏnhwa ŏnŏ, Spring, 2004.; Mun Chae-ch’ŏl, “Han’guk yŏnghwa pip’yŏng tampon ŭi ’t’ajasŏng kwa k’ŏmpleksŭ,” Yonsei Media-art Center, Han’guk yŏnghwa ŭi mihak kwa yŏksajŏk sangsangnyŏk, Sodo, 2006.
repertoires within the commercial film texts, critics regarded such commercial films as immature and disregarded them as an accomplished form of cinematic art.\textsuperscript{112} The demands for films to contain a proper national image emerged as a part of strong discourse of aesthetics, and, within such context, the commercialism of films began to be problemized by many film critics.\textsuperscript{113} Regardless of the economic boom in cinema production, film critics worried that these films were not good enough to represent national cinema. Aesthetic judgments, which view film as art rather than a commodity, became part of the discourses of elite film critics, marginalizing some popular genre films such as sinp’a (roughly translated as weepies or melodramas) and comedy films. While film critics did not necessarily agree on any one specific criterion to judge a film’s quality, they did agree that a film which overly relied on popular cultural forms such as akkūk automatically a low-brow and low-quality film. Interestingly enough, the blame for the “low-brow” and “low-quality” often centers on the extensive employment of akkūk performance in the film.

\textit{Akkūk} is a form of musical (melo)drama similar to the Japan-based American vaudeville consisting of singing, dancing, and acting. It was very popular during the 1930s in Korea and its popularity began to wane only in the late 1950s. Due to the fact that akkūk had been excluded in the historiography of plays, not many records are found on the history of akkūk. Pak No-hong’s \textit{The History of Korean Akkūk}, serialized in \textit{Korean Play}, is the one of the few detailed histories of akkūk from its earliest periods.\textsuperscript{114} Because Pak was one of the most prolific writers on akkūk

\textsuperscript{112} Those aesthetic judgments of the film critics, their near obsession with Italian Neo-realism, and its influence on film production and reception in the early 1960s will be discussed in depth in the chapter four.

\textsuperscript{113} Such aspects of commercial film, especially in comedy, will be discussed in depth in chapter four. Refer to O Yong-suk, “Transition and Historical Phase of the Korean Cinema in Post-war Period (1954-1959),” in Chŏng t’ae-su ed., \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{114} Pak No-hong, \textit{op. cit.}
since the Japanese colonial period, his writings are an invaluable source for studying Korean *akkŭk*. Although Kim Sŏk-min also provides helpful information on anti-communist *akkŭk*, his narrative focuses more about the anti-communist movements of *akkŭk* performances rather than the *akkŭks* themselves.\(^{115}\) Yu Min-yŏng, a theater scholar, also tries to trace the origin of *akkŭk* performances but fails to show a clear connection between the *akkŭks* in these earlier stages and the more commercialized *akkŭks* in the later stages.\(^{116}\) There are also some studies on *akkŭk* as the precursor of the more contemporary Korean musical.\(^{117}\) However, these studies do not analyze the character of *akkŭk* nor historicize its performance within changing national contexts. Only recently has Yi Hwa-chin attempted to explain *akkŭk* and its social meanings in the 1950s.\(^{118}\) However, she identifies the ideological functions of *akkŭk* only in relation to the Korean War, and thus fails to illuminate the history of *akkŭk* performances and the socio-political meanings in people’s consumption of this popular artform.

Due to the lack of study on *akkŭk* and the scarcity of archival materials on *akkŭk* performances, it is very difficult to define the meaning of an *akkŭk* performance and to know why many film critics criticize this performance as a low-brow. But it seems likely that the origin of *akkŭk* is closely related to other transnational popular culture forms. Although it took a detour through Japanese modern entertainment, *akkŭk*, like film, developed in relation to the arrival of Western entertainment such as vaudeville. As such, *akkŭk* is an extremely hybridized form of culture both influenced by American vaudeville and translated and consumed through


\(^{116}\) Yu Min-yŏng, *op. cit.*


the Japanese opera tradition of *Asakusa*. A strong connection thus lies between the Japanese vaudeville tradition and the Korean *akkūk*. Some Korean *akkūk* troupes owned by the Japanese also performed the Japanese style of *akkūk*, called *yanggokkūk* (洋曲劇) for Japanese audiences. This all hints at a similar cultural form in Japan as well as in the West.

In his writings on *akkūk*, Yu Min-yǒng posits three original types of *akkūk* performance in the Japanese colonial period. First, in an earlier period, he argues that *akkūk* originated in part from *makkan* (literally, “curtain to curtain”), a short comic play performed on the stage in front of a curtain to entertain the audience while the sets of the main drama were being changed for the next scene. Second, he points to Japanese *Takarazuka* as one of the influences on the *akkūk* performance. *Takarazuka* was an all-female revue founded in 1913 in the hot spring resort of *Takarazuka* by Kobayashi Ichizo, the Hankyu railroad magnate and department store owner. Attempting to create “wholesome family entertainment,” Kobayashi recruited twenty girls and trained them to sing and dance. Due to the popularity of *Takarazuka* (which was performed even on *Asakusa* Street, the central location of popular performances in old Tokyo), similar types of entertainment were mounted. Yu writes that *Pae Ku-cha kagūkttan* had a performance style similar to Japanese *Takarazuka*. Pae, rumored to be the daughter of Ito Hirobumi, was sent to Japan to work for the Japanese revue troupe *Tenkazu* in the early 1900s. When she came back to Korea after Ito Hirobumi’s assassination in 1909, she formed the revue group called *Pae Kuja*

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120 Pak No-hong, *op. cit.*
121 I am currently working on this interesting muti-pathed, detoured, cross-cultural translation, which would illuminate the significant strategic choices about what had been accepted and dismissed by South Korean *akkūk* producers, rather than to show it as a product of plagiarism or cultural imperialism.
Kagūttan, based on her own experiences in Tenkazu as well as from Takarazuka influences. Her revue group enjoyed great popularity in Chosŏn and in Japan. Finally, variety shows, such as OK Record and Victar Record—performed mainly by famous singers who had exclusive contracts with record companies—are also seen as originators of akkūk.\(^{123}\)

Aside from these obscure origins, what is clearly known is that akkūk was extremely popular among Koreans during the colonial period and even after the Korean War. In the late 1950s, however, despite its popularity, it had gained a reputation among film critics for low-browness and backwardness so that it was not considered appropriate to be modern national entertainment as I mentioned earlier. A famous film critic, Ho hyŏn-ch’an, for instance, stated that the South Korean film industry was devolving into low-brow humor, due to the easy adaptation of akkūk into film:

> Until now, our film producers targeted the film audience only within the boundary of the nation. Reproductions of low-brow melodrama from “akkūk” repertoires still compose the majority of our national film products. We cannot consider this a “film genre.” In short, our contemporary national cinema doesn’t appeal to “high-brow” audiences.\(^{124}\)

As noted by Ho hyŏn-ch’an, the easy adaptation of the akkūk performance into films was mostly to blame for South Korea’s low film quality. In his statement, low and high cultures are easily distinguished, with high-class tastes defining national cinema.

Indeed to his chagrin, the late 1950s saw many adaptations of akkūk repertoires for films. Still, after the late 1950s, the popularity of akkūk rapidly waned. I will discuss this in more detail below. This mass transition from akkūk to cinema was due to the lack of filmmaking experts after

\(^{123}\) Yu Min-yŏng, *op. cit.*, pp.421–422.

the Korean War. The old filmmaking generation had died and many akkūk people emerged to take their place in the film industry in the late 1950s. Akkūk stars became actors/actresses not only within comedies but also in other film genres. Male stars such as Kim Sŏng-ho, Kim Chinchu, and Ch’oe Mu-ryong, as well as female stars such as Hwang Chŏng-sun, Cho Mi-ryŏng, and Mun Chŏng-suk were all originally part of akkūk troupes. Thus, many films in the late 1950s naturally contained akkūk elements and many akkūk hits were remade into films in the late 1950s.

Based on the star power of Chŏn-ok and Yi Kyŏng-hi, the “queen of tears,” melodramatic renditions of akkūk performances were made. Films such as A Night at Harbor (Hanggu ūi irya, 1957), Snowy Night (Nun narinŭn pam, 1958), A Tear (Nunmul, 1958), Do Not Cry My Brother and Sister (Uljimara tunammae, 1960) and Did I Come to Cry? (Ulryŏgo naega wattŏn ’ga?, 1960) were all derived from akkūk.125 Many comic akkūk performances were transferred to the celluloid screen by Kim Hwa-rang, a former akkūk director and a scenario writer from the Japanese colonial period who had become a successful film director during the late 1950s. Kim’s films were mostly comedies. These films, however, rarely kept akkūk in their titles since an akkūk comedy-show was far too short for a film that was almost two hours long. Still, since Kim Hwa-rang was famous for writing short contes on the akkūk stage,126 it is easy to presume the influence of akkūk comedies on his scenarios for comedy films.127

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125 I inferred the repertoires of akkūk from Pak No-hong’s book, Pak No-hong, op. cit.
127 “A Life Realtor – Kim Kang-yun wrote a scenario from Kim Hwa-rang’s – the number one of Korean comedy writer- A Realtor,” Kukje yŏnghwa, February, 1959. The known comedy repertoire from akkūk stage is A Virgin Club (Ch’ŏnyŏ kurakppu), A Cloth Ghost (Pojagi kwisin), The Rich and the Noble (Puja wa yangban), No Problem with My Marriage (Kyŏron chŏnsŏn isang ǒptta), No Problem with My Honeymoon (Simŏn Saenghwal Isang ǒptta), Love! When You Are Young (Sarang ŭn chŏlŏmsŏ haera), The Height of Love (Yŏnae kokssŏnssang), Love Is on the Express (Sarang ŭn t’akkŭp ŭl t’ago), A Realtor (poktŏkkpang), No Time to Fall in Love (Yŏnaehal sigan ǒptta). The comedy titles listed here are collected from Pak No-hong’s book, Ibid.
Most of these films were derided by many critics as being “easily-manufactured,” “sinp’a” (weepies), or “non-sense”—problems seen as stemming from the il-sa-il-jak system.128 “Easily-manufactured” refers to akkūk-based films that were produced by akkūk troupes using the same akkūk storyline and cast members. That meant that a film producer could easily make a film without much background or experience in filmmaking. The terms “weepies” and “nonsense” refer respectively to the two most popular film genres on the akkūk stage at the time: melodrama and comedy. Despite their popularity, the two genres were targets of much criticism with the label, shinp’á (melodrama, weepies)—a gendered and derogatory term for melodrama and its audience—often slapped on many popular repertoires of akkūk. Unless it contained politically-charged contents, a comedian centered akkūk performance and its film adaptation were never accepted as high comedy. From the perspective of elite male critics who pursued high national culture, these two genres were merely regarded as being improper—thereby causing a crisis for akkūk in the midst of a booming economy for akkūk-based films.

**The Need for Industrialization and Modernization**

Although many producers agreed with the film critics on the problem of il-sa-il-jak, filmmakers begged to differ. While the critics advocated realist aesthetics to improve the quality of the films, the filmmakers were more interested in industrializing and modernizing the film industry, which entailed improving the film quality in different ways. The filmmakers considered a weak and primitive industrial filmmaking structure filmmaking to be the main reason problem for low quality films—a problem easily solved by the industrialization (kiŏphwa) of the industry.

128 Regarding the aesthetical judgment and its historical meaning on akkūk’s adaptation to film melodramas, see Yi Ho-kŏl, *Sinp’a yangsik yŏn’gu*,” PhD. diss., Chung’ang University, 2007.
As discussed in chapter one, the industry had a history of asking the state to reconstruct the film industry in the 1950s. This request for state subsidy was more forcefully argued in the late 1950s. For instance, in 1958, a film magazine, *Hyŏndaeyŏngwa (Modern Cinema)*, held a roundtable discussion to “develop South Korean filmmaking.” At this discussion, Yi Pyŏng-il, a famous director during the Japanese colonial period and an award recipient at the Asian film festival in 1957, highlighted the problem of *il-sa-il-jak* and its proposed solutions:

> I believe that film companies need to have better plans. Some people make a film company and buy a script if it seems profitable. This is what’s actually responsible for the *il-sa-il-jak* phenomenon. Last year, forty-eight film companies made forty seven films. However, only around twenty eight films were screened.\(^{129}\)

In this statement, Yi thus highlighted the problem of poor planning. Without proper production and marketing plans, he stated, many film production companies made films that were not even worthy of screening. What he did not highlight was the problem of poor film scripts. According to him, the problem likened mostly with the lack of systematic planning and technical development. In short, according to Yi, the main problems of the South Korean film industry, were lack of adequate filmmaking techniques, facilities, and systems.

In 1959, during another roundtable discussion at *Kukje yŏngwa (International Cinema)*, Hong Ch’an, the president of *Sudo* Film Company, interrupted a discussion of film critics centered around a film’s thematic contents to point out the significance of filmmaking facilities and market:

\(^{129}\) “The Criticism and Perspective by Celebrity,” Participants: Ch’oe Sehwang (Vice-minister of the Department of National Defense), Sŏng In-ki (Chief Editor of *Chosŏn Ilbo*), Pok Hye-suk (President of Association of Actors/Actress), O Che-do (Public Prosecutor of Seoul District), Yi Sang-sŏn (Head of Art Division in the Ministry of Education and Culture), Pak Kye-chu (Novelist), Yi Pyŏng-il (Film Director), Chŏng Pi-sŏk (Novelist), *Hyŏndaeyŏngwa*, January, 1958.
I always try to catch up with the Western and Japanese production system but the producers association only wants to make money within the national market...If we have a big market like Hong Kong, nobody would want to buy cheap scripts and make cheap films. They make films targeting the entire world. But look at our nation, which only takes forty-five minutes to travel from Seoul to Pusan.\(^{130}\)

Hong Ch’an makes two points: first, the il-sa-il-jak phenomenon is inevitable since the Korean national market is very small; second, in order to make better quality films, South Korea needs to compete with other nations.

By holding up some financially successful cases of South Korean film, Hong Ch’an insisted that the Korean filmmakers could elevate the social status of the film industry as an important national industry that could compete with other countries. As the owner of An’yang Studio, Asia’s biggest film studio, he himself made great efforts to create a Hollywood filmmaking system. To show the potential of Korean film as a national industry, he emphasized plans for foreign co-productions—especially with Hong Kong and Hollywood\(^{131}\)—even though, at that time, the South Korean film industry was mainly using low budgets to grow. In other words, while producing commercially profitable low-budget akkǔk adaptations, they were also incorporating the discourse of capitalistic development to garner state support. This, in turn, made the South Korean commercial films ironically both entertaining and nationalistic.

There were further calls for a more active role of the government in the film industry\(^{132}\) after it got rid of the tax exemption policy for films in 1960. This threatened to increase the

\(^{130}\) Kukjie yŏnghwasa, January, 1959, p.34.

\(^{131}\) Yi Chŏng-ki, “The Need of Expansion of International Market: The only way we have for the development of national film,” Chosŏn Ilbo, June 8, 1955.; “The Roundtable Discussion: Send Our Film to Abroad!1, 2” Kyŏnghyang Sìnmun, July 7, 1955.

\(^{132}\) These concerns and worries always have been in South Korean film criticism until today. To see the workings of the discourse of ‘crisis,’ see Mun Chae-ch’ŏl, op. cit., pp.37-40.
theater admission fee, reduce the film audience, and seriously jeopardize the film industry as a whole. Through a discourse of crisis, the film industry tried to call public attention to its plight and encourage industry-friendly policies from the state. It is uncertain why the government decided to abolish this policy at this time. One possibility is the serious government budget shortfall after the U.S. drastically decreased its financial aid to South Korea in 1958.133 Because of this financial crisis, there is a high possibility that many people began to question the value of the film industry. Some considered it unfair that the film industry was one of the few industries to enjoy this privilege. As one reader wrote to *Han’guk Ilbo* newspaper,

> I do not understand why the filmmakers are complaining about their low tax rate this year. Under the tax exemption law, you [filmmaking] people became a new aristocratic class … You claim to say that national cinema has contributed to the development of national culture. But what kind of contribution did you make? We [audience] think that many films just regurgitate the exact same content under different titles.134

It is hard to say how many people shared this writer’s opinion; however, there was clear public resistance, which left the filmmakers with the task of proving their value as a promising national industry.

One company that prospered in the government-centered structure of post-war South Korean film industry was Im Hwa-su’s Korea Entertainment Inc. (*Han’guk yŏn’ye chusik hwoesa*). The business path of his company illustrates how the politics of the 1950s and the topography of the South Korean entertainment industry worked together to establish a somewhat modern company. The company, which combined relationships among show-business people,

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who owned enemy property (chŏkssan, 敵産), and the akkŭk industry eventually led to the flowering of the Golden-Age of South Korean cinema. If anything, KEI also demonstrated the value of the discourse of national reconstruction for South Korean cinema.

From Akkŭk Industry to “Genre” Cinema

“Im Hwa-su” was born as Kwŏn Chung-gak in 1924 in the Yŏju area of Kyŏnggi province. His biographical film, Ch’ungmuro Don Quixote, depicts him as a poor and uneducated but ambitious child who went to Seoul to find a job. However, unable to find a decent job, he fell into petty crime, including robbery and dealing in stolen goods, and was sentenced to several years in jail in the 1940s.135 After the country’s liberation, Im Hwa-su worked as a ticketing clerk in Cheil theater in Chongno of downtown Seoul. According to a U.S. military ordinance on enemy property, Cheil theater, previously owned by the Japanese, was transferred to Im during the Korean War, whereupon he changed the theater name to “P’yŏnghwa” (“peace”).136 Based on his ownership of P’yŏnghwa theater, his marriage to the niece of a millionaire in Pusan, and his deep connections to the Rhee government,137 Im became the most powerful film producer and theater owner in the late 1950s. Although he had a well-known reputation as a thug (chŏngch’i kkangp’ae),138 he still held various titles such as the

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135 Chosŏn Ilbo, August 25, 1960; Han’guk Ilbo, August 26, 1960; Kyŏnghyang Sinmun, August 26, 1960.
136 Pyong-hwa Theater was previously called Minado Theater. The owner of the Minado Theater was a Japanese man, Minado. He was also the owner of the Minado Hat Store located in the central Seoul. See Ch’unsana Na Un-kyu Chŏnjip, p.164. Minado Theater changed its name to Cheil Theater during the 1930s, and when it was transferred to Im Hwa-su, Im changed its name to Pyŏng-hwa Theater.
137 Im’s life is well described in a biographic film, Ch’ungmuro Tongk’ihot’e (Kim Chŏng-yong, 1996).
138 The term, chŏngch’i kkangp’ae is a very colloquial use for the underground gangsters who mainly worked for the political parties, especially in the first Republic of Korea. Although the activities of chŏngch’i kkangp’ae is almost completely left out of any official history, in the case of Im Hwa-su, because he actively participated in the public discourse on national culture, the records of his life is found in many newspapers and magazines.
president of the Anti-Communist Artist’s Association, the president of the National Theater Association, and the president of the Film Producers’ Association. He was even secretly nominated as the Minister of Culture in the late 1950s—thus showing the intertwining of political and cultural power in the 1950s. Within this illustrious career, he became most notorious for forcing various actors and actresses through the Anti-Communist Artists Association to make speeches for Syngman Rhee’s election. Right before the presidential election in 1960, he made *Independence Party and Young Syngman Rhee* (*Tongniphyŏphoe wa ch’ŏngnyŏn Rhee Syngman*, 1959), film that glorified Rhee’s participation in the independence movement during the Japanese colonial period.

In addition to his political activities, Im was also one of the most successful entrepreneurs throughout the 1950s. Starting with basically nothing, he built his wealth using his power as the leader of an underground mob, his ownership of P’yŏnghwa Theater, and his close relationship with the president, to eventually establish Korea Entertainment Inc. (KEI, afterwards) in 1955. The purpose of KEI, a large entertainment company, he stated, was to improve the quality of South Korean entertainment and capture foreign markets. According to Pak No-hong, one of its founding members,

> In order to contribute to national unification, we propose to initiate a national movement of art with the spirit of war and with patriotism. We also propose to improve the quality of art and culture, protect the welfare of the artists, and nurture young talent for the future. We propose to achieve an international standard of entertainment and promote the exchanges of cultural products so that we can eventually export our national cultural products to the outside world.139

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This statement resonates with previous assertions by filmmakers on the importance of national support for the film industry. Under such banner, KEI employed from the outset a very aggressive notion of development as the only way to cultivate national culture. It also went on to establish a radically modernized structure for the entertainment industry similar to today’s “total entertainment” management companies, with exclusive contracts between the company and the stars and projects based on that star system. In particular, KEI established a “trans-genre” entertainment company that managed various genres including cinema, plays, \textit{akkūk}, and \textit{kukkūk} (a female-centered entertainment play known as \textit{yŏsŏng kukkūk} that was especially popular during the Korean War in Pusan).\textsuperscript{140} The members of KEI, who represented all fields of entertainment, included Kang Il-mae, Im Hwa-su, Ryu Ch’i-chin, Kim Sŏk-min, Pak Chin, Pak No-hong, Kang Ch’i-sŏng, An Su-myŏng, O Sŏk-cho, I-ik, Ko Chae-wŏn, Choe II, Pak Kae-ŏn, Kim Kyŏng-ae, Paek Sun-sŏng, and Pak Si-ch’un.\textsuperscript{141} In addition to merging the old entertainment genres into a new entity, the company also tried to implement the requests of filmmakers to the government during the post-war years of training future artists and protecting their livelihoods. For this reason, KEI managed to sign exclusive contracts with many actors and actresses, including most \textit{akkūk} stars such as Kim Sŏng-ho, Cheo Mu-ryong, Yun Il-bong, and Kim Chin-kyu, and almost all of the \textit{akkūk} stage comedians—which is one of the main reasons that KEI made most of the comedy films during the late 1950s.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{140} It is interesting to see the “cross-overs” of the entertainment industry to make it as a conglomerate company as other South Korean companies did at that time. From this perspective, the recognition of film or entertainment was more on its commercial value rather than the value of “art.”

\textsuperscript{141} Han’guk Ilbo, July 8, 1955; Han’guk Ilbo, August 2, 1955

\textsuperscript{142} It is not clear that every actor and actress had exclusive contracts, but some big stars seemed to have such a contract. There is one article talking about the termination of the actor Choe Muryong’s contract with KEI (Kukije yŏnghwaa, August 1959). Also, Im was notorious for forcing many stars to sign an exclusive contract with KEI. For example, a famous comedian, Kim Hŭi-kap was bitten by Im because he refused to join KEI.
Many people seemingly supported the company’s quest to develop the total entertainment company system, including its commercial exploitation of what many film critics had disparaged as “old,” “low,” and “backward” entertainment of \( \text{akk \u0131k} \). In fact, in the beginning, many participants in KEI included the primary movers and shakers of the \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) industry. They included Im Hwa-su, Kim sŏk-min, Pak Chin, Pak No-hong, I Ik (Kim Hwa-rang), Ch’oe Il, and Pak Si-ch’un, who were all either owners or key members of \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) troupes.\(^{143}\) Pak No-hong, a KEI member and director and writer of many \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) scripts, wrote that KEI was a godsend for the \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) industry, which was waning at that time. To join Freedom \( \text{Akk \u0131k} \) Troupe (\( \text{Chayu \akk \u0131kttan} \)) under KEI. KEI, which the \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) troupe owners perceived as working mostly for their benefit, many \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) troupe owners gave up the ownership of their own troupes.

In the early stage of the KEI project, the association relied heavily on the \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) industry’s cultural heritage to create new kinds of \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) performances and stories. According to Pak No-hong, most \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) performances of the Freedom \( \text{Akk \u0131k} \) Troupe were grandiose, staged by more than a hundred \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) performers.\(^{144}\) Since Im Hwa-su was the former president of the \( \text{Mugunghwa \akk \u0131k} \) Troupe, which staged more show-centered performances, he exerted some influence. When \( \text{akk \u0131k} \) was performed as an independent cultural medium after national liberation and during the Korean War by a theatrical troupe (\( \text{akk \u0131kttan} \)), the program usually contained two styles of performance—a (melodramatic) segment and a comedic segment—not usually well-integrated with each other.\(^{145}\) The emphasis was usually on the comedy-show style

\(^{143}\) Pak No-hong, \textit{op. cit.}, p.51.
\(^{144}\) \textit{Ibid.}, pp.51-53.
\(^{145}\) Interview with a famous comic star, Ku Pong-sŏ. Ku said that he worked as a musician playing the accordion when the (melodrama) was performed, and then when the comedy came on stage, he performed the main comic role. The son of Pak Ku, a famous owner of the Paekcho Kaguk troupe, also testified that these forms were developed as “\( \text{akk \u0131k} \) ” after the liberation period. Interview quoted from a Documentary Film by Sun-jin Yi, \textit{“From Entertainment to Cinema,”} Korean Film Archive, 2004.
since it attracted more people. In fact, the increased emphasis on the “show” parts and the reductions of the “dramatic” parts was common until 1956, when many akkūk performers started to work in the film business, and akkūk became a waning industry, as I have discussed earlier.

Along with the commercial strategy of uniting disparate elements of show business, KEI tried using a theater chain system to guarantee a certain level of profit. KEI consisted of an alliance between capitalists and the people working in the entertainment business who had acquired enormous amount of property during the Japanese assignment of the theaters. In particular, with the theater owners protected by the tax-exemption policy, their unification became a great source of strength for KEI. Looking at about the composition of KEI members, one can see a private network of emergent capitalist class. The president of KEI, Kang Il-mae, was the owner of Chosŏn Textile (Chosŏn Pangjik) in Pusan, the biggest cotton textile factory during the Japanese colonial period. There is a well-known historical anecdote about how Kang, an infamous mafia chief like Im Hwa-su (KEI’s vice-president) and Im’s older brother, gained control of Chosŏn Textile based on his personal relationship with President Syngman Rhee. Along with the financial patronage of Kang, the alliance between the theater owners was key to KEI’s strength. This alliance of theater owners which constituted the theater chain system included Im Hwa-su (the owner of P’yŏnghwa Theater), Paek Sun-sŏng (the owner Sigongkwan), O Sŏkcho (the owner of the Pusan Theater), and Hong Ch’an (the owner of the Kukttō and Sudo Theater). Under such system, the akkūk troupes obtained a stable venue for their

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148 Hong Ch’an did not join the KEI, but the first two performance of Freedom Akkūk Troupe were staged in Kukttō Theater. The other four performances of Freedom Akkūk Troupe were staged in Sigonggwan of Paek Sung-sŏng.
performances while the theaters could generate a profit that could then be reinvested into future shows.

For KEI, the akkŭk performances and the theater chain system were both safe and effective marketing strategies since they catered to people’s established viewing habits and guaranteed a stable amount of profit. From the colonial period, theaters were a complex cultural space, within which films and popular performances were shown. During the colonial period, the Japanese owned most of the theaters and the Japanese-only theaters tended to be better equipped with much better stages and facilities than Korean-only theaters. The new Korean owners found that they could be quite successful in their business using theaters that had been constructed mostly for the viewing of Japanese entertainment like Kabuki and Takarazuka. According to Pak No-hong, one great benefit of using Japanese owned theaters was their revolving stage, which had been commonly used for Kabuki performance during the colonial period (the Korean theater owners could not afford such extravagances). In Kyŏngsŏng (Seoul), the main venues for akkŭk performances were Puminkwan, Tongyang Theater, Minado-za (Cheil Theater), Meiji-za (Kukjje Theater later changed its name to Sigonggwan), Yakch’o Theater (Sudo Theater) and Sŏngbo Theater (Kuktto Theater).149 During the Korean War, the Puminkwan and Tongyang Theaters were both destroyed by fire.150 In this regard, the main venues for KEI performance venues were the remaining Japanese owned theaters, now run by new Korean owners, catering to the old theater-going habits of the people.

Despite KEI’s efforts to revive the akkŭk industry, many of the main akkŭk members left

the Freedom Akkŭk Troupe in 1956 to establish their own small cinema companies or akkŭk companies. Encouraged by the success of some earlier films based on the akkŭk repertoire, the akkŭk troupes tried to make films that would later be called il-sa-il-jak. Some akkŭk troupes with theater engagements or funding were able to launch bigger companies than other troupes. The following table shows some of the film companies that, like KEI, were born within the theater chain system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Korean Owner</th>
<th>Name (Japanese Colonial Period)</th>
<th>New Name</th>
<th>Film Company</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Im Hwa-su</td>
<td>Minado-za (Cheil)</td>
<td>P’yong-hwa</td>
<td>KEI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paek Sun-sŏng</td>
<td>Meiji-za</td>
<td>(Kukije) Sigonggwan</td>
<td>Sŏnmin yŏnghwasa</td>
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<td>→ Im Pin</td>
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<td>Hong Ch’an</td>
<td>Yakch’o</td>
<td>Sudo</td>
<td>Sudo yŏnghwasa</td>
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<td>→ Im Hwa-su</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hong Ch’an</td>
<td>Hwangkŭmngwan/Sŏngbo/</td>
<td>Kukto</td>
<td>Puksam yŏnghwasa/ Han’yang yŏnghwasa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Kim Hae-pyŏng</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>→ Kim Yŏn-chun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O Sŏk-cho</td>
<td>Pusan Theater</td>
<td>KEI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2 Theaters and Theater owners of the late 1950s**

Although the topography of South Korean popular culture and film had been transformed after the April Revolution (1960) and Park Chung Hee’s military coup (1961) when the government controlled industry with the strict regulation of its facilities, the above table illustrates the main film screening venues and film companies during the late 1950s.

In the course of this transition, the focus of KEI changed to make films that utilized the talents of their remaining actors. The success of comedy films such as *The Double-Arc of Youth* (*Ch’ŏngch’un Ssanggokssŏn*, 1958) and *A Father and Four Sons* (*Obuja*, 1957), both of which
featured popular akkük comedians with distinct comic techniques, led KEI to target such actors for their productions. Famous comedians Ku Pong-sŏ, Kim Hŭi-kap, Yang Hun and Yang Sŏk-ch’ŏn, Yi Chong-ch’ŏl, Pae Sam-nyong, and Sŏ Yŏng-ch’un were all initially from the akkük troupe scene, and most of them had exclusive contracts with KEI. Taking advantage of mostly akkük comedy stars, KEI produced its first film in 1957 and produced almost twenty films between 1957 and 1960. With the exception of, Independence Association and Young Syngman Rhee in 1959, most KEI productions were mostly comedy films and some sinp’a (akkük based melodrama). Out of almost twenty films, KEI made more than seventeen comedy films. Compared to other small companies that went bankrupt after making one film, KEI was consistently commercially successful. KEI’s Who Knows Your Future? (Saram p’alija alssuŏptta) was the number one box office hit in 1958, and another comedic film, Put up with Me Just Once (Hanbŏnman pwajuseyo), was included in the top five of the same year. KEI’s strategic choice to produce comedies kept the company competitive over other rapidly emerging film companies.

Despite film critics’ warnings that the combination of low budgets and easily adapted akkük would cause the problem of il-sa-il-jak, KEI’s commercially successful films based on akkük made the company stronger than others. While the success of KEI could be understood as

152 According to Korean Film Archive’s database, KEI made films such as A Night of Harbor (Hanggu ŭi irya, 1957), The Affection of the World, (Ch’ŏnji yujŏng, 1958), The Lost People (Kiriŏn saramdŭl, 1958), The Love of Shadow (Kŭrimja sarang, 1958), The Unknown Future (Saram p’alija alssuŏptta, 1958), Lanky and Fatty Go to Nonsan Training Station (Holjugi tungtung’i nonsan hŭlyŏnso kada, 1959), Waking or Sleeping (Chana kkaena, 1959), Madam Butterfly, (Nabi puin, 1959), Independence Association and Young Syngman Rhee (Tongnip hyŏp’oe wa ch’ŏngnyŏn Yi Sŭng-man, 1959), Hăngbu and Nolbu (Hŭngbu Nolbu, 1959), A Street of Sun (T’aeyang ŭi kŏri, 1959), Excuse Me (Sillyhaessŭmnida, 1959), An Inn (Yŏinsuk, 1959), A Daughter (Tial, 1960), A Revival (Chaesaeng, 1960)
the result of the business mind of Im Hwa-su, another contributing factor was KEI’s emphasis, as asserted in the company’s founding pronouncement, on art and culture as the business of the nation.

**Cinema as National Asset**

Regarding his success, Im Hwa-su argued that his business practices worked to facilitate the reconstruction of the national cinema industry—a discourse long asserted by many filmmakers. After he came back from the Asian International Film Festival in 1959, Im wrote a newspaper article titled “Nurturing Cinema and the Unity of Popular Arts,”\(^{153}\) in which he asserted that to compete with the international film industry, the South Korean nation should encourage the production of art cinema, a project that he claimed would require the unity of filmmakers. This argument, however, contradicts his actual management strategy, as his company’s numerous *akkûk* based box-office hits provided the main financial foundation for his company. His assertion to make art film at this moment was a mere rhetoric to unite the filmmakers to his directions, as he did when he initiated to unite the *akkûk* industry under KEI. To avoid the criticism that showed discomforts about his company’s low-quality filmmaking and obvious political support of the government, he used the discourse of national cinema and argued that South Korea had not yet reached the level of producing art film. He continued to insist that until the day South Korea could make art films, the urgency should be on the industrialization and modernization of the film industry, which would eventually contribute to the production of art films.

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\(^{153}\) Im Hwa-su, “Yŏnghwa yuksŏng kwa yesurin ŭi tanhap,” *Chosŏn Ilbo*, June 20, 1959.
Im’s assertion became widely accepted to many film producers, especially the next year, when the government decided to abolish the tax-exemption policy for national film production in 1960. Not surprisingly, South Korean filmmakers and critics publicly expressed major concerns that the South Korean film industry was facing a crisis. Im Hwa-su also showed the vehement resentment against this film policy’s withdrawal. He strongly asserted that the government’s withdrawal of this policy was a great mistake. Despite the fact that he endorsed art films a few months ago, after this film policy’s withdrawal, he blamed some other South Korean film critics who did not support his ackûk-based filmmaking in the past. He criticized those who had opposed his business-centered mind in previous years and pursued art films, claiming that capitalistic orientation actually helps to develop national industry. Im suggested four possible methods to overcome the crisis: 1) merging small companies, 2) reducing production costs, 3) selecting good scripts, and 4) creating an international market.\footnote{Im Hwa-su, “How to Overcome the National Crisis of Cinema Industry? Let’s Avoid Chaos and Overflows,” \textit{Kukje yônghwâ}, April 1960, pp. 60-61.} When he talked about merging small companies, he seems to support making a modernized film company like Hollywood and Japan. But when one reads the second step that he wants to cut off production costs, his intention in this statement is clear: he is not actually interested in making better quality or art films. Pursuing economic interest, with what he called a “business mind,” by producing cheap commercial films and making a profit from them by exportation was the ultimate goal for his statement. Moreover, by suggesting to make profitable films within a limited budget and sell them to the international market, he argues that it would benefit the national economy. These four methods, thereafter, would not only benefit the national film industry, but would also justify his own company’s business strategy, which had been to skillfully negotiate between
commercialism and the discourses of national development. Such business tactics were well exemplified in his endeavor of film exportation to Hong Kong.

Im’s almost obsessive efforts to co-produce films with Hong Kong make apparent his desire to make film as a commodity and his belief that making commercial films in an international market would increase South Korea’s international status. Im’s idea of extending a film market to the outside world received very positive attention from the public as well as filmmakers. His efforts finally resulted in four international co-produced films: *Love with the Alien* (*Iguk chŏngwŏn*, 1957), *One Night at the Harbor* (*Hanggu ŭi irya*, 1957), *The Love of the Heaven* (*Ch’ŏnji yujŏng*, 1958) and *The Lost People* (*Irŏbŏrin saramdŭl*, 1958), which garnered much public attention. It was, in fact, very sensational to many people that South Korea could make a film with Hong Kong, with advanced filmmaking technology, and, accordingly, KEI’s advertisements of these co-productions films seem to emphasize the collaborative aspect. The first Korea-Hong Kong co-produced film was *Love with the Alien* with The Shaw Brothers, which was known as one of the world’s biggest filmmaking companies at that time just initiated their own global commercial business. South Korean director, Chŏn Ch’ang-kŭn, and Hong Kong’s Tu Guangqi co-directed, and one of the famous *akkŭk* script-writers Kim Sŏk-min wrote the script. The most popular actors and actresses from both Korea and Hong Kong, Kim Chin-kyu, Kim Sam-hwa and Lucilla You Min acted together. It is also known that it was the first attempt at making Eastman-color photography in Hong Kong and so the Japanese technicians, Nishimoto Tadashi and Wakasugi Mitsuo, were invited to do the color work.155 This

155 However, Syngman Rhee had a strong anti-Japanese policy during the 1950s, Nishimoto Tadashi and Wakasugi Mitsuwere introduced with Chinese pseudo-name, Mian Mengdong and Hua Keyi, when it was released in Korea. Kinnia Yau Shuk-ting, “On *Love with an Alien,*” in *The Shaw Screen: A Preliminary Study*, Hong Kong Film Archive, 2003.
transnational co-production film evoked a sensational reception in South Korea. Although it had a lukewarm reception in Southeast Asia, the movie’s commercial success in South Korea made KEI produce more transnational co-produced films.

The rest of the co-produced films were made with the cooperation of relatively small Hong Kong companies. But those films also won considerable attention of many South Korean audiences. An issue of the magazine, *Myŏngnang (Delight)*, for example, includes a nearly six-page long description (of questionable verity) of *The Love of Heaven’s* shooting location, which starts by pointing out the location (Hong Kong/ Macao) and exaggeratingly stating, “the fame of comedian Yang Hun and Yang Sŏk-ch’ŏn is extended even to a foreign nation.”\(^{156}\) The article includes pictures of the comedians and crew with the Hong Kong staff, and describes episodes of shooting that emphasize Hong Kong’s tourist points and paint the country as exotic. Such indirect advertisement prior to the film’s release must have drawn a great deal of attention from South Korean audiences.

However, making international co-produced film fails to attract the audience of the other countries and ended up as only a marketing tool to promote the consumption of those films within South Korea. With the exception of the first co-production film with Shaw Brothers, *Love with the Alien*, the co-productions were neither successful nor helpful in improving the international status of South Korea. The government, however, although favorable toward co-productions had specific ideas about what could be co-produced. The government proposed rules for co-productions detailing copyright, the balance of financial sources for the film production, and the portion of Korean actors and actresses, and also insisted on the use the Korean language

\(^{156}\) *Myŏngnang*, April, 1958. It was not only KEI’s strategy to make co-productions with advanced nations. The possibility to make co-production films with Hollywood was also suggested by other companies.
and a Korean script.\textsuperscript{157} The purpose of this specific regulation reveals that the discourse of developmentalism in the film industry gave a positive image to the government and the public. However, KEI’s co-produced films did not even observe many of these national rules. First of all, KEI did not control any copyrights in Hong Kong. Based on the record that Yang Hun and Yang Sŏk-ch’ŏn had a hard time memorizing the script, it seems that the original film was recorded in Chinese, and a Korean version was dubbed in Korean afterwards,\textsuperscript{158} which violates the regulation of using “Korean language and a Korean script.” From these records, it is hard to see that KEI’s co-produced films were precisely planned for the development of the South Korean film industry with such careful consideration for international standards. Rather, KEI only provides some Korean actors for Hong Kong films. Moreover, only co-produced films at the beginning were commercially successful in South Korea. Their success continued to wane until they lost even their South Korean audiences. Although Im used the popular discourse of national reconstruction of the film industry as an excuse for making internationally co-produced films, this strategy in fact was only beneficial to his own company, which capitalized on the exoticism of co-produced films at the beginning\textsuperscript{159} and also giving fame to Im Hwa-su with a patriotic image. After the 1960 April Revolution when Im was charged with embezzlement and violence in the national court, he petitioned the court to export Korean films to Hong Kong on the basis of patriotism. Making a co-produced film, thus, in fact was not based on his enthusiasm to build Korean cinema industry as an internationally competitive national industry but Im’s hope for his company to survive.

\textsuperscript{157} *Hyŏndae yŏnghwa*, January, 1958.
\textsuperscript{158} *Myŏngnang*, April, 1958. Throughout the Golden Age era, Koreans rarely used synchronous recording.
\textsuperscript{159} Although it might be a fictional story, the film *Ch’ungmuro Tongkihot’e* shows that the popularity of Im Hwa-su’s film in the late 1950s waned, and thus he sought to make co-produced films.
At this point, one might speculate about what thematic elements of comedy film made KEI focus on this genre. The complex relationship between industry and politics offers some explanations. Despite discussions of how to remodel South Korea’s film industry into a modernized system, almost all of the existing filmmaking assets from the Japanese colonial period were transferred to a few filmmaking companies (as exemplified in Im Hwa-su’s case). From a practical standpoint, within the limited national budget, the government had to focus on one of the few national industries in which to invest. As Pak Myŏng-rim wrote, there were two governmental functions of Syngman Rhee’s government:

The Syngman Rhee administration did not function effectively as the one of Park Chung Hee. But it accomplished two important tasks. One is direct manipulation of elections, and the other was the administration-centered capitalistic system through assigning U.S. financial aide and enemy property.\(^{160}\)

As Pak noted, becoming an entrepreneur in the 1950s was dependent upon political connections and financial privileges from the government, and, in turn, the government coerced financial support for the election. The records of large companies showing allocation of funds to support Syngman Rhee’s election, revealed after Park Chung Hee’s military coup in 1961, show how 1950s entrepreneurship was tightly interwoven with government politics.\(^{161}\) The film industry was no exception with, for example, a film company receiving a bank loan to show direct support of President Rhee and the anti-communist national ideology. The next section will


discuss how the comedy genre produced under this type of a political and industrial backdrop played a particular political and ideological role in the complex cultural web of the late 1950s.

**The Politics of “Pure Entertainment” in an Anti-communistic Authoritarian Regime**

Aside from the comedy film production company’s marketing project, one thing we should consider is how this genre specifically contributed to the construction of national politics while sustaining great popularity. Regarding the mass consumption and popularity of the entertaining comedy film in the post-war period, Chǒng Chong-hwa commented that it reflects the desire of the audience to avoid confronting the devastation of the Korean nation on the psychological level.162 The comedy films of the late 1950s, the encapsulation of pure entertainment in South Korea, could be understood as a manner of psychological refuge from the trauma of the war. In fact, South Korean comedy film, which overtly borrowed themes/styles from *akkǔk* and Hollywood cinema, mesmerized the audience by showcasing a fantastic modern life. Most comedy films produced in the late 1950s, except for some historical comedies (*Sagǔk hǔigǔk*), were based on the modern city like Seoul or Pusan. In these films, the novelty of urban modernity derived from fantastic Hollywood settings as well as the delightful performance of *akkǔk* usually projected society as a modern Utopia. The fantasy of a modernized society worked as a hidden grammar of the comedy films, while such manipulation was meticulously directed by the government politics.163

Similarly, despite the devastated physical landscape, poverty, and destitution following the Korean War, the public sphere buzzed with a discourse emphasizing the spirit of individuality

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162 Chǒng Chong-hwa, *op. cit.*
163 The reception side of this manipulation will be discussed in chapter three.
and freedom, which was a new morality of the modern times. O Yŏng-suk argued that the public discourses of the 1950s reflected an individualism that was antithetical to nationalism. For the first time in South Korean history, she claims, individualism seems to have been valued over nationalism or public good. O states that a word such as individual or self was frequently used in the discourse of social and cultural theory. Many cultural discourses emphasized “self, individual, self-recognition, private feelings” and were significantly influenced by American liberal democracy. Modernity attained through the practice of liberal democracy was emphasized in almost every public sphere. O, thus, argues that the enlightenment message of the government and nationalism disappeared during this time period. While I agree with her point that the liberal discourse emphasizing a modern self and individual characteristic was prevalent in public media, including film, I do not, however, find this discourse to be antithetical to the discourse of nationalism. Rather, I think individualism and the emphasis on self were actually contained within the discourse of the public media, and were used to mobilize the South Korean people when South Korea needed to cultivate their own people’s subjectivity as citizens of a free democratic nation.

As O argued, in the late 1950s, there was an obvious and drastic decrease in production of propaganda or anti-communism films and, thus, such media function was taken over by civil hands. Without question, this decrease displays the government’s superficial renouncement of media ownership, in line with the democratic social rhetoric of the time. Indeed, South Korea of the 1950s buzzed with the spirit of liberal democracy and the expansion of the public sphere. However, while the government’s direct engagement decreased in this realm, it in fact permeated

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164 O, op. cit., p.10.
165 Han’guk yŏnghwacharyop’yŏllam, Korean Film Council, 1976. p.47.
various domains of popular culture in subtler, more dexterous ways.\textsuperscript{166} While the public sphere expanded, popular films always had a role to play in government politics, and cinema became a significant apparatus of the national institution.

In the 1950s, the educational purpose of cinema was emphasized. Im Hwa-su and others, in the hopes of getting government support for the film industry, used the argument that the main purpose of cinema was education. Many civilians, focusing on moral values that all democratic citizens should acquire, with regard to the nation, law, society, education and religion, suggested filmmaking ethics.\textsuperscript{167} According to this ethics code, the most important task for a filmmaker is to positively portray the nation.

Comedy film, at this moment, was the genre that fulfilled this national ethics code. First, it functioned to describe a national or familiar space in more fantastic ways in order to turn the interests of people to non-political issues and suggest a desirable fantastic vision of the newly born nation. Secondly, by inserting anti-communistic anecdotes within the comedy film, which is possible due to comedy’s instable cinematic form, it casts the political situation of South Korea only in terms of anti-communism. Comedy film, a form of pure entertainment, was despised by many film critics and so did not have any social meaning in terms of political participation. However, the genre operated in politics in more subtle ways. Various entertaining characteristics of comedy film reflect free and individual desires while avoiding the negative South Korean political/social atmosphere.

This kind of situation is not unique to South Korea. According to film scholar Richard


\textsuperscript{167} “Kukssan yŏng'wa yulli rŭl kyujŏ,” \textit{Kyŏnghyang Ilbo}, August 22, 1957.
Dyer, in socially unstable and depressing times such as the Great Depression in the 1930s and post-war periods, films intended as pure entertainment become popular, satisfying the audience’s desire for a Utopian world with a more exaggerated and intensive cinematic form. Historically, akkŭk theatrical troupes in wartime, both Japanese and Korean, were used as puppets for the transmission of the propaganda of the Japanese Fascist government and the authoritarian Korean regime. Song Il-kŭn, who worked in an Army akkŭk troupe, said that the akkŭk troupe mostly performed comedy or variety shows. This form of pure entertainment provided a moment of temporary relief from the unhappy reality. It was the typical trajectory of the akkŭk performance, after this temporal psychological recovery, a war-time drama which strengthens the spirit of the soldiers followed. This projection of a new Utopian image of modern life was, in fact, the regular repertoire of anti-communistic akkŭk performance. Kim Sŏk-min, an early member of KEI and the script-writer of over seven hundred akkŭk performances, wrote the KEI-led Sinsaenghwal undong (New Livelihood Campaign) to encourage patriotism and a wholesome way of life among people in their role as new citizens. One song that KEI tried to popularize was “Let’s live this way!” (Irŏk’e salja!):  

Let’s live with a smile in this new life,  
In this bright new life, let’s live together,  
Construction is to increase production, let’s work twelve hours a day,  
Live frugally and save money,

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170 Testimony of Song Il-kŭn, Han’guk yŏnghwa rŭl malhanda, Ich’ae, 2006, pp. 55-60.
At home and at work, think about our nation,  
Let’s live with a smile in this new life!

The song asks Koreans to act in a thrifty and diligent way for the sake of the nation’s prosperity after the War. The goal was to promote a positive image of the nation’s future and to convince people that that future was dependent upon their attitude toward this new life. Similar kinds of discourse were conveyed and popularized by akkūk troupes all over the nation during the early stage of KEI’s akkūk performance. The akkūk performance, in this vein, was a very effective tool to mobilize people’s minds with one unified national and developmental subjectivity. Such propaganda images and songs of akkūk performance naturally permeated into comedy film texts, since comedy film actively adopted performances of akkūk.

The comedy film genre provided such pure entertainment while simultaneously representing South Korean society as properly designed and harmonious. The desirable ingredients for filmmaking were brightness, harmony and pleasure. Projecting a positive image of the South Korean nation within the film text was essential, since the film’s representation of South Korean society had to be in line with the government’s project of constructing an optimistic view of the young nation-state. Moreover, comedy films were used to direct people’s attention to important national issues and anti-communist ideology, which, the government reasoned, could be best disseminated among the common people through entertaining films.

Besides this relatively abstract notion of making use of the lightness of comedy films to create a positive image of the nation, more direct political overtones can also be found in many comedy films. For example, one of the most popular comedic radio programs of the day, Fatty
and Lanky, demonstrates a typical way in which the government exerted control over popular culture and media through comedies. Fatty and Lanky were the most popular comedians at the time, and the program’s ratings were very high. The radio broadcast station subsequently scheduled a news program, which was a direct mouthpiece of the government, immediately following the show.  

It is not difficult to see the motive behind this tactic: to attract listeners to the news program, so as to indoctrinate them into the state’s anti-communistic ideology. This direct anti-communist stance is also found in the KEI comedy film *Fatty and Lanky go to Nonsan Army Training School* (*Ttungttung’i wa holjjugi nonsan hullyŏnsogada*, 1959). Consider this dialogue from an early scene in the film:

> Um, at this historical moment when the attacks of communists become more severe, our nation and people should be united in order to get rid of communists who corrupt world peace. Moreover, after the Korean War, our nation strives to strengthen our nation. At this moment, it is our honor to celebrate that Fatty and Lanky have been drafted to the military band from our village.  

Although the rest of the film follows the entertainment of *akkŭk* stars and silly games played by the two main characters, the anti-communistic statement used to open the film is symbolically significant, for it shows the direct links among comedy films, comedy film companies, and the national ideology. Another Fatty and Lanky film, *Who Knows Your Future?* also delivers this anti-communistic stance. Although this film is also an absurd story, at the end the protagonists are rewarded for capturing a spy from North Korea. In both films, the story line uses the narrative strategy of comedy to engage with the themes of supporting the national army

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174 Scenario, *Lanky and Fatty go to Nonsan Army Training School*, Korean Film Archive.
to protect against Communists’ attack by North Korea and of striving to catch the “Reds” in South Korea. Although such anti-communistic declarations could be used as jokes in the film, it cannot be overlooked that the film contains such ideological devices.

The debates of 1958 regarding the nominations for the Asian International Film Festival by the Ministry of Culture and Education reveal the hidden politics of popular culture. In 1958, South Korean film critics vehemently criticized the government’s nominations for the fifth Asian International Film Festival because the government chose *The Double-Arc of Youth* over *The Money* (*Ton, 1958*), for the reason that it described South Korean society in a depressing way.\(^{175}\)

In fact, the Film Nomination Board consisting of cinema specialists initially made the nomination. But the final decision was in the hands of the Department of Culture and Education (DCE). *The Money* was nominated by the Board but was rejected by DCE. A similar situation arose the following year. Instead of another film by Kim So-dong, *Oh, My Hometown (O, nae kohyang!, 1959)*, the film *The Bell Tower (Chonggak, 1959)*, which showcases the orientalistic beauty of the nation, was nominated by the DCE.\(^{176}\) *My Hometown* was rejected on the grounds that it was dark and not constructive. When one sees the actual submission list of the festival, a pattern of films that were promoted becomes clear. In terms of genre, comedy garnered the majority of nominations for the International Film Festival.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of International Film Festival</th>
<th>Film Title</th>
<th>Genre</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The 4th Asian Film Festival (1957)</td>
<td><em>The Wedding Day</em> <em>(Sijip kanūn nal, 1956)</em></td>
<td>Comedy</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Adada, the Idiot</em> <em>(Paekch‘i adada)</em></td>
<td>Drama</td>
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<tr>
<td>The 5th Asian Film Festival (1958)</td>
<td><em>For ever with You</em> <em>(Kūdae wa yŏngwonhi)</em></td>
<td>Romance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Double-Arc of Youth</em></td>
<td>Comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 6th Asian Film Festival (1959)</td>
<td><em>Free Marriage</em> <em>(Chayu kyŏron)</em></td>
<td>Comedy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Because I Love You</em> <em>(Sarang hagie)</em></td>
<td>Romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Seizure of Life</em> <em>(Insaeng ch‘aap)</em></td>
<td>Comedy</td>
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Table 3 Films Submitted for the International Film Festival in the late 1950s (Reconstructed based on *The Yearbook of Film and Entertainment, Kukje yŏnhwasa, 1970 and South Korean Film Archive Database*)

If we go back to the answer to the question of why so many comedies were submitted to any International Film Festival at this time, a simple answer can be found by examining the eligibility guidelines and the film submission process as defined by the South Korean government. Participating in international film festivals was not solely about film content. Rather, the direct political engagement between film companies and the government was critical and necessary. In order to participate in the international film festival, film companies were required to pay for the international trip and all other costs associated with participation in the festival, which imposed a huge financial burden for most companies in late 1950s South Korea.

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177 “Lists of Submission of South Korean Film to the International Film Festival.” This table shows the dominance of comedy upon other film genres in the late 1950s. This genre dominance switched in the 1960s to so-called “realism” films, when those genres were welcomed by international film festival.
Furthermore, when a film participates in the International Film Festival, the film company got the award—an import quota. Thus, only commercially successful companies or companies that were supported by black money from the government could participate in the International Film Festival, and in turn they were able to obtain this film import quota. Newspapers suggested a conspiracy between the government and KEI, an allegation that was confirmed after the April Revolution. The close ties between the modernized film company and the government enabled these companies to participate in the festival, and given their reliance on government support, it was inevitable that the films would convey a government-approved message.

Kim So-dong, the director of two rejected films, criticized the government’s intentions behind this decision:

If we cannot make films that are “depressing” and “dark,” then, should I make only comedy films or delightful things? If a film is not constructive, then should I always include a scene of high buildings, airports, or even construction site? I do not understand the standard… In fact, I actually considered this film for submission to an international film festival, so that I did not actually go out for the field location and used a studio even spent more money to make the country-side scene look better.

What Kim argues here is interesting. Although he opposed the government’s decision and their absurd standard of film aesthetics, he also did not want to make films featuring authentic post-

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178 A film company which exported a film or won a prize from the International Film Festival was given a distribution right of a foreign film. The comedy film companies’ plans to make transnational cinema at that time could be understood within this context. Lee U-sŏk, op. cit.
179 Im Hwa-su, a president of KEI, was arrested after 4.19 for the suspicion of embezzlement of the money secretly provided for the participation of International Film Festival. The Park Chung Hee government hanged him due to his cooperation of Syngman Rhee in the 3.15 election in 1960.
war South Korean landscapes. He intentionally tried not to make his films too realistic by using studios instead of doing field location as many Italian neo-realist films did. From his statement, one can imagine that there was some kind of consensus among the government and the filmmaking people about the responsibility of representing desirable landscapes of the nation. In the same publication, Hwang Hyŏng-ok, discussed more about the nationally proper aesthetics. Hwang insisted that the Italian neo-realist films that many film directors and critics preferred could be regarded as art, but the realistic representations these films offered would also inspire pity for the Italian people. He suggested that cinema should present “creative, constructive, hopeful and educational” content, such as the Westerns of Hollywood did.\(^\text{181}\) The philosophy of Hollywood’s “dream factory” is embedded in this statement, which proposes to hide the negative aspects of South Korean society and to create the image of a Utopian, modern nation.

The rapid industrial development of cinema production in the late 1950s, which had been shaped and supported by the efforts of both Korean filmmakers and the government in the process of national reconstruction, provided a supplemental basis for the emergence of South Korean film industry’s Golden-Age. Despite the worries of many film critics about film quality, South Korea’s film industry emerged as one of the most powerful national industries of the 1950s. Also, film started to function as a semi-national apparatus during the 1950s. However, in spite of the film’s obvious engagement with modern national ideology, it is questionable if the real audience—which was drawn to the entertaining elements of comedy films—actually bought into that ideology as the government had hoped. Also, it is necessary to look more closely at how this kind of obvious and sudden intervention of anti-Communistic national ideology is used in

\(^\text{181}\) Hwang Yŏng-ok, \textit{op. cit.}\)
the context of the film narrative and how it played as a joke in the actual theater atmosphere.

Although it is difficult to know how actual theatergoers received such films, the anarchistic style of the comedy film opens up the possibility to read these films in various ways, a point that I will make in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

The Forgotten Genre: The Aesthetics of Anarchistic Comedy

Film comedy was one of the most popular and dominant film genres of the late 1950s. Although comedy only made up ten to fifteen percent of the total number of films produced in the late 1950s, year after year, comedies maintained a significantly high rank among the box office hits. Interestingly, compared to the long-standing history of melodramatic films (sinp’a) from the Japanese colonial period, film comedy had a weak tradition in Korea. Before this period, there had been only one comedy film, *The Stupid* (*Mǒngt’ǒngguri*), produced in 1926. During the colonial period, comedies on the akkūk stage were very popular and many were recorded for sale during the colonial period, and yet these were rarely made into films. The mass production and popularity of comedy films, then, even considering the fact that Korean Entertainment, Inc.’s systemized production structure, relatively stable distribution system, and strong government support virtually monopolized comedy film production was a remarkable cultural phenomenon that cannot be explained by analysis of the production side alone. The aesthetics of the popular comedy film, although it had always been disparaged as the symbol of low-brow culture, and the unprecedented popularity of this single genre for the first time in South Korean film history, thus, make us rethink this ignored and neglected genre style and meaning of its consumption as a significant social and cultural phenomenon.

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183 In fact, it is very difficult to divide the films by genre, especially because they were produced so long ago. Moreover, many films produced during the Japanese colonial period are not available now, and scenarios or other archival sources are not sufficient to define genre. But it seems that *Mǒngt’ǒngguri* was based on the five-cut comics serialized in the newspaper, and a remaining still-cut suggests that it resembled Charlie Chaplin’s silent films. Thus, it wouldn’t be unreasonable to define this film as comedy. *Han’guk yonghwa ch’ongsŏ*, pp. 482-483.
With these problems, while I did research on the late 1950s’ comedy film genre, I found that genre’s popular consumption has to do with its film style, which could aptly be defined as anarchistic comedy. Henry Genkins defines the early Hollywood comedies as anarchistic, in terms of their transitional and episodic characteristics —holdovers from the Broadway vaudeville tradition that was transferred to the Hollywood screen.\(^\text{185}\) According to him, early comedies made in 1930s Hollywood presented, in general, a more fragmented and episodic narrative style than classical Hollywood due to industrial transitions as well as the character of the genre—because the laughter often occurs in unexpected moments in the film, the narrative of the comedy is, of necessity, fragmented. Like in Hollywood comedies, in South Korean film history, the anarchistic style also aptly describes the general tenor of the late 1950s South Korean comedy films.

Moreover, the 1950s’ South Korean comedies are even more anarchistic than Hollywood films, due to even more diverse cultural signifiers. South Korean comedies were a patchwork of media genres such as akkūk, Hollywood cinema, cartoon and even documentary film, most of which were first translated by Japanese people and came to the attention of South Korean culture, taking a cultural “detour.”\(^\text{186}\) Certainly, anarchistic comedy was not the only film genre influenced by the akkūk tradition or Hollywood films. But the characteristics of the genre, along with the absence of a filmic past in South Korea, allowed filmmakers to make use of clear references to other media genres without many constraints. Non-linearity and attraction combining various popular performance styles into one film text composition was the most


\(^{186}\) Further study will be needed on the “detour” of this interesting cultural multi-path of South Korean popular culture.
distinctive nature of anarchistic comedy.

Further, I argue that anarchistic comedy is the film genre that displays a complicated South Korean modernity that satisfied people’s competing desires. Compared to the disciplined societal mode of the 1960s’ South Korea, when clear ideological notions and specific political directions with a concrete economic development plan for national reconstruction were set forth, the societal mode of 1950s could be described as premature, and thus somewhat anarchistic. Societal anarchism refers to the markings of the beginning stage of modern capitalistic society where many unharmonious social desires expressed in anti-communism, pursuits of democratic ideal and burgeoning capitalistic desires or the skepticism and sorrow that occurred after the Korean War sought to find their own way of living. I argue that the comedy film’s style of anarchism aptly describes the general tonal/aesthetical modes of the 1950s. Anarchistic style, in this sense, provides a window through which we can reread the film texts in a more nuanced way than was offered by the long-standing history of elite film critics.’ Hence, the study of the anarchistic style of the 1950s’ comedy film opposes the traditional understanding of South Korean film history regarding 1950s’ as the pre-stage preparing for the full-fledged cinematic Golden-Age in the 1960s. Rather, this chapter will seek to discover the meanings of anarchistic comedy film styles, languages and icons, which are particularly important to this time.

Korean “Cinema of Attraction”: Popular Consumption of Anarchistic Comedy

Im Kŭng-jae, a famous film critic of the 1950s, pointed out that South Korean film style

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187 Jinsoo An also points out that 1950’s film, in general, has to be understood with its own historicity rather than seeing it as a premature experimental stage of filmmaking before I became matured in the 1960s. See introduction, Maehok kwa hondon ūi sidae: 50nyŏndaehan’guk yŏnghwa, Sodo, 2002.
was lacking a sense of continuity, which was a common problem of film quality of the time:

Recently, Korean cinema started to make some “styles.” But most of them are not even close to obtaining a sophisticated “style” yet. What our filmmakers make now is various human feelings such as happiness, sadness and so on. However, since this kind of feelings is not related to the themes, the sequences are sometimes very “excessive” and show “issued scene of nonsense” in an Eisensteinian sense. [emphasis added] 188

“Issued scene of nonsense” means basically the nonlinearity of the film scenes or sequences, which were coined by Eisenstein, the harbinger of the “film montage,” used for ruptured film effects to elevate the intensity of the film by assembling unrelated scenes together. Although the film montage was used for Eisenstein to create Soviet realism, when Im cited the techniques of the Eisensteinian montage, he only focuses on the style rather than the meaning of such technical employment. Thus, from Im’s viewpoint, Eisenstein’s style is regarded as a backward and outdated technique when compared to contemporary Hollywood’s linear film style, regardless of whether the film conveys the spirit of Eisensteinian realism or not. Im’s article goes on to claim that classical Hollywood cinema provides the best example of a technically well-made film. He asks “why Holiday in Seoul (Seoul ūi hyuil, 1956) does not share any of the sophisticated sensibilities of Hollywood’s Roman Holiday?” Im’s laments are based on his aesthetical preference for classical Hollywood cinema, whose style projects a cinematic, technical realism by creating narrative linearity and causality in film sequences. This style aims not to reveal the narrative as a film, but to project it as real, emphasizing its verisimilitude. 189

South Korean films’ general cinematography in relation to the Eisensteinian montage criticizes South Korean filmmakers’ incompetence and also succinctly describes the low quality characteristics of South Korean cinema in the late 1950s. If we follow I’m preference for the Hollywood style, many of the plot structures and editing of South Korean films of the late 1950s would be considered weak and could be described as compilations of what Im called “issued scene of nonsense” without much continuity. However, if considering his point on the aesthetics of montages in a more colloquial sense, this inadequate cinematography ironically points us to an interesting aspect of the cinema of this historical moment: popular consumption by the audience.

Tom Gunning once argued that early Hollywood film is a “cinema of attraction,” which is a more colloquial usage of Eisenstein’s concept of the montage. In essence, it provides commercial entertainment in much the same was as the fairground, circuses, variety shows, and dime museums, which attract audiences without a strict plot or narrative.190 Regarding the aesthetic of attractions of early Hollywood films, Gunning states that it had “developed in fairly conscious opposition to an orthodox identification of viewing pleasure with the contemplation of beauty.” Against the common analysis of Hollywood film, which emphasizes the process of aesthetic development in accordance with technological development, Gunning points out that this kind of analysis often overlooks the important role of the audience’s interaction with film in producing the social and historical meaning of each stage. Rather than regarding viewing habits of the cinema of attraction in the developmental sense as a primitive cultural practice, Gunning argues that the audience’s reaction was in response to the encounter with modernity, as the audience desired.

In a similar sense, what Im Kŭng-jae had observed in the late 1950s, the Eisensteinian term of “issued scene of nonsense,” could be understood as a Korean cinema of attraction. The 1950s was the early stage of commercial cinema production in South Korea. Along with the development of film industry and national film production, the number of theaters and moviegoers drastically increased. Reflecting the increase of audience numbers, fifteen new theaters were built in 1957 and 1958, which was a 50% yearly growth.²⁹¹ Existing theaters also increased their seat capacities. Theaters started to be regarded a modern cultural space, and the concept of theater also changed. Common people’s theater experience, which had mostly consisted of akkŭk, yosŏng kukkŭk, and play watching in the past, drastically transformed into a more modern form of entertainment—the cinema.

In the past, a theater was a multi-complex popular cultural space where various popular performances were serially programmed. Unlike today’s ticket purchasing practices, theatergoers bought a one-day program ticket consisting of akkŭk, kukkŭk, ch’anggŭk, variety shows, and film. The theater program would often open with various popular performances, including akkŭk, kukkŭk, and ch’anggŭk, to be followed by the variety show by popular singers and bands.²⁹² Cinema was often slated for the last program of the day. When the audience remained in the theater to watch a film, they often had the experience of watching a very popular performance beforehand. But during the late 1950s, many theaters had been transformed into cinema-only theaters, and many of them started to screen Korean films simply due to the increase of national film production. Even to many of the previous filmgoers, this change provided a new theater

²⁹¹ December 14th, Han’guk Ilbo, 1958.
experience. Illiterate people who had been excluded in the spectatorship of foreign language talkie films also started to have new opportunities to watch national talkie films. Also, they could watch films without any intervention by pyŏnsa (辯士, film commentator, benshi in Japanese), which often accompanied foreign and silent films. Even for the people who used to go to the theater to see foreign talkie films, the uncomfortable experience of reading (Japanese) subtitles, which often occurred when they watched foreign talkie films, also disappeared.

The transformation of the theater-going experience at this time, then, could be understood as quite a new experience, even though film screening had been already a popular cultural practice among people from the previous decades. The transition from theater experience to film experience, then, could be described as the encounter with modernity by those theatergoers who desired to experience a different form of modern media, the cinema. As Miriam Hansen also points out, consumerism of film and the modern movie-going practice includes the contradictions of “the discrepancy between utopian images of abundance, exotic splendor, and sensuality deployed to create consumerist desire and the industrial-capitalist discipline necessary to produce spending power.” Hansen’s argument is critical to understanding the sudden increase of moviegoers, their love of the comedy genre and new and modern experiences through this genre. Radically increased consumption of the popular comedy film in the late 1950s, in a

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194 Most foreign film had Japanese subtitle during the 1950s. The reason for this is, first, to make a subtitle in Korean cost a significant amount of money. So, the foreign movie importing companies bought already-subtilted Japanese film from Japan. Secondly, most foreign film audiences were intellectuals who learned Japanese in school, and do not even learn Korean writing system properly. Making a Korean language subtitle, in this sense, was not profitable, if not useless, for film importing companies.
similar context, exhibits the complicated aspects of a rapidly changing capitalistic society as well as modern South Korean people’s desire and subjective nature.

As South Korean comedy film audiences negotiated between these two contradictory aspects of consumption actively seeking their desires, while the discipline of production companies’ capitalistic intentions (like those of KEI) lying behind this scene. In order to secure commercial success for such audiences, filmmakers chose the style and subject of films from the complex patchwork of various popular cultural products such as akkūk, yōsōngkūk, theater plays, and foreign films. Making a film attractive by borrowing from such familiar and popular cultural forms (rather than focusing on the film’s composition in terms of linearity or continuity) was the best move from a capitalistic standpoint.

**Modernity of Anarchistic Comedy Film**

How, then, was such modernity presented in the film? The success of the late 1950s comedy films demonstrates the akkūk hybridity common to 1950s films, and illuminates its strongest appeal to contemporary viewers: mainly the unique aesthetic combination of the tradition of akkūk with Hollywood films. The act of transporting an authentic image of the akkūk into the illusory, inauthentic, utopian world of the film doubled the effects of modernity in the comedy genre. The unique styles of akkūk performance and classical Hollywood cinema editing were combined in a cinematically unfamiliar way within the text of the South Korean anarchistic comedy. While South Korean anarchistic films partly used the incorporated and continuous classical Hollywood editing style and narrative, they also adopted many akkūk performance styles, which stand out from the film narrative and interfere with the linearity of the film by
utilizing un-incorporated, discontinuous, and more “punctuated” sequences. Although this style endured intense criticism from film critics who regarded it as a deficiency, anarchistic comedy elicits dual pleasure arising from identification (audience familiarity with akkūk) and differentiation (the novelty of Hollywood to this audience).

For example, *The Double Arc of Youth* (*Ch’ôngch’un ssanggokssŏn*, 1958) opens with a doctor’s office scene with a lighthearted song performance by the Kim sisters. In a similar way, one of the extant comedy films produced in the late 1950s, *The Double Arc of Youth*, exemplifies the attempt to portray the bright side of life and celebrate modern urban existence. The film starts with the abrupt encounter between two male protagonists, Myŏng-ho and Pu-nam. They are college friends who happen to meet at a doctor’s office. Myŏng-ho is a middle school teacher, and Pu-nam (which literally means “rich man”) is the unemployed son of a rich man. Both of them have a stomachache. The doctor diagnoses Myŏng-ho’s stomach pain as due to malnutrition, and Pu-nam’s as due to overeating. The doctor recommends that they should switch houses with one another and live an opposite lifestyle for two weeks. The men go to each other’s house and meet each other’s sister. Although both couples do not like each other because of the different lifestyles they must adopt at the beginning, they eventually fall in love and finally get married at the end.


197 Unfortunately, most comedy films produced during the late 1950s in South Korea have been lost. What Korean Film Archive has are *The Double Arc of Youth* and *How to Become a Millionaire* (*Paekman changja ka toeryŏmyŏn*, 1959). In particular, the comedy films produced by KEI are not remaining at all. This is part of the reason that the comedy film is absent in the study of South Korean film history. However, most scripts are remaining. In this study, although there might be a difference between film and the scripts, I use the scripts as the main source for comedy films of the late 1950s.
The space in which the two male characters encounter one another is a very modern site, the doctor’s office. The modern, Western style stage is decorated with a microscope, a violin, and a guitar. A delightful song number performed by the nurses just before the protagonists’ encounter opens the film. The nurses sing about a happy Saturday afternoon: the first verse in Korean, and the second verse in English:

We are singing angels in white gown. We are angels, happy and bright. We are angels singing Saturday. Let’s sing together, a happy Saturday. Today is Saturday, a happy Saturday. Forget the sorrow and happiness. Let’s sing together! (In Korean)

If I ever needed you, I need you now. I can’t remember when I’ve ever been so blue.
If I ever needed love, I need you now. I feel so all alone. I don’t know what to do.
(In English)

This song is a popular American song, “I Need You Now (1954),” one of the biggest hits of American pop-singer, Eddie Fisher. “I Need You Now” was the number one song on The 1954 Billboard chart. The Kim Sisters are impersonating Hollywood’s Andrews sisters who were often in movies during the Second World War, and the song they are singing would have been quite familiar to soldiers in the US Army, as Eddie Fisher was drafted to the Korean War, and traveled the whole nation singing for American soldiers.

Yet the tone of the song as performed by Eddie Fisher in 1954 is quite different from that performed by the Kim Sisters in this film. The tempo of the song as performed by the Kim

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198 Ramona Curry pointed out their impersonation of the Andrews sisters when we watched this beginning sequence together. To see one of the performances of the Kim Sisters when they went to Hollywood and performed on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1959, see the following web link at: http://search.pandora.tv/frame/outSearch.htm?ref=na&ch_userid=swzzzz&id=4417540&keyword=%BC%F6%B5%B1%D8%C0%E5

199 For the war experience of Eddie Fisher in Korea, refer to his autobiography, Eddie Fisher, Been There, Done That, Tomas Dunne Books, 1999.
Sisters is much faster and much brighter. The violin interlude, played by Pak Si-ch’un, accelerates and upgrades the brightness of the whole music number, and this variation works to make it very upbeat. The excessively smiling bright faces of the Kim Sisters and Pak Si-ch’un also create a positive image of the space (the doctor’s office) and draw the audience’s attention to the fantastic and exciting cinematic world that will be presented later in the film. Also, since the second verse of the song was sung in English, featuring the Western image or masque of Korean female singers mesmerizes the audience as if they are something similar to Hollywood film. The staged performance of the song is reminiscent of akkūk troupe performances during war-time, which functioned to temporarily relieve the war anxiety of soldiers. In this way, the opening scene of The Double Arc of Youth establishes a positive, bright, and happy atmosphere that will continue throughout the film, which contrasts greatly with many other 1950s films that usually show a very serious or depressed South Korean society.

The eloquent use of Hollywood cinematic techniques also facilitates the resolution of the protagonists’ problems in the film in a very positive way, which is actually the problems of all South Korean people: while they were buzzing with Americanized culture and democracy, their reality in fact confronted the post-war destitution and class stratification. Toward the end of the film the director cross-cuts shots of Myŏng-ho’s house and Pu-nam’s house, a technique, which has the effect of speeding up the transformation between the two characters’ lifestyles. Cross-cutting is often used to heighten suspense by putting in parallel two contiguous events that are occurring at the same time but in two different spaces.\(^{200}\) The cross-cut contrasts a dancing and eating sequence of Myŏng-ho with a difficult labor sequence of Pu-nam, and the technique

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\(^{200}\) This cross-cutting is often used for the cinematography of Eisensteinian montage or in gangsters and thrillers. See Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, Routledge, 2000.
combined with delightful music, rather than increasing the crisis, decreases the intense confrontation of the two totally different spaces. It brings a kind of pleasure—the satisfaction that comes from a natural negotiation between the fantasized modern life and the South Korean post-war situation. This scene serves to symbolically establish a harmonious space for the two protagonists who are from totally different classes and social backgrounds.

This unique hybrid successfully accomplishes the attractive cinematic illusion so that it could obviously bring cinematic pleasure to the audience. Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that in the course of the transition from theater experience to film experience, other popular cultural forms such as ch’anggūk or yosŏng kukkūk failed to transfer into film. I believe the demise of changgūk and yosŏng kukkūk even in representation within many popular films is derived from its reliance on the past; some parts of this genre characteristic are transferred into the genre of historical drama (sagūk). On the contrary, both melodrama and akkūk comedy were resurrected as popular film forms. This success is likely due to the ability of akkūk to express various types of South Korean modern subjectivity.

Sinp’a (melodrama), which was also a notably popular and akkūk-influenced genre of the time, often emphasized aspects of failure, repulsion, and pain within modernity or a new world. Yi Ho-gŏl suggests that the nature of Korean sinp’a derives not only from its generic style but also from people’s passive subjectivity and defeatist attitudes toward the world in general and modernity in particular. He writes that Korean melodrama portrays personal pain in relation to South Korean modernity, the nation, and gender. In comparison, the passive image of

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202 Yi Ho-gŏl, Sinp’a yangsik yŏn’gu, op. cit.
melodrama on modernity is not found in comedy, and a more constructive and positive attitude toward modernity is often overtly celebrated. Compared to melodrama, comedy akkūk appears to celebrate modern culture. Moreover, when akkūk-based comedy met a new medium, cinema, it doubled the meaning of modernity in a more positive and imaginable way. The audience of comedy, in this sense, cannot but be exhilarated by South Korean modernity from their film experience. As such, akkūk was the most significant neighboring cultural mode to film, and it provided the sense of identification and familiarity of the Korean cinema of attraction.

However, the study of akkūk and its transmission to the film text is an area where there is much research left to be done. Even studies on akkūk itself as an independent cultural form are rare, and it is known that today’s akkūk is very different from what it was in the past. Thus, it is difficult to determine the nature of the aesthetics of past akkūk performances. While I got a glimpse of akkūk performance from oral testimony and remaining historical texts, it was the punctuated sequence of the films that paradoxically helped me to understand the various forms of akkūk of the 1950s. The study of the aesthetics of akkūk performance are visualized when the performance is brought to film; for this reason, akkūk films not only shed light on the aesthetics of the late 1950s film, but also provide a concrete surviving example of the akkūk performance itself. Comedy film in the late 1950s seems to meet the desires of both the film companies, who chose the essence of akkūk modernity as a marketable strategy, and the consumers, who wanted to experience a feeling of modernity through a more modern media. It is also notable that Im Hwa-su’s Cheil theater, known as a second-running theater, was previously the main venue for akkūk performance and was frequently used for the akkūk-based comedy film screening.

In sum, the consumption of anarchistic comedy provides cross-genre viewing experience
in one theater, and enhances the superiority of the modern media. The popular consumption, in
this context, could be understood as a sort of participation in a modern public sphere. Now we
return to the discussion of how akkūk was specifically transferred into the new media, cinema,
and in what kind of form to mesmerize South Korean audience into a new modern world.

The Punctuating Pleasure of Akkūk

Although film critics labeled the akkūk-based film as “easy-manufacturing,” the process
of filmmaking itself was not an easy task. To be successful in filmmaking, despite the already-
famous akkūk script, the directors needed to learn how to filming. Moreover, since akkūk is often
classified by its incorporation of discontinuous connections among diverse modes of
performance, creating a mode of tonal “in-betweenness,” framing akkūk into a film with a
relatively linear narrative was difficult for many film directors. Director Ha Han-su, who made
several films based on melodramatic akkūk stories, recollected that achieving linearity was the
most challenging aspect of making akkūk-based films. According to Ha,

_Akkūk_ does not have any connection. When a play needs transition, in akkūk, people
beat a drum. Then, the scene changes. That is the akkūk’s way of transition. But we
cannot change a sequence only with a drumbeat in film. So, it was really difficult to
make it linear.  

From Ha’s statement, we can find that filming was more than recording a mere akkūk
performance. Thus, regardless of success or failure, filmmakers at that time somehow tried to

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203 Regarding akkūk style itself, a recent study examines a case demonstrating the discontinuous and fragmented
classifieds of _akkūk_. Yi Hwa-jin, in _T’aejung sŏsa yŏn’gyu_ 17, _op. cit._ p.55-57.
204 Interview with director Ha Han-su, quoted from Yi Sun-jin’s documentary film.
make a film. It is also noteworthy that the difficulty Ha had was partly due to his genre concentration on melodrama. The films he produced in the late 1950s—*The Snowy Night* (*Nun narinün pam*, 1958), *The Lullaby* (*Chajang’ga*, 1959) and *The Tears of Mokp’o* (*Mokp’o üi nunmul*, 1958)—were all melodramas, featuring “the queen of tears,” Chô-ok. While melodrama-centered comedy films required causality and stricter plot structures to be framed as films (requirements that necessitated suppression of the *akkûk* style), comedy-centered *akkûk* films were more flexible in creating linearity.

Comedy films allowed for a linear punctuation without regard for the storyline. Comedy in *akkûk* was not often comprised of an independent story. Rather, it was inserted in the middle of a melodrama as an independent short show or *conte*. While this comedy-centered, discontinuous *akkûk* style, when transferred into a film, could prove very uncomfortable or disorienting to contemporary viewers who are more attuned to the continuous editing style of classical Hollywood cinema, audiences for anarchistic comedy were used to the *akkûk* style and did not find it at all disturbing. Rather, it might have been the case that these audiences expected comedy to derive from discontinuity.

For instance, Kim Hŭi-kap, a famous comedian, who later became a movie star, performs comedic punctuation in his debut film, *The Double Arc of Youth*. In an early sequence from this film, Kim appears as a poor water deliverer who is always singing. When he passes by the protagonist’s household, a female protagonist asks him to sing a song. Kim sings three popular songs while impersonating those singers, a technique called *moch’ang* in Korean.205

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205 Although Kim Hŭi-kap was not actually a comedian on the *akkûk* stage, because he was good at singing, and especially at impersonating popular singers, he happened to take a comic role in the film and became a comedic star among the popular audience. “All about Kim Hŭi-kap,” *Yŏnghwa sekye*, March, 1968.
This sequence seems unduly long if the audience views Kim as just an extra passing by. Yet the film toys with audience expectations by keeping the camera on Kim Hŭi-kap’s performance with a long take until he finishes each number. In this way, Kim completes three songs. Kim’s mimicry of famous singers’ voices and facial expressions (his primary talent as an ākkŭk comedian) must provide the audience with great amusement, even if this strategy is an unfamiliar way of creating a film sequence.

Another interesting use of comedy in 1950s cinema is the short insertion of comedy into melodrama, as in the makkan comedy performance within melodramatic theater. How to Become a Millionaire (Paekman changja ka toeryŏmyŏn, 1959) provides an example of this technique. Although How to Become a Millionaire is defined as a comedy according to the Korean Film Archive’s genre categorization, the film structure and story are more or less melodramatic. The storyline of this film concerns an engaged couple, Ch’ang-chin and Chŏng-su. Ch’ang-chin is a truck driver who has a fatal accident the day before his wedding. Ch’ang-chin goes to hell and is told that a rich old man was supposed to die, but the gate keeper of hell dozed off and allowed Ch’ang-chin to die by mistake. Ch’ang-chin’s soul is sent back to the world, but without his body. He goes to the rich old man and exchanges souls and, masquerading as a rich old man, meets his fiancée, Chŏng-su. Although she does not believe that Ch’ang-chin has come back from the afterlife at first, she gradually falls in love with the old rich man because he is so similar to Ch’ang-chin. She resists her emotion because it is a betrayal to Ch’ang-chin. But at the end, she cries to confess her love for him, and Ch’ang-chin, of course, accepts her love.

Despite the general melodramatic plot structure of the film, there is one significant scene, which breaks down the entire melodramatic air of the film: when the main character is killed in
the car accident and goes to the hell to meet the king of the hell (yŏmnadaewang). Obviously, this scene is very comic just because of its unrealistic story. To emphasize this scene’s comic nature, the director uses a theatrical stage decorated as hell. In this hell, to parody the extensive use of drama actors, many comedians suddenly appear and act as the king of hell and the king’s servants. This sequence also starts with ballet dance choreography, and the camera explores the fantastic space by focusing on the exaggerated costumes and make-up of the king and the errand boys of hell, all of which are unrelated to the melodrama. This non-linear interjection is likely derived from the makkan tradition, which would be very familiar to an akkūk audience. Their comic performance, thus, disorients its melodramatic genre to an uncanny theatrical stage. Such theatrical sets and costume designs were prevalent elements of comedy at that time. While there is no extant copy of another comedy film, Hŭngbu and Nolbu (Hŭngbu Nolbu, 1959), the remaining scenario and criticism suggest that this film also developed special sets for its comic scenes. A well-known repertoire of akkūk based on a folk story, Hŭngbu and Nolbu, is a very familiar story to almost all Koreans. The main setting for the film is of the Korean landscape. But then when it encountered a comic scene, which is also set in heaven, it also provides unusual theatrical stage images in the film. The film reviews comment that the spectacle of the palace of a swallow present “fantastic imagery that no Korean film has yet had,” including a special revue with a grandiose musical scene.

When I interviewed a comedian star, Ku Pong-sŏ, he testified that he actually moved

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206 From Kukje yŏnghwage, May and June, 1959.
207 Hŭngbu and Nolbu is a orally transmitted story between two brother, Hŭngbu and Nolbu. Hŭngbu has a good character to cure a swallow’s broken leg. The swallow appreciated his help so that invites him its palace to treat him, whereas Nolbu got punished because he breaks the swallow’s legs and cured it to get the same fortune that Hŭngbu had.
between comedy and melodrama as an *akkük* performer. When a play needed a comic role, he filled that role, and then when the show started, he did the comic show.\(^{208}\) From his testimony, the inconsistency caused by the comedian’s crossover in *akkük* would not trouble the audience, and probably did not do so in cinema either. This not only shows the influence of *akkük* in film, but also suggests that an *akkük* audience’s theater experience also influenced the composition of films. Moreover, the expectation of punctuation would have been intensified when viewers encountered *akkük* stars or popular singers (the most powerful signifiers of the familiar to the popular audience) in films. Popular singers in the show part of the *akkük* also frequently worked in film, and these show aspects punctuated film sequences. *The Double Arc of Youth*, for example, features a musical-style, comic punctuation: in the doctor’s office, three nurses are working, carefully choreographed, lined up from smallest to tallest. The doctor is about to leave the office to meet a friend when one of the nurses says to him, “You are not going to keep your promise?” Blaming his forgetfulness, the doctor suddenly takes out his guitar and starts to play and sing, accompanied by the three nurses, a Korean translated take on a popular American song.

The actor playing the doctor is Pak Si-ch’ un, a famous music composer for various *akkük* companies, including the most popular and commercially oriented troupe, *Ok Grand Show Troupe* (later known as the *Chosón akkük troupe*), from the Japanese colonial period. The three nurses who sing the jazz song are the Kim Sisters, who were the daughters of the famous female singer Lee Nan-yông of the *Ok Grand Show*.\(^{209}\) At that time, the Kim Sisters were popular enough to have their own jazz singing program on a Seoul radio station, and also achieved a high

\(^{208}\) Interview with Ku Pong-sŏ, 2005.

\(^{209}\) Yi Nan-yông was also the head of the KPK *akkük* troupe in the post-liberation period, and the wife of the former head Kim Hae-song who was kidnapped by the North Koreans after the national division. Pak Si-ch’un, *Myŏngnang*, October, 1956.
level of popularity among American soldiers at the 8th Army Base. This scene exemplifies the transition of *akkūk* stars into film, as well as the show tradition in *akkūk*. In a typical Hollywood musical, musical numbers are often integrated smoothly into the film’s storyline and express a protagonist’s emotional climax. Although there are sequences in the film that use this Hollywood musical style, the beginning scene and its musical number do not relate to any of the storylines, and the three nurses’ performance does not reappear in the film. Such performances are used throughout the film as an attraction, just as a *makkan* (curtain to curtain) play was used in the past. Once they provide the necessary punctuation, they have completed their function. However, the commercial success of the anarchistic comedy is not entirely explained by the presence of the *akkūk* tradition and its punctuating pleasure within the film text itself.

Although other popular cultural modes could translate into film, if the system did not support the transition, or if the producers lacked understanding of the film medium, it was not successful. The best example of this kind of failure was the attempt to film *yōsōng kukkūk*. Although *yōsōng kukkūk* was very popular during the Korean War and the post-war period, the filmic transition was a total failure mainly because producers of *yōsōng kukkūk* tried to make film versions without any knowledge filmic techniques, and simply recording the performance would not be attractive to the viewers. When a performance was inscribed within the film text with appropriate film language, though the language itself was a bit coarse, crude and exaggerated, comparing to that of Hollywood, it could bring a new kind of pleasure to the audience. An understanding of the *akkūk* tradition as well as skillful utilization of imported film techniques based on the classical Hollywood style were both necessary to convey novel visual

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pleasures to the audience.

The Visual Pleasure of Hollywood Cinema

Old Hollywood in a New Comedy Film

Although many foreign films had greatly influenced South Korean film after the Korean War, Hollywood films were the most influential, partly due to America’s political dominance over South Korea during the 1950s. Even after the establishment of the South Korean government in 1948, as I explored in chapter one, the predominance of American films continued until the first film law restricted the number of foreign film imports in 1962. In terms of genre, the majority of the films in CMP’s stockpile were musicals and early sound comedies, such as the short comedy films including the old Hollywood slapstick comedies of Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, and Laurel and Hardy, which were imported and distributed by CMP.211 Thus, despite the time gap between the early comedy films of 1930s Hollywood and those of 1950s South Korea, there are nonetheless direct and/or indirect references to and quotations of early Hollywood comedy films in South Korean comedy films. In addition, so-called sound comedy, which was popular to the contemporary Hollywood audience, was directly imported through CMP. South Korean anarchistic comedy makes extensive use of icons and styles of both early Hollywood silent films and contemporary sound comedies. Comedy filmmakers aptly and aggressively used the comedic characters and slapstick sequences modeled on Hollywood comedy films of the silent and early sound eras. Also, it is notable that to common viewers, silent comedy is more familiar than other genres, since it was screened with the narration of film

211 This information on the American film screenings in South Korean theaters between 1946 and 1947 was found in Cho Hye-chŏng, A Study on the Policy of U.S Military Government, op. cit. pp.149-155.
commentators. Screenings of foreign films were always accompanied by a film commentator (pyŏnsa) for people who were not able to read subtitles, although this was not an effective tool for the talkie films due to the amount of dialogue. Indeed, it seems that Korean screenings continued to make use of the voice of a famous film commentator into the mid-1950s, a technique more in line with the viewing habits for Hollywood silent comedy films.212 One of the local sellers of foreign films in the 1950s recalled that he secretly bought a film reel from the 8th American Army band and circulated it in small local cities with a film commentator.213 The beginning stage of post-war filmmaking, therefore, employed the familiarity of old film viewing habits by accompanying films with a commentator and directly quoting Hollywood icons of the silent film era within the film text itself.

One film that seems to cater to the old viewing habits of certain Korean audiences is A Holiday in Seoul (Sŏul ūi Hyuıl, 1956). Fortunately, this film is still extant so that this obvious rupture of old viewing habits of the new spectators can be observed. The beginning of the film features a slapstick comedy sequence performed by a male actor. Voice-over narration is provided by the dubbed-in familiar voice of a film commentator (pyŏnsa). This narrator awakes an old man, presumably impersonating Charlie Chaplin. The man walks around the streets and parks of Seoul (in a manner akin to Charlie Chaplin) while the narrator provides commentary of what the man sees. This slow sequence is reminiscent of Hollywood silent comedy films. The employment of this style in the opening of a melodrama shows a transitional stage of the filmmaking, which crosses and negotiates genres in order to appeal to both old and new style

213 Yi Sun-jin, op. cit.
viewers. In a manner similar to the makkan play discussed earlier, this out-of-context Hollywood silent comedy episode disappears when the main sequence starts. The experimental adaptation of early Hollywood silent film within mid-1950s’ South Korean dramas or melodramas seems to be a commonly used technique of filmmakers during this time.

KEI’s creation of Fatty and Lanky (ddungddung ‘i wa holjjug ‘i), the most popular comedian couple throughout the 1950s, is the best example of the inter-textual relationship between Korean comedy films and the silent film era in Hollywood. The “fat and thin” comedic couple is very familiar to South Korean audiences from the colonial period.214 There had been several “fat and thin” couples in Korean akkük stages. Yang Hun and Yang Sŏkch’ŏn, who acted as Fatty and Lanky in the late 1950s comedy films, were known as the third duo and were both from the akkük stage. However, different from the past the duos from akkük stage, they acted individually in different akkük troupes.215 They started to work together as a couple for a radio program, called “radio-comedy,” and their comic couple performance followed in films.216 Before they became a comic couple, both of them acted in The Double Arc of Youth in 1956. Yang Sŏkch’ŏn, who always acted as the lanky one later on, played a very minor role, whereas Yang Hun acted his fatty role in the film. Another akkük star, Hwang-hae, although he was not a comedian, played opposite the lanky character instead of Yang Sŏk-ch’ŏn. However, when they were established as a couple in several films produced in 1958, their names were included in the titles such as Fatty and Lanky’s Love of the Heaven (Ch’ŏnji yujŏng, 1958), Fatty and Lanky’s

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214 This might be related to the early silent film’s reception by Koreans during the colonial period, before war-time, when the Japanese government did not prohibit the import of Hollywood films.

215 Yang Hun started to act as a comedian in Japanese language in Sŏngbo akkük Troupe during the colonial period. Whereas Yang Sŏk-ch’ŏn was the singer in Victar akkük Troupe. The history of comedians in akkük troupe is well described in the conversation among comedians written in “Hŭigŭk pae’u saengwhal skech’i,” Kukjje yŏnghwa, March, 1960.

Who Knows Your Future? (Saram p’aljja alssu óptta, 1958), Fatty and Lanky’s Hŭngbu and Nolbu (Hŭngbu nolbu, 1959), and Fatty and Lanky Go to Nonsan Army Training School (Nonsan hullyŏnso kada, 1959).

Although started with such familiar character, the late 1950s’ “film duo,” comparing that most akkŭk comedians possessed their own characteristics from the akkŭk stage, film critics judged their co-performance as lacking in talent. One critic commented that Fatty’s stout body was a handicap and that Lanky needed to develop his own idiosyncrasies if the pair wanted to survive as comic stars because the critic believed that they could only be funny in a certain story and only with their physical icons. This remark highlights the fact that this couple was created to fulfill a particular iconic characterization, which covered the lack of their own personal comic talent, compared to other comedic stars who gained their popularity from akkŭk comedy performance.

Unfortunately, any of these duo-play films are not extant at all. It is not clear to what extent this comic characterization was based on Hollywood tradition. But their films were certainly modeled after Laurel and Hardy, a duo of Hollywood comedy fame. Like their Hollywood counterparts, Fatty often performed the smart and strong character while Lanky performed the dependent, less competent roles. On top of the familiarity with the characters of the Hollywood comedy and to make up for the relatively low performance of the couple, it seems that, Lanky and Fatty’s films in the late 1950s would have created a spectacle that could hardly be achieved on the akkŭk stage. Fatty and Lanky Go to Nonsan Army Training School, for example, is very similar to Laurel and Hardy’s The Bull Fighters (1945), which was imported.

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and released from the CMP stockpile in 1947. Known as one of the great acts of Laurel and Hardy, *The Bull Fighters* displays a series of slapstick sequences disrupting the film’s narrative. In particular, the bullfight in a coliseum filled with thousands of people provides a great cinematic spectacle, and using such a spectacle was one of the commercialized tactics to attract audiences to the already-diminishing popularity of silent era comedies. Likewise, *Fatty and Lanky Go to Nonsan Army Training School* is full of slapstick scenes. And when it was released, its advertisement emphasized the spectacle aspect, pointing out that the film is “using three cameras for the first time in South Korea! Five hundred thousand soldiers appear in the film!”

The film scenario describes various spectacles, including a boxing match attended by a large number of soldiers, which recalls the coliseum scene in *The Bull Fighters*. Just as Laurel and Hardy were able to survive in the early sound era (unlike other silent period comedians) by employing these kinds of filmic spectacles, Fatty and Lanky films continuously strove to create new film spectacles. In this way, the comedy films could strategically attract many South Korean viewers during the late 1950s.

**Desiring Hollywood**

If many anarchistic comedy films intentionally used the familiar filmic images of old Hollywood, they also actively used new images that had been transferred from contemporary Hollywood films. As mentioned before, in addition to the stockpile of CMP, the extensive

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218 Cho Hye-ch’ông, *op. cit.*


220 After watching another Lanky and Fatty film, *Who Knows Your Future?*, Chosŏn Ilbo commented that it is very similar to Danny Kaye’s *Knock on Wood* (1954), a famous contemporary sound comedy film. *Chosŏn Ilbo*, September 9, 1958; The direct quotation of the Hollywood film seems to indeed have happened.

numbers of contemporary Hollywood films, which are now categorized as part of Classical Hollywood Cinema, were also released until the first film law of 1961 limited the number of film imports. Directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, William Wyler, Billy Wilder, and George Stevens were very popular. Hence, South Korean film historian Yi Yŏng-il commented that in the 1950s, the abrupt and massive importation of foreign, mostly Hollywood, films, which were heavily restricted on the Korean peninsula during Japanese wartime, provided a learning space for South Korean filmmakers. At this time, therefore, acquiring the filmmaking skills of famous Hollywood directors was a major task for many young film directors of the 1950s, and many of them experimented with these new techniques in Korean films. Also, the individual film director’s efforts to master Hollywood’s film technique, especially continuity editing, left many legendary stories such as how many times a director went to see Shane to learn continuity editing and so on.

One article on film criticism at the time pointed to a strong intertextual relationship between Hollywood films and South Korean films. It applauded the most active 1950s film director, Han Hyŏng-mo, as a “Korean George Stevens.” George Stevens, a Hollywood director, was especially famous for his Western films. It is not easy to see in what respect this article actually compares Han Hyŏng-mo to George Stevens. The name George Stevens is not somehow used to designate a specific film auteur or style, but seems to take the iconic status of famous Hollywood director. The article continues to say that Han and another young director,

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222 Yi Yŏng-il, *op. cit.* p.27.
223 Kim Su-yong testifies that the most challenging thing for the directors of that time was to make a Hollywood-like film. Kim Su-yong, *Na ǔi sarang ssinema*, Han’gyŏre, 2006.
225 This article discusses the three outstanding film directors of the time- Kim Ki-yŏng and Yu Hyŏn-mok, and Han Hyŏng-mo. Song Mi-gu, “The number three Korean directors,” *Kukjje yŏnghw*, July, 1959.
Kim Ki-yŏng, share an “Americanized way” of filmmaking, even though Kim is known as a modernist art film director. Another director Yu Hyŏn-mok, commonly known as a realist art film director, and his films also received commentary about how they are like “traditional steamed rice glazed with butter.” Traditional steamed rice represents South Koreans’ daily meal, and that image glazed with butter—a metaphor for American culture—is very unnatural to Koreans and even sounds awkward. However, this article points out that the very unnatural part is why people were fans of his films. This commentary is interesting in two ways. First, it succinctly singles out the generic style of the 1950s without referencing any previous comments on those film directors. South Korean film criticism had been somewhat obsessed with European realism as an ideal art form in history, and hailed Yu Hyŏn-mok as a master of this aesthetic. This article, however, points to the rather uncomfortable mixture of contemporary Hollywood film styles into his aesthetic in Yu’s earlier career. Secondly, thus, it not only discusses the mixture of film texts but its unnatural aspects.

This comment, in other words, suggests a bit of a surprise to contemporary readers who had known Kim and Yu as the forerunners of art film directing in South Korea. In South Korean historiography, Kim and Yu’s style is always discussed as if it is akin to Italian Neo-liberalism or Japanese horror style. So, when the points were made about their Americanized style in the


228 For the aesthetics of Kim Ki-yŏng’s film, see Yi Hyo-in, Kim Ki-yong: Ha’nyŏdŭl ponggihada, Han’ularae, 2002.
contemporaneous critics’ eyes, it opens up a refreshing discussion on the styles of 1950s films. Different from Kim Ki-yŏng and Yu Hyŏn-mok, Han Hyŏng-mo was always regarded as a popular artist. Han, though he was a well-trained camera director from the Japanese colonial period, was known as a commercial director after the release of his first box-office hit, Madame Freedom (Chayu puin, 1956).\textsuperscript{229} Regardless of whether a director was labeled a popular or commercial film director or an art director, making Hollywood style films was not only aesthetically fascinating but also a necessary and arduous step in making profitable films in the late 1950s. Filmmakers could not only rely on the familiarity of cultural forms like akkŭk to make their films appealing to viewers; but the competence of Hollywood style techniques were also another standard to be achieved.\textsuperscript{230} Some might wonder how these two anti-theatrical characteristics can coexist in films, but if one carefully observes later films, such characteristics persist throughout film history, though it rarely dominates the film as a whole. So, such mixture of the styles could be only understood as a problem of a degree rather than an essentiality.

In the comedy genre, as we have seen, akkŭk-based comedy films possess more anarchic styles with punctuated sequences than any other genres. Yet they also had to integrate some Hollywood techniques, as many other genre directors did. One of the reasons for the great success of comedy film director Kim Hwa-rang, who made most of the comedy films at KEI, was his skillful manipulation of the film frame. During the Japanese colonial period, he was a famous film scriptwriter with a pen name, I Ik. In the 1940, he made a propaganda film, I Will


\textsuperscript{230} The example of the biggest business failure would be The Great Story of Ch’unhyang (Taech’unhyangjŏn, 1958). One magazine ridicules its failure saying that the title was “the great” Ch’unhyang but it was in fact “the petty” Ch’unhyang. Kukje yŏnghwa, December, 1958.
Die Under My Flag (Kugkki aresŏ nanŭn chugŭri, 1939). The film is only partially left but the remaining part clearly displays his ability to use Hollywood film techniques.\textsuperscript{231} Even after the liberation from Japan and the Korean War, while young filmmakers did not have much experience in making film, he could show competence in filmmaking relatively.\textsuperscript{232} Film critic Yi Pong-nae commented that Kim Hwa-rang’s Lanky and Fatty’s Love of the Heaven, has a fine film presentation speed, and he is the model of a successful commercial filmmaker.\textsuperscript{233} Although it is very unfortunate that none of his comedy films remain today, the film script shows how carefully he planned for the camera angles, editing, and so on.

Han Hyŏng-mo’s comedy film, The Double Arc of Youth, well exemplifies the use of Hollywood filmic language with confidence. In constructing the opening scene of the film, Han employs the establishing shots as something typical of classical Hollywood cinema. Without any sound, the camera shows the poverty-stricken South Korean seacoast, and then abruptly shifts to the next scene showing Pusan bustling with cars. Having indicated that the location is the center of Pusan, the camera then naturally moves towards the next scene, showing a hospital door with a sign that reads “we are off on Saturday afternoon.” Han gracefully dollies the camera forward and back. This seemingly simple technical editing, however, demonstrates a mastery of classical Hollywood cinema techniques, which was rarely found in South Korean films of the time. At the time, since there were no cranes, it is known that Han made a crane with his staff to create this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{231} Japanese war time propaganda film ironically uses the linear editing style of Classical Hollywood Cinema in many ways, while Hollywood films were heavily controlled to viewer of Japanese empire. Regarding the propaganda film style, Kim Ryŏ-sil, T’usahanŭn cheguk t’uyŏnghanŭn singminji, op. cit. [\textsuperscript{231}]
\item \textsuperscript{232} Most of his films are made during the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to the film database of Korean Film Archive, he made twenty one out of thirty films from 1957 to 1962. The concentration of his filmmaking at this time shows both his competency of filmmaking also the transition of film directors after the early 1960s from the people who got trained during the colonial period to the new generation.
\item \textsuperscript{233} “General analysis: half of this year- the restoration of subjectivity,” Kukjie yŏnghwga, October, 1958.
\end{itemize}
kind of smooth continuing sequence. He also made dolly rails with his own hands. In other parts of the films, Han tries to employ simple—to today’s viewers—filmic grammar, such as the 180 degree rule or shot/reverse-shot (a basic rule of classical Hollywood cinema), in order to create film continuity. Although this seems to be very simple techniques to today’s viewers, such editing is regarded as a huge development. Popular comedy filmmakers’ continuous efforts to study such Hollywood film techniques and adapt them for Korean films received high praise from film critics.

One thing we should consider in adopting the techniques of Classical Hollywood Cinema, however, as the film critic’s comment about “steamed rice glazed with butter,” is that many of the techniques were usually partially employed. In other words, the techniques are not well incorporated into the whole film structures, rather, they are overtly squeezed into one sequence as if the director is actually trying to show his mastery of film techniques. As Gunning points out, early Hollywood film directors habitually tried to exhibit “a mastery of visual showmanship.” What Gunning means by “a mastery of visual showmanship” is tightly related to the “moving image” that many early audiences might have been confronted with when they first encountered such an image through a cinematic apparatus. Rather than merely projecting a still image, by following the grammar of Classical Hollywood Cinema, South Korean film directors could satisfy both audience types one which wants to see the familiarity from akkūk and the other which wants to experience the novelty that comes from the new filmic illusion.

Thus, the focus of using Hollywood cinematic language in the late 1950s appears to be somewhat magnified. For instance, despite the relatively positive critiques of the comedy films

234 Testimony of An Ch’ang-bok in Kim Mi-hyŏn ed., Han’guk yŏnghwa kisulssa yŏn’gu, pp.139-140.
235 Gunning, op. cit., p.118.
of Han Hyŏng-mo, one can easily see that the techniques of classical Hollywood cinema are often adapted in exaggerated forms. At the beginning of The Double Arc of Youth, when the camera movement dollies in and out, its movements are usually faster, at least, compared to the typical classical Hollywood films of the time. The camera angle, which often looks up or down without filmic meaning, also creates an air of exaggeration. High contrast with overriding backlights, which is often used in the horror genre like in many Hitchcock films to create the scary atmosphere, is also frequently used without such genre context. Han also uses frequent close-ups, and by editing many overlapping sequences, the film creates a new visual pleasure that could not be achieved in an akkŭk performance, which seems to be a conscious attempt to remind viewers that he is making a film.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the process of active cross-cultural translation was done in a very compressed and selectively desired way for the Korean people’s own commercial and cultural survival. This active cross-cultural exchange between Hollywood and Korea can be understood, in part, in the context of cultural imperialism since this whole cultural process hinged upon the unequal political and cultural relationship between South Korea and the U.S. after the Korean War. At the same time, however, the heavy reliance upon the icons and styles of Hollywood films within the text of South Korean anarchistic comedy, as well as the mass-consumption of these films by the Korean people, indicate a strong desire for modern and American culture after the Korean War.

Such desires are quite apparent in the extensive and direct incorporation of foreign image in South Korean film texts. In making a foreign image, gender plays the most significant role in comedy films. Gender images of Korean woman in many melodramas were closely
associated with the past and motherhood. The image of the iconic female star and of exotic spectacles in anarchistic comedy films, in contrast, were initially derived from Hollywood films scenes, and acted as strong cultural icons of novel visual pleasure based on America-centered material culture. Just as many Hollywood films used images of the female body and the extravagancy of material culture to provide visual pleasure for the male audience, so too did South Korean comedy films. These kinds of techniques functioned in many other film genres as a mode of indirect consumption of other cultures, which South Korean audience found appealing. In the pursuit of creating such images filmmakers were eager to find a new face appropriate for film to emphasize a modern feeling in them. Even if akkŭk stars were a good resource in terms of better acting and familiarity in filming work, many girls who won beauty pageants were cast in films. Pure Love (Sunaebŏ, 1957), also directed by Han Hyŏng-mo, Kim Ŭi-hyang, features the winner of the Korean national beauty pageant of that year. In this film, Han directs an overlapping sequence of the woman walking on the beach in three different swimsuits and sunglasses, with the camera’s gaze fixed closely on Kim’s body. This sequence is indeed out of context since Kim’s role, a woman of platonic love rather than physical love. Even the star actress Ch’oe Īn-hŭi, who achieved fame in her role as a good mother throughout the 1960s, exposes her sexualized body as a famme fatale in Hell Flower (Chiokhwa, 1958). Among the new stars, Yi Pin-hwa was regarded as the sex symbol of South Korea, or the South Korean Marilyn Monroe, in this new era of the “body.” Her role in The Double Arc of Youth—her screen debut—made her a star. In the film, she embodies a new form of attraction by brazenly

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237 One of the main foci of popular magazines in the 1950s was celebrity, including Hollywood stars, comedic stars, film stars, dancers and singers. Popular magazines provided a detailed account of the private/ love/ family lives of those stars.
displaying her body in swimwear. The camera gazes closely at her body, and her sensual facial expression provides a novel, exotic visual for South Korean viewers. Sequences in which the actress dances and sings were, of course, also among the main attractions of *The Double Arc of Youth*.

Excessively Westernized outdoor locations, like those seen in Hollywood film, were also used to intensify the glamour of female stars in these films. For example, in *The Double-Arc of Youth*, scenes of a couple playing on a beach and rowing a boat are obviously meant to be reminiscent of the California landscape. Activities often associated with Western or American culture, like playing golf, going to a bar, dancing at a party, or drinking a can of coke were emblematic of such intertextual processes between Hollywood film and Korean film put in place to draw South Korean film viewers. Visiting the foreign material culture through film is tightly related to the desires of people who watch those films. With the total economic devastation of South Korea after the Korean War, American material products were the icons of wealth, and watching a film was a relatively inexpensive consumption people could pursue.

On top of the exoticism that it shared with many other film genres of the late 1950s, comedy films used visual techniques such as aesthetics of illusion and experimental sequences to heighten discontinuity and punctuate the more Hollywood zed sequences. The nature of the comedy genre allowed such insertions to be more frequently possible, since it pursues less story structures. In *The Double Arc of Youth*, for instance, there is a series of exotic dating scenes between the four protagonists, which are crosscut, and a male-female duet background music number replaces the diegetic sound. This dating sequence is, in this way, composed much like a music video as if the couple is acting for the music. The film also includes animation such as a
framed photo of a family member that changes its facial expression depending on the protagonist’s performance. This cartoon-like scene is copied in other comedy films of the late 1960s, in *The Father and Four Sons* (*Obuja, 1968*). In a similar cartoon-like moment in *How to Become a Millionaire*, when the protagonist comes back to earth from hell, he is projected to appear as if he is flying through the sky. Based on the number of times these kinds of scenes were recreated again and again, these seemingly primitive sequences for the film critics must have been entertaining and amusing to the many viewers of the time.

It is somewhat natural to conclude that anarchistic comedy film watching is related to such “primitiveness,” which deviated from classical Hollywood’s grammar, if considering the fact that the classical Hollywood cinema was considered as the high-culture at that time in South Korea. These kinds of filmic manipulations and irruptions through the excessive use of Americanized icons and cartoon-like sequences can be described as a primitive attraction that is similar to the marvelous magic shows of early Hollywood cinema. However, at the same time, given the fact that the size of audiences for *akkūk* or shows decreased in the late 1950s, producing show-like sequences within the cine-scape might be considered a way of giving the people what they want, that is, transmitted into a new media form. In this sense, South Korean film audiences can be seen not as “gullible country bumpkins, but as sophisticated urban pleasure seekers.” While many critics described these audiences as low-brow, one could argue that, to the contrary, theatergoers were well aware of what they were seeking and viewing “the modern techniques” of stage craft. Furthermore, due to its anarchistic style, comedy films

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were able to fulfill various audience desires, representing the times and people’s lived experiences, were more important to audiences than maintaining the narrative structure, as will be exemplified in the case of *The Double Arc of Youth*.

**Comic Realism: Re-reading *The Double Arc of Youth***

*The Double Arc of Youth*, is one of the most successful comedy films in post-war South Korea, exemplifies the possibility of national film’s commercial success through the use of the unique anarchistic style. As one of top-ten box office hits of 1957, *The Double Arc of Youth* was applauded as “a model of a commercial film”\(^{241}\) and praised for the skillful camera techniques of the director, Han Hyŏng-mo. Ultimately, the movie would trigger the comedy film boom of the late 1950s. A careful mixture of *akkăk* and Hollywood film tradition, this film successfully portrays the bright and positive social atmosphere of South Korea, as many comedy films did in the late 1950s. *The Double Arc of Youth*, nevertheless, allows us to read it in a different way and the usual mis-reading of comedy film texts as mere entertainment conservatively follows the norms and disciplines created by the political powers. It is not deniable that any part of popular culture including comedy film has such submissive characteristics since it should have been censored by the political powers before it was released to the audience. However, despite such limits of expression, the nature of fissures and non-linearity in anarchistic comedy allows more careful reading of the film texts.

Although the film was made to test the commerciality of the comedy genre the scriptwriter of this film was Kim So-dong by Han Hyŏng-mo, Kim directed *The Money* and *Oh,*

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My Hometown, both of which had been censored by the government in the process of being submitted to the International Film Festival.\textsuperscript{242} Given that the participation of Kim, a realist, in The Double Arc of Youth did not draw the attention of government censors, it is doubtful that there was a strict set of political standards regarding censorship. Although this film did not have any censorship issues, The Double Arc of Youth nonetheless avoids creating the kind of undesirable or depressing social and physical atmosphere that the government found so problematic in The Money and Oh, My Home Town. This more positive portrayal of life can be attributed to the generic characteristics of the comedy film, the protective structure of which it tends to cast forms of trouble as the basis for jokes.\textsuperscript{243} Using such genre characteristics, the stylistic anarchism of comedy film opens up the possibility of thematic anarchism—the rupture of the overall theme and the narrative structure of the film.

As I analyzed earlier in this chapter, the theatrical settings of akkŭk and the use of studio sets akin to those in Hollywood films help emphasize the bright, happy, and lighthearted moments of the storyline. However, compared to the studio shots, many of the outdoor locations reveal and reflect the reality of the South Korean situation of post-war destruction. These outdoor scenes, although they make up a relatively smaller proportion of the shots, punctuate entertaining sequences.

The film’s sequences are largely divided into two parts: those that take place in akkŭk and Hollywood-like settings and those that take place in outdoor locations in South Korea. The names of the two male protagonists tell us about their character: Myŏng-ho (typical name entails

\textsuperscript{242} Refer to my chapter two.

\textsuperscript{243} Regarding the political freedom that the comedy genre had compared to other film genres, See Ramona Curry’s \textit{Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as a Cultural Icon}, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
some moralism) is a model citizen despite his poverty and Pu-nam (meaning a rich man) is a spoiled and negligent youngster. Scenes showing Myŏng-ho’s house consist mostly of outdoor shots of a location labeled with a derogatory Japanese term, hakkobang, or panjach’on in Korean, meaning “poor village.” Pu-nam’s house, on the other hand, is situated in a studio. Thus, when the film features the real location of Myŏng-ho’s house, the sequence creates an almost documentary-like realism with deep-focus cinematography.\textsuperscript{244}

The first outdoor sequence of \textit{The Double Arc of Youth} follows the first scene in the doctor’s office. After leaving the doctor’s office, Myŏng-ho and Pu-nam walk down the street and come to Pusan Pier where they wait for a bascule bridge (Kyŏngdo tari) to close. They talk about the war, and ask each other how their families are doing. Myŏng-ho says, “My father was kidnapped by North Koreans. My brother died during the war. I got injured. I really had a near-death experience, though it is ok now.” This short line summarizes the experience common to many Koreans during the war period. A very sad and sober climate is created in this sequence, and we can read the pain in Myŏng-ho’s stomach as symbolic of his internalized pain due to the war and the difficult post-war time period. Although war had more often been used for raising the spirit of anti-Communism, this scene focuses instead on private and individual pain associated with the war. The climate of the outdoor location, thus, sharply contrasts with the previous studio location filled with brightness and music. The contrast is sharpened when we see Myŏng-ho’s house.

As the camera follows Pu-nam going to Myŏng-ho’s house, it exhibits the whole village, focusing on the details of the everyday life of the people. From a distance, children are seen

playing in the poor neighborhood. After framing the entire local landscape in a long shot, the camera shifts its direction to the creepy alleys and to the village located in the mountain where many war refugees lived. Next, it moves to a person’s hands preparing a meal in a boiling pot. Finally, the camera moves to another set of hands sewing a pair of worn-out rubber shoes, then dollies out to reveal that the hands are those of Myŏng-ho’s sister. This introductory sequence of Myŏng-ho’s house is reminiscent of an unreleased documentary film, *Children in Crisis*, made by Yi Hyŏng-p’yo and American war reporter Theodore Conant after the Korean War. This short documentary film depicts the poverty-stricken South Korean landscape, juxtaposing the streets and the children with critical use of diegetic sounds. The camera gazes on a group of children who lost their parents. Without cinematic interference, it follows the real scene in which the children steal merchandises from a store, beg for gum and chocolates from American soldiers, and swear and attack each other. In comparison to a more authoritative way of documentary filmmaking in which voice-over narration is used to explain an objective and authoritative vision of the film, this film avoids such overt manipulation, and, at the end, inserts a subtitle asking, “who made these children like them?” In this way, this film asks about political responsibility in light of the war. Much like *Children in Crisis*, which intentionally creates such realism, the sequence of *The Double Arc of Youth* also uses only diegetic sound and deep-focus cinematography when depicting the poverty-stricken South Korean. This not quite entertaining sequence within anarchistic comedy is a very unique experiment unmasking fantasy world of comedy film.

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245 Interview with director, Yi Hyŏng-pyo. I was able to watch the documentary film *Children in Crisis* when I did an interview with the director, Yi Hyŏng-pyo. I want to show my gratitude to director Yi Hyŏng-pyo for lending me so many unreleased documentary films he made in the 1950s. Unfortunately, it is not available, since it was more like an independent cinema made by him and Theodore Conant.
When shot outdoors, even an entertaining scene, such as the *akkuk* performance of comedian Kim Hŭi-kap, has notes of realism and post-war South Korean sentimentalism. Kim, wearing almost nothing on his upper body, performs outside of Myŏng-ho’s house as a very poor water-deliverer. The performance—an imitation of Korean singers Ko Pok-su, Nam In-su, and Kim Chŏng-gu, former *akkuk* troupe singers from Japanese colonial period—is very amusing. This sequence, however, also elicits sorrow by showcasing Kim’s thin and humble body and pity arousing face. Critic Yu Han-ch’ŏl commented, “his (Kim Hŭi-kap) face shows innocence and emptiness that triggers laughter of the popular audience. With his popular phrase “oh, no! (At-ch’a!),” expressing his ugly face, he shows the stereotypes of all people in our lives who are weak and slow.” In addition to his filmic image, Kim’s actual experience as a journalist in the past also contributes to generating a more serious attitude toward the real situation in South Korea. Yu continues, “I find his potential not only in slapstick but also tragic comedy, which brings laughter even in the midst of the lonely and overtly complex world.” His personalized comic character, in this sense, is very different from other Hollywood-style comedy stars like Lanky and Fatty. Yu also states:

Kim Hŭi-kap acknowledges the limits of the slapstick comedy, which Lanky and Fatty do not have. Their (Lanky and Fatty) performance is funny only for ten minutes but if it takes more than fifteen minutes, it is very boring and even makes the audience furious about their low-brow taste of performance.

From Kim’s performance as a water-deliverer, a stereotypical post-war wanderer, it is not an exaggeration to say that his performance reminds people of the Korean War, its impact on

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normal people’s daily life, and the sorrow embedded within it. What he sings in this film supports and strengthens this emotional atmosphere and evokes people’s sorrow in post-war Korea.

In one sequence, in particular, Kim sings two songs that reveal the sense of emptiness and loneliness due to physical separation, dislocation, and Diaspora caused by the war and the unfortunate modern history of South Korea:

No sound in misty rain,
Sad farewell of Pusan Station
Good bye, good bye,
Whistling of tears,
So many sorrows living in a war shelter
But I cannot forget this poor house
A girl with a Pusan accent is crying very sadly,
Sad farewell of Pusan Station.
- *The Pusan Station of Farewell (Ibyŏl ūi Pusan chŏnggŏjang)*

Counting the years of wandering in a foreign land,
It’s been ten years since I left my hometown, and my days of youth are gone,
I am just like a floating weed, sympathizing with myself,
Looking out the window, the sky is far away
- *Wandering in a Foreign Land (T’ahyang sari)*

*The Pusan Station of Farewell (Ibyŏl ūi Pusan chŏnggŏjang)* and *Wandering in a Foreign Place (T’ahyang sari)* sung by Nam In-su and Ko Pok-su respectively are very sentimental in relation to the war, dislocation, and the lonely existence of displaced or separated people. *The Pusan Station of Farewell* is a wartime song written in 1953 by Pak Si-ch’un. Pusan is in the southern part of the Korean peninsula. When the North Koreans marched into the South during the Korean War, South Korean people went down to Pusan for refuge. Thus, Pusan is a space that reminds people of their wartime sentiment of being lost people, and a space in which
many personal memories of love and sorrow are left, as suggested by the lyric, “a girl with Pusan accent is crying.” *Wandering in a Foreign Place* was written in 1937 and was popular during the Second World War. The wanderers in the lyrics refer mostly to the people who went to the Manchu area or *Kando* due to poverty and political exile. In this sense, both songs are resonant with wartime and the sentimental feelings of the people who lost their land while in exile. Kim Hŭi-kap’s performance of those popular songs in relation to Pusan and wartime in *The Double Arc of Youth*, thus, brings a different kind of pleasure from that which the popular audience might have from exotic settings and Hollywood-style performances. Although the overall narrative structure easily sutures the rupturing and depressing moments into a narrative film with a happy marriage, one could still expect an audience with very vivid memories of wartime pain to have diverse viewing positions.

In this respect, while South Korean anarchistic comedy films of the late 1950s had always been regarded as merely entertaining or something far from realism, they actually convey real situations and the mentality of South Korean people. The insertion of outdoor sequences is similar to the non-manipulative techniques of Italian neo-realism in terms of eschewing studio sets, focusing on scenes of everyday life, and using non-star actors like Kim Hŭi-gap. The use of realism filming techniques in anarchistic comedy films, then, could be understood as the filmmakers’ endeavors to utilize world-cinema styles other than the Hollywood style, which was so often regarded as the proper way of filmmaking by many elite film critics. Considering the significant position of Italian Neo-realism in South Korean film criticism history, the reading of this anarchistic comedy as realism text shows the complicated and diverse desires of 1950s audiences and filmmakers.
Although the late 1950s was the starting point of the Golden-Age of South Korean cinema history, this time period should be considered more broadly. The 1950s’ cinescape articulated a historical, industrial and cultural panorama entirely different from that of the 1960s. The comedy boom at this historical and industrial juncture is joined with the discourse and philosophy of the larger nation-building project. Comedy had a strong populist appeal by emphasizing optimistic views of the national situation through its textually idiosyncratic pure entertainment. Yet comedy of this time period also shows the characteristics of cinema of attractions, in which the various commercial traditions of *akkūk*, famous plays, early Hollywood cinema, classical Hollywood cinema, popular shows and coarse animations collide, reflecting the varied desires of consumers of South Korean modernity. Such anarchistic cinematic collaboration is significant since it disappeared soon in the 1960s and evolved into a more sophisticated form. The next chapter will discuss how radically changing historical and industrial circumstances in the early 1960s influenced the comedy film texts and the grammar of filmmaking in regard to the nation and popular pleasure.
PART III : THE 1960S AND COMEDY FILM

CHAPTER FOUR

The Euphoria of Democracy, Modernity as Ours

On April 19, 1960, South Korean people witnessed mass student protests that called for the removal of the authoritarian president, Syngman Rhee. On April 25, university professors demonstrated for freedom within universities and for the removal of President Rhee. The next day, President Rhee declared that he would formally resign. A few days after Rhee’s removal, the whole family of Vice-President Yi Ki-bung committed suicide, and a new democratic constitutional law was promulgated. That these dramatic historical events condensed into such a short period of time has long been remembered as part of South Korea’s most liberal and revolutionary moment. Although the a year-long short democratic government led by Chang Myŏn and the Democratic Party (Minjudang) ended after the military coup by Park Chung Hee in 1961, the so-called April Revolution is often remembered as the “democratizing milestone” took place between two radically authoritarian regimes.

Such a historical atmosphere had a great influence not only on the political realm but also on the cultural sector. In the midst of the post-revolutionary political power struggle, the intellectual discourse of political participation of cultural products as a national civil agency pervaded this time period. Among all cultural realms, cinema industry was recognized as one of the most powerful tools to reflect the social atmosphere of the time. While it was difficult for

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248 Theodore Hughes discusses the most frequently used word by literary or film critics, “engagement (angajyumang),” meaning the social participation of the cultural product how it had influenced to produce a “proper” national cultural products in the late 1950s’ literature. For more details, see Theodore Hughes, Writing the Boundaries of the Divided Nation: the works of Son Ch’ang-sŏp, Ch’oe In-hun, Nam Chŏng-hyon, and Lee Ho-chul, PhD. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2002.
many film critics to be radically critical of the anti-communistic authoritarian regime during Rhee’s presidency, after the April Revolution, the critical discourses on politics started to bloom, reflecting the democratic social atmosphere.

The film critics’ discourses also requested the participation of cinema as a social agency in a democratic nation. They criticized the absolute control of the government over the film industry as well as the puppet-work of the filmmakers during Rhee’s presidency. In order to be an active agent of civil society, two agendas were suggested. On an administrative level, a civil censorship organization called the National Ethics Board that had been suggested in the late 1950s was formally established right after the April Revolution. This Board aimed to create the counter-hegemonic power in censorship so that government power could not harm the freedom of expression, the basic civil rights. On an aesthetic level, many filmmakers attempted to practice realism based on Italian Neo-realism. In this social atmosphere, some films produced and released between the April Revolution (1960), and Park Chung Hee’s military coup (1961) were appreciated as the most outstanding realism films by contemporaneous film critics,\textsuperscript{249} and such aesthetical judgment has been the most powerful intellectual discourse throughout South Korean film history. Usually, without careful assessment of the film’s actual presentation, many film critics gave positive comments on the aesthetical development of some South Korean films over the years.

In fact, such discourse on social participation of cultural products had long been a heavy task for many Korean artists since the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), when Korean ethnic people’s formal political participation was prohibited and “being cultural” was the only means to

\textsuperscript{249} \textit{A Stray Bullet (Obalt’an, 1961)} is the best example how such criticism made this film as the best ‘realism’ film in South Korean film history. Regarding such critic’s manipulation, see Kim So-yŏn, \textit{Yŏnghwasa ónŏ}, 2004.
voice national identity.\textsuperscript{250} Marxist and leftist cultural discourse on the social realism or social participation of cultural products actually led all cultural discourses during the colonial period. Cultural nationalism, in this sense, was the most powerful resistance tool within the Korean peninsula during the colonial period as we discussed in chapter one.

However, even after the national liberation from Japanese colonial rule, post-war South Korea was under militant and authoritarian rule where the embodiment of anti-communistic ideology actually permeated and controlled the people’s daily lives.\textsuperscript{251} After the April Revolution, under the rubric of democracy, many intellectuals requested social participation even more as a social resistance tool. The critical discourse of realism pervaded, within the limits of not presenting socialist ideas, cinema had freedom to express counter-hegemonic cultural realm. The canonization of South Korean film based on the obsession with realism from this time, then, resulted in overlooking or overvaluing some of the popular films produced and consumed throughout post-war Korea.

The April Revolution was even more conducive to empowering such discourse. After the April Revolution, in particular, a particular genre film such as realism was believed to have achieved this goal and, hence, proclaimed to be proper national cinema. Among them, interestingly, many comedy films obtained quite positive attention, as a social agent genre. Previously, as I discussed in chapter two, comedy film was regarded as one of the most low-brow genres, while it was always the most popular genre throughout modern Korean film history.


\textsuperscript{251} Regarding the “colonialism” during the “post-colonial” Korea, see Choi Chungmoo, “The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory: South Korea,” in \textit{Positions} 1:1, Duke University Press, 1993.
However, interestingly enough, many comedy films were viewed differently during this short April Revolution period, appreciated as realistic film, and the characteristics of satire of comedy films were highlighted.

Indeed, in general, the comedy films produced in the early 1960s had totally different images and visual landscapes distant from the late 1950’s comedy films: they displayed the high development of showing Hollywood’s linear style with more continuity editing compared to the 1950s’ anarchistic film style. Also, the images of modernized national (usually urban) landscapes were the backdrop of the film texts during this time period. For many film critics, such style has been translated as the reflection of South Korean real modernity and as the euphoria toward a new modern South Korean society.

However, despite such compliments and aesthetic achievement, what I want to emphasize here is that these films are not best understood as straight-forward reflections of the April Revolution and South Korean social reality: rather, I want to appreciate them in the context of the comedic rhetorical frame of the day. The political quality of these films, therefore, should be reconsidered, because comedy films are not only socially functioning, but also its democratic banter was the code of pursuing democracy – the symbol of a westernized and developed nation. Although many film critics or scholars who saw the April Revolution as the most democratic milestone of South Korean modern history wanted to see those filmic characters as the result of the revolution, comedy films with similar style remained popular even after the Park Chung Hee’s military coup in 1961, and lasted for few more years. I argue, further, what had been circulated to South Korean audiences were commercialism-oriented, Westernized and

252 For the “anarchistic” style of the 1950s’ comedy films, see my chapter three.
Hollywoodized comedy films. In many comedy films, new icons of fantasized and idealized modernity and the Westernized (Americanized) democratic and liberal way of living were created. More significantly, they were circulated, disseminated and consumed through various mass media outlets by the popular audience.

This chapter examines, thus, the boom of comedy films in the early 1960s, which were produced right before and after the April Revolution, investigating how the comedy film of this time has been read in relation to the April Revolution and the discourse of realism in previous and recent scholarship. I attempt to answer the ways in which many comedy films in the 1960s were suddenly appreciated as top-notch and aesthetically satisfying films at that time and in the following decades as well.

To do so, first, I discuss the influence of the April Revolution on filmmakers’ agencies. The first step is about the shifts of the civil agencies of film critics, which made people believe that it was the most democratic social organization and, so, historically memorable, even today. By focusing on the radical transformation of filmmaker’s after the Revolution and the formation of the National Ethics Board as a democratic civil agency against the government’s control, its *bona fide* formality will be discussed. Then, by focusing precisely on comedy film’s textual representation, I discuss how Hollywoodized verbal styles of the early 1960s’ films drew a misrecognition of these films as expressions of the real and democratic way of living or presenting realism aesthetics. I see the frequently politically charged statements in the films as signifiers, which operated ideologically, precisely to create an image of a democratic nation. The systematic change of the film industry and the development of filmmaking technology, I argue were the important vehicles for making a *quasi*-realistic film text into authentic realism films. In this
sense the realism of these comedy films is realism only existing in film’s fantasy.” With the help of such technology, films present a typified image of a democratic and developed nation; as such, film is best appreciated as a player in the South Korean dream-factory and as a consumer item that answered the people’s desires to become modern and democratic citizens during this short revolutionary period.

The April Revolution and Democratizing Movement

“The Revolution! It is still on its way! It was a hot lead boiling in the heart of the people. It was a wave sweeping away every decomposed part of our life even before we realized what it was. After a few days of seeing a placard saying “Remove! Syngman Rhee!” we found another placard “Let’s be rational!” in the bloody hands of the students. Then, we realize that the Revolution is ours and people started to welcome the honorable victory of our new generation!”

The citation above is from a newspaper article written by famous South Korean film critic and historian Yi Yong-il. Exhilarated by emotions, his statement shows the social impact and excitement of the April Revolution. Indeed, the April Revolution was a shock to many Koreans. For many South Korean intellectuals, in particular, the April Revolution was a victorious moment for South Korean democracy, since it is believed to have taken away the historical burden of achieving democratization from authoritarian rule, a historical task among intellectuals. Although the revolution ended soon after the military coup by Park Chung Hee in May, 1961, because of its short time period and seemingly revolutionary social atmosphere, it was also remembered as the most democratic and valuable days in South Korean modern history. Although it is true that it was one of the most memorable historical times, I argue that this time

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period was also one of the most overtly politicized historical times in South Korean modern history. What I mean by saying overtly politicized is to emphasize the fact that many politicians and historians tend to use this historical event for their own political aims.

The characteristics and reception of the April Revolution, thus, are very controversial. Despite the fact that the revolution was a very urban-centered, elite-driven movement,\textsuperscript{254} it has been discussed and remembered as a national revolution,\textsuperscript{255} which was often easily translated as the representation of the all national people’s success over the dictatorship of the Rhee regime. While some people see the strict disjunction between the April Revolution and the May 16th military coup by Park Chung Hee, as democracy versus authoritarianism,\textsuperscript{256} it is notable that Park Chung Hee publicly claimed his legitimacy was based on the April Revolution. He blamed Chang Myŏn and the Democratic Party for not following the April Revolution’s spirit – that is why the May 16th military coup was called the May Revolution in the headlines of newspapers of the time, though it was, in part, a shrewd media play.\textsuperscript{257} I believe that such an antithetical interpretation of the same historical event could be possible since South Korean people vehemently desired to establish a modern nation in a democratic form at that time, but such desires were mostly focused on the establishment of formal institutions of democracy (e.g. constitutional amendment and initiating various civil organizations), as notably seen in the

\textsuperscript{254} For the April Revolutions’ characteristics which are different from grass-root revolution, see Kang Man-gil, “The Historical Meaning of April 19 and its present meaning,” in Kang Man-gil ed., 	extit{Theories of the April Revolution, Han’gilsa}, 1983; Pak Hông-sin, “Han’guk sahoe ŭi kujo wa 4-wŏl hyŏngmyŏng, 1945-1960.: 4-wŏl hyŏngmyŏng e taehan sahoe kujosajŏk chŏpkŭn,” MA Thesis, Korea University, 1986.

\textsuperscript{255} For the perspective to view the April Revolution as a national revolution, see Ko Un’s article in the same volume of above book. Ko Un, “Sailgŭ hyŏngmyŏng ŭn muösìn’ga,” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{256} Ko Un narrates that April Revolution was the culmination of the grass-rooted revolution stemmed from the past like Tonghak Farmer’s Movement and March First Movement, and extend it to the anti-government movement under the Park Chung Hee’s military government. Ko-un’s view is typical nationalist’s view to make a linear modern Korean history from the view of grass-root scholars. Ibid.

consequences of the April Revolution. Aside from such formal institutional changes, the bustling revolutionary social atmosphere of the post-April Revolution saw political reprisals, such as the execution of Rhee supporters, and the exertion of power over the newly formed civil organizations.

As in politics, the April Revolution had a tremendous impact on culture, including cinema. Since the April Revolution started with the rally against the corruption of the March 15th presidential election, after the April Revolution and removal of Rhee, people blamed organizations which supported Rhee. Many cinema organizations were established during the mid-1950s, such as the Association for South Korean Cinema Production (Taehan chejakija hyŏp 'woe, 1954), the Association for Cinema Distribution (Taehan yŏnghwa paekŭp hyŏphwoe, 1955), the Association of South Korean Film Directors (Han’guk yŏnghwa kamdok hyŏphwoe, 1955), and the South Korean Association of Actors and Actress (Taehan yŏnghwa paeu hyŏphwoe, 1955).²⁵⁸ These organizations publicly supported the President, Syngman Rhee, in the March presidential election, although Im Hwa-su, the president of Korean Entertainment Inc and the leader of the Association for the Anti-communists Popular Artists supposedly coerced them. After the revolution, these groups were either severely criticized or punished.²⁵⁹ More significantly, the state-backed company, KEI, was completely dismantled, and people involved with organization faced persecution from the general audience as well as civil organizations. Many actors and actress who made speeches in support of Rhee’s presidential election campaign

²⁵⁸ Han’guk yŏnghwa charyo p’yŏllam, Korean Film Council, 1976. p.34-36.
²⁵⁹ It is a well-known anecdote that Im Hwa-su’s P’yŏnghwa theater was attacked by the students during the April Revolution.
were expelled from the Association for Actors and Actress. \(^{260}\) Im Hwa-su was arrested for embezzlement and violence, and finally executed. Many of those in the cinema industry who politically supported the Rhee government were stripped of all their previous honors. What I want to emphasize here about this revolutionary moment is that many film scholars jumped to the easy conclusion that the most democratic moment after the April Revolution produced the most democratic social organization, and, thus, a realism film such as *A Stray Bullet* could be made and screened. \(^{261}\) The idea of constituting a civil organization for the purpose of curbing the central power of the government is a quite well-known modernist idea. But such an idea needs close scrutiny when applied to the relationship between the social atmosphere and film text. More significantly, even though there were some experimental films that pursued realism and film art, such discourse did not actually have much influence on the popular film and people’s consumption patterns. For example, in general, the owner of the theater and the producers doubt the fact that realism films could be profitable. This was the case for *A Stray Bullet*’s circulation. Although it is known as a legendary film text in Korea’s realist canon, and reflects the liberal social atmosphere, it is noteworthy that the director, Yu Hyŏn-mok, could not find a single theater to show the film, when it was first released in Seoul. After some struggles and negotiations, the film was released during the “flower-play-season” (*kkonnori kyejŏl*), which was regarded as the most unprofitable season for film screenings, because people go out for “flower-play” and rarely visit theaters. \(^{262}\) So-called Korean auteur directors, Kim Ki-yŏng, Yi Sŏng-gu

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\(^{260}\) Kim Sung-ho was the exemplary case for this persecution. He was eliminated from the association of actors and actress and was not able to be in screen for those short moments. However, right after he was awarded as the best actor’s role in the Asian International Film Festival, he resumed his career as an actor soon.

\(^{261}\) The best example of such criticism is actually from Yi Yong-il’s assessment on this film as well as the contemporaneous film critics of this time.

and Yu Hyŏn-mok worked with such small coterie productions from 1959 to early 1960. However, although many film critics believed that this group of young directors was the new hope of South Korean filmmaking, the directors’ new movements and experimental films did not get enough audience attention; as a result, they did not get a second chance to make art-film again.

Not only did many film historians give too much political attention to film text judgment but also to the civil organizations formed during the revolutionary period. However, the civil organizations did not function in a civil capacity as much as the filmmakers had expected. In terms of cinema, in order to prevent using various cinema organizations as government apparatuses as Rhee’s government did, people (the film critics, mostly) emphasized the social role of cinema as a civil agency and in the formation of the nation’s public sphere. The previously heavy censorship became the focal point of criticism and the object of renovation. Pointing out the absence of any national film policy in 1960—until then American military government’s film policy was still in action—people asserted that in order to establish a true democratic nation, Koreans had to have their own independent national film policy which might secure the autonomy of South Korean people and freedom of expression. Indeed, the previous censorship code promulgated in 1956—The Censorship Code for the Public Performance—was almost identical to the Japanese colonial censorship code and, thus, needed to be revised into a democratic form.263

For this reason, The National Ethics Board on Cinema (Chŏnguk yŏnghwawon gowŏnhwoe), a civil organization for censorship, was hastily organized in 1960. The main

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263 The whole article is found in The Compiled History of Korean Film Industry, Han’guk yŏnghwa chin’hung chohap, 1970. p.337.
The purpose of this board was to put into practice “the civil power gained from the April Revolution.” The Board consisted of many civilians including all classes of people from education, law, military, religion, journalism, and, even, children. Specific ethics codes on nation, society, law, tradition, sexuality, and education were proclaimed and distributed through the newspapers. Despite the fact that this organization’s rule did not have any legal power, many people expected that it would play an important civil role in protecting the freedom of expression that had been largely restricted by the censorship of the past government. It is not surprising, then, that the historical evaluation of National Ethics Board (NEB, afterwards) is more than exhilarating because it is recorded as the first and foremost civil censorship organization in modern South Korean film history. Many contemporaneous and recent film critics and historians view NEB as a direct consequence of the April Revolution and a symbolic protector of the democratization of film industry and the freedom of expression. The head of NEB, Yi Ch’ŏn’g-i proudly said:

The National Ethics Board is the result of bloods of young students who fought for the democracy of our nation. NEB is totally born from the spirit of the April Revolution, and will live with such spirit....There is no government intervention toward this organization, and so it is the most democratic social organization run by civil hands.265

However, worries and woes about the practical utility of this board pervaded as much as excitement.266 The first criticism of the National Ethics Board centered on the fact that the organization did not have legal power to censor content. The NEB could only recommend the

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film producers to revise the point that the board problematized. Second, the NEB easily assumed that filmmakers would follow all the ethics codes after getting the recommendation. Thirdly, the ethics codes itself were too strict and regulated too many details on the film contents. Therefore, even though it was by the hands of civilians, one might imagine that such civilian ethics codes could ironically harm freedom of expression. Thus, there was criticism that the board only changed their name from censorship to advice, although Yi Ch’ŏng-gi, the head of the board, publicly responded that the code would be applied in a looser sense within the limit of keeping the spirit of liberal democracy.\(^{267}\) The political meaning by adopting civilian censorship, then, seems to be the reassurance from the anxiety that stemmed from the dominance of the past government. The difference between the newly formed Ethics Board and the previous government Censorship Code was only the government’s signing over of the power of censorship into the hands of civilians.

Furthermore, the need for civilian censorship was discussed even before the April Revolution, and the ministry of Education actually permitted civilians to run the Ethics Board. The Cine-Pen Club aiming for the establishment of democratic journalism was formed in 1957. The main members of the Cine-Pen Club were actively engaged in the formation of NEB.\(^{268}\) Hence, the purpose and function of newly inaugurated Ethics Code were greatly similarity to the suggestions of Cine-Pen Club. However, the suggestions of the Cine-Pen Club were a continuation of the U.S Army’s Censorship Code, which basically followed the Japanese colonial legal system. Therefore, the Ethics Code could not but have a strict, controlling characteristic in its nature. In sum, what I want to point out is that the formation of the NEB was not a direct

\(^{267}\) Yi Ch’ŏng-gi, “Yŏnghun kyujŏng pok nŏpkke haesŏk hagetta,” Han’guk Ilbo, August, 18, 1960.

\(^{268}\) Yŏnghwa yŏnye yŏngam, p.184.
result of the April Revolution.

The consensus about having the NEB was, then, that if a civil organization implements the social control, although it follows almost the same regulations as the colonial and authoritarian regimes, the organization’s work was believed to be a practice of democratic procedure. Many South Korean intellectuals largely shared such modernists' beliefs of the formalism of democracy. Regardless of carefully assessing the meaning of the specific regulation code, the point, “by the people,” was regarded as upholding the democracy. In 1958, the president of Kwangsŏng Cinema Production, Kang Hyŏng-ok wrote:

Our friend nation, America, produces very decent films such as westerns in which good people subjugate social evils. They show how important civilian’s sacrifice is for the nation. Many believe that America is a democratic nation. [As a democratic nation] It is hard to conceive they have such a heavy self-regulatory system using Production Code compared to that of [democratically underdeveloped] Asian nations. I am surprised to see the strictness of the rule and its employment in the film.269 (parenthesis added)

Impressed by Hollywood’s civil production code, he further claims that South Korea has to have a stricter Censorship Code like Hollywood. His statement is interesting in that he is the owner of the production company and usually producers are often opposed to such regulations. Although there might be some limits to the freedom of expression as a democratic nation, modeling the Censorship Code after Hollywood, if it is helpful for constructing a healthy nation by the hands of a civil organization and even if it is a strict civilian censorship, would not be a problem for him. Moreover, he argues that such civil censorship is a necessary course for the development of national democracy. Taking an example of Hollywood’s western film genre, he

269 Kukje yŏnghwa, May and June, 1958.
explains how the morality of a nation could be built within a film genre’s text. What he
demanded is that a stronger ethics code could be used for constructing a healthier image of the
nation, which does not have anything to do with democratic ideal. Rather it is similar to the
nationalism that had been pursued by many filmmakers in the 1950s.

In this sense, despite the vigorous spirit of the April Revolution as a milestone of South
Korean modern democracy and the seemingly enormous transformation of the society, we should
be careful to regard these social changes as the direct result of the April Revolution. And it is
necessary to pay close attention to the details of each cultural product and the performance of the
social institutions and popular discourses of the time to investigate the meanings of such changes.
The next section will question the popular analysis of so-called April Revolution film texts and
the intellectual discourses that view these film texts as realist films reflecting the April
Revolution and the democratic social atmosphere of the early 1960s.

**Screening Resistance? “Realistic” Style in Question**

In the early 1960, starting with the big hit *Romance Papa* (*Romensũ ppappa*, 1960)
based on a popular radio drama, comedy films produced, titles such as *A Petty Middle Manager*
is a Hussy* (*Ǒni nǔn malkwallyang’i*, 1961), *The Salary Man* (*Wǒlkǔp chaeng’i*, 1962) and so on.
Many contemporaneous and recent film scholars define this new genre as family drama or family
comedy.\(^{270}\) This definition mostly stems from a similar narrative structure that is constituted

\(^{270}\) Yi Yǒng-il, *op. cit.* 1969; O Ên-sil, Han’guk yǒnghwa e nat’an an hũiükssǒng yǒn’gu,. MA Thesis. Seoul:
Tongguk University. 1993.; Kim Yun-a, *The Study of Korean Family Comedy Film in the early 1960s*, Master’s
with the story of a father and a family member living in Seoul as members of the middle class or lower-middle class. Without doubt, the titles of the comedy films in this genre share such thematic characteristics. Since non-comedian actors and actresses acting in these films were cast in the main roles, these films also gave a glimpse of the “feeling of drama” rather than comedy, when compared to the 1950s’ comedian-centered anarchistic comedy films. More interestingly, based on the styles and thematic characteristics of those films, many film critics celebrated those films not only because they displayed refined film techniques, but they also show the South Korean democratic social atmosphere. Such labeling on film is quite unusual, since most of this genre could be included in the comic genre and the comic genre, or comedy, did not attain much attention from film critics.

As I discussed in chapter two, it is not an overstatement to say that almost all South Korean comedy films were identified as low-brow and lacking the proper spirit of the South Korean nation’s needs. The overflow of meaningless slapstick gestures and comedian-centered comedy films based on akkūk repertoire were always regarded as the shame of the national film products.271 “Proper spirit,” in this context, means the participation of cultural products in social activism functioning as a meaningful democratic social practice. Thus, it is also notable that the comedy film genre, which had long been despised as a low-brow, started to earn a different social label that it could possibly show such proper national spirit.

For example, a contemporaneous film critic, Yi Yŏng-il, once praised film director Yi

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Pong-nae—a previous scenario writer, film critic and a modernist poet—for his talent in describing Korean society in a realistic and liberal way.\textsuperscript{272} Similarly, Yi also offered very positive comments on Yi Pong-nae’s first comedy film, \textit{A Petty Middle Manager}, proclaiming that it is “full of satire on South Korean society.”\textsuperscript{273} Other film critics categorized \textit{A Petty Middle Manager} as an A-level entertainment film.\textsuperscript{274} Such contemporaneous positive attention to the quality of the comedy film has continued even in recent film studies. Many film scholars who are studying this time period often regard \textit{A Petty Middle Manager}’s critical style is the result of the April Revolution.\textsuperscript{275} As such, Yi Pong-nae and his first commercially successful comedy film, \textit{A Petty Middle Manager}, received many great comments elucidating that this film is actually a cultural civil agent in democratizing South Korea in its own right. What is interesting in this film’s critiques is that most of the criticism praised how well the film portrayed the social reality of South Korea, referring to the rapidly changing democratic social atmosphere of the time.

Moreover, in the case of \textit{A Petty Middle Manager}, since the production and screening time were perfectly matched with the period of post-April Revolution and pre-military-coup, the film gained more attention for supposedly revealing a more direct picture of revolutionary social reality.\textsuperscript{276} Not to mention, Yi Pong-nae’s personal history as a South Korean intellectual and as

\textsuperscript{272} Kim Kyu-dong also commented that Yi’s autheurism in one article, “The study of Cinema Auteur Yi Pong-nae: the harbinger of the resistance,” \textit{Kukjie yǒnghwǎ}, September 1959
\textsuperscript{273} Lee Young-il, p.275-276
\textsuperscript{274} “A Fine Entertainment with fun and laughs: A-level Entertainment,” \textit{Han'guk Ilbo}, May 4, 1961
\textsuperscript{275} Although there had been some differences depending on the writers about the comedy films produced in this time period, it seems that they are sharing the “positivism” of the April Revolution. O Ŭn-sil, \textit{The Study of Comedic Characteristics of Korean Film}, Master’s Thesis of Tongguk University, 1993; Yi Chin, Choe Mi-ae, Ch’ŏn Mi-hyŏn, “The Social History of Genre of the 1960s,” in \textit{Yǒnghwǎ hakppo}, April 1994; Kim Yun-a, \textit{op. cit.}; O Yŏng-suk, \textit{op. cit.}; Yi Kil-sung, \textit{The Study of Construction of Family Drama and Problem in 1960s Korea}, PhD diss., Chung’ang University, 2006.
\textsuperscript{276} Yi Kil-sung, Introduction, \textit{A Petty Middle Manager} in the DVD Booklet, Korean Film Archive, 2006.
the son-in-law of Cho Pong-am, the leader of the South Korean Progressive Party (*Chinbodang*) who was executed by Syngman Rhee in 1959 functioned to recognize his film dealing with more progressive idea. According to Pak Ch’ang-ho’s testimony, *A Petty Middle Manager* was first released in Pusan on May 1, 1961, and when it was released in Kuktto Theater in Seoul, the military coup by Park Chung-hee took place. From the first day of the coup, all the film’s screenings were prohibited. Yi Pong-nae was arrested just because he was the son-in-law of Cho Pong-am. Through such a particular backdrop, the film procured a rubric of resistance to many people and influenced critics seeing this film as a significant realism film text of that time.

Even when one finds subversive characteristics in comedy film, it is noteworthy that the subversive nature of these comedy films was always under the rubric of comedy. Comedy film always had autonomy from censorship. Jerry Parmer once argued “a joke is a joke when it is permitted as a joke,” which means that if a joke is perceived as a politically threatening banter, it always confronted with censorship. But South Korean comedy films of this time rarely had serious censorship issues. For example, there was only one comedy film that caused trouble in the early 1960s, *The Green Apartment* (*Ch’ôngsaek Ap’at’ù*, 1962). Its director, Yi Hyŏng-p’yo, was arrested because his comedy film denounced the government insignia. The insignia of Park Chung Hee’s government was of a cow and the main protagonist’s nickname of *The Green Apartment* was a cow. However, Yi was released by just saying, “it was just for fun!” Jokes and satires were permitted even in Park’s absolutely controlled military government. Thus, it is very difficult to say that jokes in the early 1960’s comedy films had radically and politically

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278 See the vulgar content of Mae West comedy and the censorship code in Ramona Curry, *opt cit*.
subversive intensions even when we assume that they reflected the democratic social atmosphere.

Then, it is questionable what other quality these films share that makes critics perceive them as realist texts. I find comedy films of the early 1960s certainly display technological advances in manipulating film language that were not present in the 1950s’ anarchistic films, and the deliberate use of Hollywood film language which was initially developed to create verisimilitude of cinema brought some confusion to South Korean people’s acceptance of realism. Many critics of this time often confused cinematic realism (verisimilitude) with realism. Achieving technological development filmmaking in the late 1950s and the early 1960s as a result of the industrial change from the small company system (il-sa-il-jak) to the major company system, modeled after the major Hollywood studio systems, greatly effected the creation of cinematic realism within film text. This resulted in confusion from seeing many early 1960s films as realistic representations of the 1960s’ South Korean reality. The next section will discuss the way in which Hollywood’s major studio system influenced change in the South Korean film industry and how the technological development created cinematic realism in the early 1960s’ comedy films.

**Film Industry’s Free Market System**

Regarding the early 1960’s film industry, there were two antithetical responses: one argues that the South Korean film industry faced a crisis, and the other believes that the South Korean film industry is over developed compared to other industries of the nation. Such antithetical responses existed mainly due to the fact that the government withdrew the tax-exemption policy in 1960. As discussed in chapter two, in 1960, the government decided to
withdraw the tax-exemption policy, which was regarded as the key national protective policy to promote the production of the national film industry. The withdrawal might be partly because of the government’s revenue shortage and financing troubles by the end of 1950s. However, the sudden withdrawal of this policy unexpectedly brought confusion to many filmmakers because they suddenly had to pay a twenty percent tax, which accordingly increased theater entrance fees. Many expected the decrease of audience numbers due to the increase of entrance fees and, thus, if a theater did not want to lose audiences, the film production company had to find their own ways of doing business. Therefore, before the promulgation of the film law in 1962, the film industry started to change in accordance with being more business minded, as exemplified in Im Hwa-su’s business path in chapter two.

The responses of the filmmakers toward the 1960 abolishment of the tax-exemption policy for national film production, however, are two-fold. While some filmmakers still asked for strong support from the government for the reconstruction of South Korean film industry, especially when their industrial foundations heavily relied upon government politics, like Im Hwa-su, it seems that others believed that the South Korean film industry already showed competence as an independent and self-sufficient industry of the time. Indeed, the number of film productions had not been decreased seriously even after the abolishment of the exemption policy.

O Yǒng-jin, a scenario writer, wrote in Sasangkye that even in the economic and social turmoil of the early 1960s, the Korean film industry stood still without any agitation in terms of production numbers, and he asks, “how is such a miracle possible?”

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that this miracle was possible due to the over-development of the film industry. However, lingering on the over-development part, O denounces the value of development. He continues to assert that the most significant problem of the South Korean film industry in 1960 was the monopolization of the industry by the government-sponsored big companies. He wrote:

In a democratic society, the development of the film industry should be from the free market system among the film companies. However, our film industry still has been distorted and has not yet overcome the bad legacy of the past. In terms of production, except for few companies, there is no fixed capital for the filmmaking, and the government possesses most filmmaking facilities. Who would dare to compete with the government’s capital? [emphasis added]

What he meant by “bad legacy,” is, of course, the nation sponsored big-companies like KEI and the film policy of the past. O’s criticism of the problem of the government sponsored film production system is very significant in a sense that in a free-market system, he believed, people could achieve the freedom of expression, which was the most important humanitarian desire of the time – the early 1960s’ right after the April Revolution. Nonetheless, O’s simple configuration to achieve a democratic and humanitarian ideal from the free market system is from his misrecognition of the whole production and distribution system of the time.

If the government does not support them financially, the production companies needed to make films with minimum costs and guarantee release in a theater. As we discussed in chapter two, the chain system between the theater and the production company was the easiest way to supply the production cost and return the profits to the production company. But if a filmmaker who does not have much personal relationship with capital owners wants to make a film, he, or she, had to face a unique marketing meeting. This kind of meeting was called reading meeting,
the “tokhwoe (讀會).” A filmmaker who finds a script for a film had to hold a meeting with the 6-local capital holders who were mostly the owners or the managers of the theaters who would write a check for the film production cost. By the late 1950s, it was already the routine process. Many producers remember that this reading meeting was the most terrible system, since the owners of the theaters often asked for their preferred star or even changes to the script.281 However, after the successful reading meeting, the producers got a check that would cover the film production cost. The production company only got 60-70% profits from the first release in Seoul or Pusan, and then the 6 copies of the film reel, usually including the original, were distributed to the local distributors.282 This habitual practice has long been the tradition of the money flow throughout the South Korean Golden-Age period. Thus, if there is no support from the government, making a film with the lowest cost had the best profits, and the profit was accelerated if the theater chain system guaranteed its release. Under this production and distribution system, different from the ideal expectation of O Yŏng-chin, rather than making a film without political intervention, filmmakers had to go through capitalistic intervention by the film theater owners.

Also, in order to minimize the business risk for the production companies, in 1960, right before the April Revolution, the president of the Associations for Film Production, Im Hwa-su, proclaimed that South Korean film companies needed to set a standard cost for film production and increase the entrance fee for the national film screening.283 The Association for Film

281 Han’guk yŏnghwa rŭl malhanda, opt cit.
282 This is one of the reasons that many South Korean film had lost the original copy of the film. After the screening, the film reel was used most popularly to make straw hats. Kim Mi-hyŏn ed., Han’guk yŏnghwa paegūpsa yŏn’gu, Korean Film Commission, 2003.
Production drew a limit to the production cost, mostly targeting the reduction of the stars’ and director’s guarantee.\textsuperscript{284} The association also isolated the production companies that did not produce two films a year, initially implemented to prevent the \textit{il-sa-il-jak} phenomenon. Although there was some opposition toward the Association’s proclamations, especially from the stars and famous directors, because, under such a system, the stars and directors acquired employee status, which reduced the freedom of expression of the directors as well as lowered the income of the directors and the actors. Although it is nebulous that the Association tried to establish something similar to Hollywood’s major studio system, somehow the Association’s intent to evaluate and control film production mostly according to commercial value resembles that of Hollywood’s major system. At this transitional moment, it seems that many filmmakers would rather adapt themselves to the changing atmosphere. Influenced by such regulation, the production and distribution system in the late 1950s had been changed to a so-called “block-booking-system,” which basically means vertical integration between the film producers and the theater owners. For example, \textit{Sudo} Theater had \textit{Sudo} Cinema Production, \textit{Kukjje} Theater had \textit{Sŏnmin} Cinema Production (with director Hong Sŏng-gi and actress Kim Chi-mi), and \textit{Myŏngbo} Theater had \textit{Sin} Film (with director Sin Sang-ok and actress Choe Ŭn-hŭi). The block-booking-system, in this sense, seemed to be one of the possible solutions that the South Korean film industry could use to survive without the government’s strong financial support, which might be a satisfactory result for the people like O Yŏng-jin.

Nonetheless, although the block-booking-system had a capitalistically stable system, as I

\textsuperscript{284} The Association for Korean Cinema Production specified the highest cost. For example, scenario writing – 300-400 thousand hwan, director guarantee – 600-700 thousand hwan, camera usage- 500-700 thousand hwan, main actor -600 thousand hwan and so on. \textit{Chosŏn Ilbo}, January 17, 1960.
mentioned earlier, under such a capitalistic system the freedom of expression and the humanitarian needs of the time period are never guaranteed. Instead, under such a production system filmmakers cannot but make commercially-oriented films due to the strong demands of the theater owner. In this atmosphere, after the April Revolution, when the state-backed companies suddenly disappeared and many companies competed each other within a free-market system, filmmakers strove to make a commercially oriented and technologically advanced film following Hollywood’s model, which of course was the key machinery to create cinematic realism. In creating cinematic realism, film technology became the center, which needs vast quantity of capital. Inaugurating a block-booking-system and making a popular new film genre with new style, 1960 opened up a new visual world that suggests a different level of filmmaking that was not fully accomplished by 1950s filmmaking.

**Technology Wars**

If the 1950s’ South Korean cinema often manipulated the nonlinear style due to the akkūk based filmmaking, the early 1960s’ film directors could make technically well-made films using a more linear and causative Classical Hollywood style. The comedy film genre was not an exception. The newspapers exceptionally appreciated those films as “structured social satire: Petty Middle Manager,” “modern comedy with fine speed: My Sister is a Hussy,” “parades of outstanding presentation: Under the Roof of Seoul.” The words, “structured,” “speed,” and “outstanding presentation,” show how the techniques of the film comedies display

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285 Regarding the 1950’s film’s visual style, see my chapter three.
288 *Kyônghyang Sinmun*, December 17.
marked tonal advancement compared to the comedies of the late 1950s. It was, indeed, a great accomplishment of 1960s comedy films, which strove to attain such technological development throughout the 1950s. Moreover, many of the early 1960s comedy films were made by comparatively young, cinema based directors such as Sin Sang-ok, Yi Hyŏng-p’yo, Yi Pong-nae and Kim Su-yong. Starting their cinema career during the 1950s and early 1960s, these directors drew new attention from the film critics. Although they did not publicly claim it, the people seemed to have a certain agreement on the filmic orientation of “Hollywoodization,” which is very different from the film critics’ usual request for social participation.

In spite of the film critics’ reception of many of these comedy films as the April Revolution text, as exemplified in the reception of A Petty Middle Manager among the film critics, the directors themselves never seemed to have such intentions. For example, Yi Pong-nae, right before he made A Petty Middle Manager, made popular melodramas and comedy films, and he also had a clear idea on the popular aesthetics of cinema. He wrote:

> Cinema should be an entertainment, before it became an art form. The cinematic realism is to please the audience’s eyesight and narrow the distance between the audience and the screen to make the audience absorb themselves into the screen.\(^{289}\) [emphasis added]

The meaning of realism in this context is unequivocal: the Classical Hollywood Cinema style. The main purpose of the classical Hollywood film was to create so-called “dream factory,” the total absorbance of audience into the film text. Although many late 1950s films also tried to make films using various techniques from Hollywood, as I explored in chapter three, those

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techniques often entailed tonal excessiveness. Making a commercially successful film by achieving the Classical Hollywood film style without the tonal modes of excessiveness was one of the most challenging tasks of filmmakers of this time. Sin Sang-ok, the president of Sin Film and one of the most prominent directors of the early 1960s wrote about how to find a balance between achieving commercial success while preserving aesthetics.

I think the best way for making successful cinema business is not to lose both commercial significance and aesthetics. However, a high-class film does not speak to popular audience and the popular film does not satisfy the intellectuals. We need to satisfy both by making a film, first, focusing on the intelligent feeling and then add some of the popular techniques…I believe that “a good film” should have such elasticity to sustain the whole different levels of appreciation.

What Sin means to possess “elasticity” is clear when he made his first box-office hit, The Story of Ch’unhyang (Sŏng Ch’unhyang, 1961) in competition with Sŏnmin Cinema Production. In 1961, both Sin Sang-ok’s Sin Film and Hong Sŏng-gi’s Sŏnmin Cinema Production planned a film with the same the same title, The Story of Ch’un-hyang, and both films were released almost at the same time. The making of these two The Story of Ch’un-hyang films are almost legendary, entailing various lawsuits and maneuvering. The result was the total success of Sin Film, which recorded 360,000 audience number only in Seoul and lasted more than a month in one theater.

Although there were many reasons for Sin’s success such as well-planned filmmaking, most praises were focused on the technological aptness of Sin Film’s The Story

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290 See my chapter three.
291 Sin Sang-ok, “The characteristics of Film as a Business,” Kukje yŏnghwa, February, 1960
292 Hwang-nam recollected that it was the first time in South Korean filmmaking industry that the true company managing started to work in projecting a whole film production. Testimony of Hwang-nam, Han’guk yŏnghwa rŭl malhanda, op. cit.
of Ch’unhyang in dealing with colors and cine-scope. Many people regarded the huge success of Sin Film’s The Story of Ch’unhyang as the aesthetical model for the commercially successful well-made film. The judgment of well-made, without any doubt, meant the mastery of the Hollywood style film techniques and the technological development of cine-scope, which can be easily recognized as the adaptation of the wide screen techniques of Hollywood’s cine-scope.293 One newspaper editorial says that if A Stray Bullet is a prototype of art film, Sin Film’s The Story of Ch’unhyang is a commercially and technically satisfying film.294 The success of Sin Film’s The Story of Ch’unhayng showed competence, both financially and technologically, and its incredible mass appeal gave hope for constructing Korean-style major studio systems. The commercial success of the technologically versatile film exemplified in the result between the two companies’ competition in making the same story embellished with different techniques and filmmaking strategies, in fact, foretells how early 1960s’ films would strive to produce typified and codified film techniques in the film visuals throughout the South Korean Golden-Age cinema.

Many Golden-Age film directors share similar ideas on the significance of filmmaking technology and the employment of coherent film narratives, which were, of course, the virtues of the Hollywood films targeting the mass audience’s appeal. Rather than the value of film art or being socially integral to the people, many people who mainly worked in the cinema industry

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293 Cinema-scope has a wide screen and often regarded as suitable to make a more spectacle in misen-en-scene, made for attracting more audience in Hollywood when they were losing their audience by the wide distribution of Television from the mid-1950s. In South Korea, making a cine-scope film was started in 1957 by the Hong Ch’an’s Sudo Cinema Production. But since this film was recorded as one of the poorest box office hits comparing to the production cost, cine-scope, was not made afterwards until Sin’s success. Kim Mi-hyŏn ed., Han’guk yŏnhwa kisulssa yŏn’gu, Korean Film Commission, 2002.
stress the characteristics of film as industry and the ability to communicate well with the popular audience. The most active and prolific directors throughout 1960s such as Yi Hyŏng-p’yo, Kim Ki-dŏk, Yi Pong-nae and Kim Su-yong all shared that cinema is entertainment, though it could also be art.

I made almost hundred films. My films were very popular. That means that I know the [taste of] audience. It is my natural-born talent. If one does not know them [audience], it is just masturbation. There are many people out there just like that. I am not one of them. I think cinema is just a service business. Film is just an entertainment. It could be an art. That could be possible. But it is not necessary. I am very flexible.295 [parenthesis and emphasis added]

The words, flexibility and elasticity depending on the audience and their taste that Sin Sang-ok and Yi Hyŏng-p’yo were using, in this sense, displays their intentional choice to accept popular taste and making popular films. And such a choice is expressed in the many film texts and became the vehicle to produce the similar misen-en-scene structures, plots and themes adapted from Hollywood in the early 1960s’ cinematic landscape, as if the directors were practicing and applying the same formula into a slight different modulus. In that structure, the directors minimized the anarchism, the prevalent attraction of the 1950s film and started to use a normative film frame with set film language grammar.

In such a production atmosphere, the comedy genre became the most popular genre of filmmakers. For the film production companies, in general, the comedy film was one of the more commercially profitable genres that had a relatively low budget and high guarantee of

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295 Interview with director Yi Hyŏng-p’yo. Kim Ki-dŏk, p.31; Even a director who made lots of so-called “art film (munye yŏnghwa)” like Kim Su-yong had the same opinion. Also, Kim Su-yong also wrote that Yu Hyŏn-mok also struggled because his film did not sell well. Kim Su-yong, opt cit. A director now to be the leader of resistance like Yu hyŏn-mok or Yi Pong-nae also considered the commercial significance of film before the art, “Yi Pong-nae: the leader of the resistance,” Kukje yŏnghwa, September, 1959.
commercial success. At the moment of the big companies’ decline (e.g. KEI) after the April Revolution, comedy film, which was regarded as the money machine, became the target film genre to many production companies. Different from the low genre status of the comedy films during the 1950s, sound comedy of the early 1960s, as we saw in the case of *A Petty Middle Manager*, became the main properly codified mode of filmmaking of the time. Compared to anarchistic comedy film, in the comedy films of the early 1960s, non-comedian actors and actresses did the main role and *akkŭk* comedians usually did supporting roles and their individual talents were also used very partially—making it into a more stylish comic drama. *Sin Film* and *The Second Half Production* (*Huban’gi prŏdŏkshyŏn*), for example, the most vigorously working company in the early 1960s, made many comedy films. *Sin Film* made comedy films such as *Romance Papa, An Upstart, Under the roof of Seoul* and *Romance Grey*. *The Second Half Production* made *A Petty Middle Manager, I Won’t Hear* and *Marriage Practice*. Even Sin Film’s *The Story of Ch’unhyang* had many more comic elements within the film text compared to the more classical interpretation of *The Story of Ch’unhyang* by Sŏnmin Cinema Production.

Although comedy film in the 1950s had been regarded as the most low-brow genre of the time, because of the development of film techniques such as achieving continuity editing and using more coherent narratives, the comedy film in the early 1960s obtained better criticism from film critics. Also, when a historical event, coincidently happened in the same year as the tax exemption policy withdrawal, the April Revolution, and the intellectual’s discourse on the social participation in a democratic society displayed its best energy to the people; many intelligent film critics of the time praised the comedy film and emphasized the competing function of the comedy genre.
Talking and Visualizing South Korean Modernity

Another significant aspect of the comedy film, notwithstanding the excellence of the production side, is its popular reception. Mass consumption itself has a meaning to identify one cultural product over the other which makes them to buy things the publicly likable and sayable, as Micheal Warner noted that “nearly all of our pleasures come to us coded in some degree by the publicity of mass media. We make symbolic identifications in a field of choice.” When certain cultural products are popular, it gains real meaning reflecting the desires of the audience as well as the critic’s acceptance of comedy film as proper national film. A Petty Middle Manager, for instance, was one of the most appreciated film texts of this time period by many film critics. It is also notable in that it not only got positive attention from film critic, but that it was also commercially successful. Pak Ch’ang-ho testified that it earned thirty million won which might be equivalent to three hundred million won today and covered up all the production costs from only one-week of release in Pusan. The aforementioned Romance ppappa also displays such commercial success. Comedy films of the early 1960s present an actual public sphere where the consumers’ taste and the public necessity of the time were met and negotiated.

Then, one might ask what quality the early 1960’s comedy films had to attract the audience over other films. Beyond technological development and the film company’s commercial strategy, genre-wise, as many Hollywood film created “genre film” for commercial purposes, the early 1960s films of South Korea also started to establish a certain genre tradition. Among those genres, comedy film would be one of the more successful film genres, displaying a

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297 The testimony of Pak Ch’ang-ho, Han’guk yǒnghwaw rǔl malhanda, op. cit.
different kind of pleasure which could not be found much in the late 1950’s comedy films.

1) New Language/ Sign System

In comparison to the 1950s’ comedy films that provided "akkūk" based and comedian-centered visual pleasure, the biggest characteristics of comedy films in the early 1960s would be the verbal pleasure derived from the performances of non-comedian actors. Of course, the verbal style did not appear all of sudden in the early 1960s. Few verbal style comedy films had already emerged in the late 1950s. For example, comedy films such as *A Female President* (*Yōsajang*, 1959) or *Free Marriage* (*Chayu kyo'ron*, 1959) present more verbal pleasure by the act of non-comedian actors. For this reason, these comedies are often called “sound comedies” compared to comedian centered slapstick comedy. However, in the early 1960s, the characteristics of verbal comedy became more noticeable, and somehow the verbal quality of the film arises a sense of realism, regardless of whether it projects reality or verisimilitude in many comedy film texts in various ways.

First of all, verbal style comedy films usually function to lead a burst of laughter by playing with the traditional social order. For example, by giving rights to the people who did not have much power and letting them talk about the things they want to say, it gives viewers somewhat liberating moments. Marginalized national subjects such as women, youngsters, children or even feudalistic old people begin to talk about something. And this might bring the feeling that these films are reflecting a democratic South Korean society. The joke often breaks down the values of the traditional social or familial relationship and expresses the equality of various social hierarchies. For example, in *A Petty Middle Manager*, the son and daughter of the
family directly says to their parents or grandparents that they are “feudalistic” or “subservient.”
Likewise, although *Romance Papa* was made before the April Revolution, it displays a very radical joke. The son of *Romance Papa* says that “I want to win over you [father] with my own hand!” showing his will to win over the power of the father which symbolizes the patriarchal social order. And the sex life of the youngsters is discussed without any restrictions. Such sensationalism of this film could be easily translated as reflecting the democratic or liberal social atmosphere of the day in which common people were seen to demolish and equalize the traditional and Confucian social order.

Moreover, the frequent scenes of verbal play using neologism contribute to elevating the level of the comedy film, and by sharing and consuming such new verbal pleasure, the utterance of jokes is also built up: under the rubric of modern citizen and citizenship, a new class and new human relationships overrule the tradition. For instance, in *A Petty Middle Manager*, the daughter makes fun of a man saying he is a “chingūl-ist”—“chingūl” is a Korean word, meaning “gross.” To this Korean adjective root, the daughter adds the English suffix “ist,” which makes a noun indicating a person who has such a personality. Thus, the word “chingūlist” means a gross person. In *Upstart*, a man introduces his fiancée to another person saying “this is my ‘pi-ang-sae (fiancée),’” and the other person asks back “musūn sae yo? (what kind of bird?)” It is a pun for the English pronunciation of “sae” which means “bird” in Korean. Of course, this sort of verbal joke is very foreign and difficult to understand for people who do not know English. The audience could not but feel some catharsis from such powerlessness of the old powers and systems and starts to recognize and learn the superiority of the new modern system through the symbolic power of language. In this situation, the old grandfather is the most marginalized
person who is even ridiculed by the grandmother who knows some of the new, modern words, while he is always described as the person who does not know anything about the modern world system. The patriarchal power in this sense is overturned and the younger generations are at the front of such social changes.

Also, the dialogues, which directly criticize and ridicule Syngman Rhee and his regime, became the key element for which this film was praised for having achieved freedom of expression as the result of the April Revolution. For example, in *A Petty Middle Manager*, there is one scene that describes the absurd hierarchical relationship between the company president and the male secretary. The president is rebuking a manager and preaching about the responsibility of the manager. Then, in the middle of his rebuke, the president suddenly passes gas with a loud sound. Then the sectary of the president standing next to him says, “you must feel better, now!” with a subservient smile. In fact, a similar story between President Syngman Rhee and a national secretary had been secretly distributed among the people during Rhee’s presidency. 298 So, when the audience was watching the film, it would not have been difficult to recognize that this scene ridiculed the Rhee government. The phrase, “you must feel better, now!” was pinpointed in the newspaper as a direct criticism of the Rhee regime. Also, in this film, people directly talk about the April Revolution. The son proclaims, “The Revolution was done by us, the students!” while the grandmother says “Nothing has changed -- even after the Revolution!” Another phrase, “All politicians are burglars!” was also recognized as a significantly critical response to the government. Direct political jokes, in this way, create some

lively moments, “revealing”—so it seemed—South Korean reality. Such verbal pleasure, seemingly revealing South Korean reality, however, is repeatedly used as comedic punctuation in the early 1960s comedy films, just as the adaptation of akkūk had been the punctuating pleasure in the 1950s. Such comedic tradition was codified in many early 1960s comedy films as I examined in the case of *The Green Apartment* produced in 1962, after Park Chung Hee’s military coup. The jokes in *Romance Papa* and *A Petty Middle Manager* became the model for creating stereotypical comic banter and were developed as the grammar of successful comedy films.

Once again, perhaps most conspicuously, I want to point out that this new comedy style could be born under the influences of Hollywood screwball comedy. Screwball comedy is a distinctive film genre made mostly between the 1930 and the 1940s and emerged from the technological development of talkie films in the 1930s. Replacing the space of vaudeville stars' slapstick comedy, screwball comedy uses new comic film stars, often related to the themes of marriage between the different classes and genders. Indebted to the technology of talkie films, screwball comedy provides new pleasures from verbal jokes, twists and fast exchanges of words. As the Hollywood screwball comedy emerged with the development of talkie films, which made the verbal joke possible in the early 1930s, early 1960s comedy films’ verbal quality also emerged from some development of filmmaking technology.

A director, Sin Sang-ok, once testified that the most challenging task of Korean film in post-war Korea was to make a good sound film. Although Korean produced talkie films with

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299 O Yong-suk commented that such verbal jokes are revealing the democratic social atmosphere emphasizing that free spirit of an individual. O, Ibid.; Others state that these films were creating and exhibiting the cinematic “public sphere” directly reflecting such social atmosphere of the time.


301 The best example of screwball comedy is *It Happened One Night*, 1934 by Frank Capra.

302 Cavell, op. cit.

303 Kim Mi-hyon ed., *Han’guk yŏnghwa kisulssa yŏn’gu*, Korean Film Commission, p.111.
the start of *The Story of Ch’ün-hyang* in 1935 by Yi Myŏng-u, due to technological deficiency after the Korean War, making a fine sound film seemed to be a difficult task for most South Korean filmmakers. One of the reasons for the failure of the first cine-scope film, *The Life* in the late 1950s, was mainly the failure of the recording. Yi P’il-u, a technician from the colonial period, recorded it, and his failure was evidence that the technology of the colonial period did not work for the late 1950s’ filmmaking. However, when technological support was relatively stable in the early 1960s, just as Hollywood screwball comedy had its heyday, the South Korean verbal comedy also reached its culmination.

In addition to Hollywood, the active adaptation of national radio dramas into film, which reflects the voices from the listeners, may have greatly influenced the unique verbal comedy style of South Korean comedy films. In the early 1960s, many films were made based on popular radio dramas such as *Romance Papa, Your Voice* (*Kūdae mokssori*, 1960), *Dream Disappeared* (*Kkum ūn sarajigo*, 1959), *Even Love is Passing* (*Sarang ūn hullŏgado*, 1959), *The Hill with Zelkova Tree* (*Nūt’ınamu inūn ŏndŏk*, 1958), *A Barber of Villiage Changmaru* (*Changmaruch’on ūi ibalssa*, 1959), *Over the Mountain and River* (*Sannŏmŏ padagŏnnŏ*, 1958), *Tongsimch’o* (*Tongsimch’o*, 1959) and *Terms of Marriage* (*Kyŏron chokkŏn*, 1959). Making a film based on a popular radio drama was prudent, first of all, because it guarantees the commercial success of the film using the audience’s familiarity with the story. However, it also resulted in a particular stylistic characteristic of the film when it was transferred into the film text. When a radio drama, which mostly consisted of people’s dialogue with some sound effects, is adapted into film, the

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304 Ibid., pp.32-33.
305 Of course, there is a huge gab between screwball comedy and the early 1960s South Korean comedy in a sense that while the theme of the former is mostly about the gender and class, the story of the latter often centers in the miscellaneous family matter, along with strong political banter.
content of the film could not be anything but dialogue, just like the original radio drama. Moreover, due to the lack of scenario writers, many radio drama writers wrote the film scenarios. A previous radio drama writer who became a scenario writer and TV drama writer later on, Yu Ho, testified that because of this transition, early radio-based films (or TV dramas) cannot but have many dialogues than the films produced before. Considering that Yu Ho was one of the main comedy film scenario writers of the time because he wrote a radio comedy “Humor Theater (Ｙｕｍｏ ｋｕｋｉｊａｎｇ)” and “Could it be right? No!” (Ｉｇｏ ｔｗｏｇｅｓｉｍｎｉｋｋａ? Ｉｇｏ ａｎｔｗｏｅｍｎｉｄａ!) for many years, there must be a strong connection between verbal comedy films and the radio drama based comedy films.306

Though there are differences between screwball comedy films’ obvious thematic convention on a love story, the Korean verbal comedy often uses words to intensify the pleasure of the film. Korean verbal comedy films manifest the direct social issues in the film, and publicize and naturalize them in the daily life of the people. It is a pretty customary tradition of the comedy genre to entail some kind of social satire in its nature, and yet the verbal comedies are tightly packed with the political semantics drawn from the language play and, thus, make the film critics believe that watching and consuming this film is some kind of real participation in social matters. The new pleasure derived from the complex web of intertextual language and sign system could function actively as the new popular cultural commodity of the time.

2) Visualizing Imagined Modernity

Another significant characteristic of the early 1960s comedy films is its unique visual

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representation of South Korean modernity. Benefiting from the development of cine-scope and its adoption into the early 1960’s South Korean cinema text, the early 1960s comedy films were effective in presenting the landscape of a newly developed nation. Interestingly enough, most of these comedy films’ backgrounds were of Seoul, the capital of South Korea. *A Petty Middle Manager* would be the most typical example of such comedy stories.

*A Petty Middle Manager* is the story of a middle-class salary man, Ku, who is working for a transportation company (*Samch ’ön ri unsu chusikhwoesa*) as a middle manager, and his family. Living in Seoul, his family is not described as rich, but is portrayed as a middle-class urban family. The son is a college student and the daughter is working as an office girl in the same company with her father. From the standards of today, being a college student and an office girl is not so attached to middle class image. But it was a typically westernized filmic icon of the middle class youngsters. The traditional image of family remains in the livelihood of the three generations of the family. However, it is different from the traditional image of the extended family. The extended family of three generations often gathers together around a dinner table talking about their life and opinions freely, in a very liberal way. Such creation of a happy family image is endangered when the daughter finds out that the father is very powerless in the company. The life struggle of Ku is described as painful because the company president requests an absurd thing. For example, Ku is threatened into running a dance hall for the president’s secret love affair. Although Ku was not happy about being used by his company president, due to the promise of promotion within the company, he decides to help the president. Ku’s wife somehow doubts Ku’s strange behaviors and misunderstands that he was having a love affair. At the end, this complicated story ends happily as all the misunderstandings are resolved.
In this story, although the life of a salaried man, a so-called “petit-citizen (sosimin),” is described as painful, the pain is not actually as radical as the father’s pain in other films such as *A Coachman (Mabu, 1960)*, or *Mr. Pak (Paksŏbang, 1961)*, a film about a lower class urban laborer. In *A Coachman* and *Mr. Pak*, the struggle between lower class and higher class or the relationship between family members is described miserably and tragically and cannot be resolved by some miscellaneous happenings. In comparison, in *A Petty Middle Manager*, the urban salaried man’s life is somehow romanticized and the agony of the urban middle class is overly dramatized. For instance, when the daughter and the father have a conversation about the life of the salaried man, the camera holds the sequence rather long and the father’s long speech is captured as a long take to create a romantic atmosphere. In this sequence, the relationship between the father and the daughter is described as surprisingly rational, moderate and full of understanding.

Furthermore, the urban setting in *A Petty Middle Manager* naturalizes and well sutures the images of modern urban life within the film text using Hollywood film techniques. As many other early 1960s’ films, the urban area is mostly Seoul, which became the dream city and city of opportunity to many South Korean people after the Korean War. When a film presents life in Seoul, the verisimilitude of the South Korean landscape is earmarked within the film text. The verisimilitude is created on two levels, first, as the modernized part of a nation, such as the central part of Seoul. It became an already-typified film characteristic that the establishment shot of early 1960s comedy films mostly starts with the panoramic view of Seoul and narrows it down to the house of the main protagonists. The camera from Tower Park (*T’apkkol kongwŏn*) in *Namsan (South Mountain)* located in central Seoul, looks down Seoul city with a long shot; it
was the most frequently used shooting venue by the filmmakers of the 1960s. When cine-scope became the standard after the success of Sin Film’s *The Story of Ch’ünhyang*, which presents wider visions of landscapes, the manipulation of the Seoul landscape became more like a set-grammar in the early 1960s films. Even a film like *Mr. Pak*, the story of a lower class urban laborer, which mostly took place in a suburb of Seoul throughout the film, the ending sequence is set at the central site of Seoul, the city hall, symbolizing the lower-middle class people’s safe arrival to the stable national landscape with the promise of success coming from the son’s passing of the bar exam. Through such establishment shots of the South Korean landscape, the early 1960s films successfully incorporated the filmic verisimilitude of the ideal urban life within the film texts.

This filmic presentation is notable in that it is different from the unattainable, luxurious urban life that visually stood out in many 1950s films. In many 1950s films, when they present urban life, the female characters are wearing real Western dresses, drinking a coke or coffee, living in a two-story building and dancing a Western volume-dance, which are all directly from Hollywood film icons. The best example of such filmic representation would be director Yi Pyŏng-il’s *Free Marriage* (*Chayu kyŏron*, 1959). In this film, especially at the beginning, the male and female protagonists, wearing a tuxedo and a western dress respectively, share a conversation on their Honeymoon: “How are you going to remember today? [In Korean]” “The best day of our life! [in English]” From this sort of film imagery, the audience would guess this scene is about urban life but not necessarily associate it with South Korean urban life. This film sequence creates an illusion as if one is watching a part of the original film with Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn in which a Korean man and women act wearing western wigs. Of course,
since this film is based on the play, this kind of presentation could be done intentionally. My point is that the discordant visual manipulation in 1950s films and the foreignness of it when the films describe a modern life, was the main characteristics of those films. Compared to the 1950s’ relatively anarchistic style, most of the early 1960s’ comedy films well followed the grammar of Classical Hollywood cinema such as continuity editing, shot-reverse-shots, making a proper angle, distance, and so on, which greatly enhanced in creating a verisimilitude of South Korean life.

In addition, the story itself expresses the plausibility of people’s daily life—the verisimilitude of the story itself—although it actually manifests as a quite romanticized image of a family. The setting of the film often seemingly presents the (lower) middle class life in Seoul and the stories of everyday life of Seoul citizen. The protagonists are mostly the stable salaried man, a typical white-collar worker in the office such as an insurance company (Romance Papa), transportation company (A Petty Middle Manager), a school teacher (A Dream of Fortune), and unknown but as a common salaried man (An Upstart, and Salary Man). Despite the fact that the film pictures the life of the salaried mans’ family in a pretty comfortable and stable setting, the dialogues of the people in the film ironically brags about the hardships of their lives. It is particularly interesting that the hardships are mostly from public injustices. For instance, in A Petty Middle Manager, the mother of the family complains a lot about the high-tax rate and the public injustice that actually influences the daily life of people. The agony and the failure of the father in their workplace were mainly from social unstableness and economic difficulty rather than a personal inability. In this way, the comedy films in the early 1960s display the tight interplay between private life and public life, which might happen somewhere in South Korea. In
this respect, the film critic’s usual comments about 1960s films being realistic could be understandable. Again, however, the filmic verisimilitude and the reality need more scrutiny because, in terms of the visual manipulation of life in Seoul as described in those films, Seoul was quite foreign and remote for most South Koreans.

This “familiar foreignness” is partly from the fact that the films produced in the early 1960s display strong intertextual relationships with Classical Hollywood Cinema. The story line of *A Petty Middle Manager* is very similar to Billy Wilder’s *The Apartment*: a salaried man is tempted with a promotion in the work place by providing their home and office to hide the president’s secret affairs. Kim Su-yong’s first comedy film with Sin Film, *An Upstart*, also shows a different comedy style compared to other early 1960s comedy films. While many comedy films did not use many comedian stars who actively performed in the 1950s, *An Upstart* casts the comedian star Ku Pong-sŏ as the main protagonist. However, he did not do the slapstick comedy action in that film and so it was not commercially successful because audiences expected a different comedic act from him. In another stance, this film is very similar to Billy Wilder’s *The Seven Year Itch* and the Ku’s role resembles the comic play of Tom Ewell who does the comic role in a meticulous but not an exaggerated form. As *The Seven Year Itch* distinctively consisted of the monologue of Tom Ewell, many parts of *An Upstart* are also filled with Ku Pong-sŏ’s monologues, although it seems to be disappointing for the audience who came to watch the comedic style of Ku Pong-sŏ.

As such, partial employment of Hollywood’s high-comedy film elevated the status of the comedy film as something qualified to the global standard. Particularly, in terms of the comedy genre, Billy Wilder certainly became the model for a well-made comedy film. When I
interviewed the director Yi Hyŏng-p’yo of *Under the roof of Seoul*, he stated that he received much influence from Billy Wilder and tried to make something similar to that. He spoke of his enormous reverence for Billy Wilder and specifically his films *The Apartment* and *Love in the Afternoon*.\(^{307}\) It is nebulous what aspects he is actually aspiring to from Billy Wilder’s films since the films belong to two different genre traditions, comedy and melodrama respectively, yet it would not be an overstatement to say that the comedy directors tried to make their film a cross between comedy and melodrama, which is exactly the characteristics of the early 1960s’ comedy films. Also, Western and foreign images of the middle class and urban life with more intelligent taste using political banter could be naturally sutured into the South Korean film texts and were believed to represent the “real” modern Seoul after the April Revolution.

The distance between the salaried man’s life and that of real South Korean people is evidently displayed in the film commentary of Yi Pong-nae’s previous film. Before Yi Pong-nae became a film director, he wrote a scenario of a film, *Do Not Get Me Wrong (Ohae Maseyo)*, in 1958. This film is also about the life of a salaried man and describes urban life, full of miscellaneous misunderstandings and love like *A Petty Middle Manager*. However, this film did not attract as much attention from film critics and commercial success as *A Petty Middle Manager*. About this film, one film magazine stated that “this film is testing whether the theme of salaried man could be commercially successful or not. But (regarding its failure) we do not have many salaried man in our country.”\(^{308}\) Of course, one cannot easily assume that there had been a radical increase of salaried men during those two years. Rather, we can presume that the attitude of the consumer had been changed radically and became popularized after the April Revolution.

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\(^{307}\) Interview with Yi Hyŏng-p’yo, 2006.

\(^{308}\) *Kukje yŏnghw*a, December, 1958
It could be, then, the effect of the Revolution rather than the realistic change in people’s everyday lives.

Also, as Im Yong, the first cinema journalist of South Korea, divulged, Korean film’s reveal an unconscious mimicry of Japanese film, noting that Japan had its established genre, the salaryman film (Salaryman mono), since the Meiji period. While the modernist project of the nation and the film companies’ competency to produce such imagery as their own did appeal to the common audience, the Japanese salaryman film was influenced by Hollywood, so Japanese critics regarded it as “too western.”309 In this sense, dependent upon the government’s and film industry’s constant efforts to make a modern and developed film industry, the comedy films of the early 1960s could deliberately create a verisimilitude, a realistic fantasy through its visuals. A film style using such visual presentation of the developed part of the nation must have been very fresh for many Korean audiences, which corresponds to the ethos of the time period—the construction of a modern democratic nation.

It is however true that despite the rapid changes in the political realm due to the April Revolution on the surface, the early 1960s’ South Korea still remained economically underdeveloped. The urban consumerism that often appeared in many popular films in the early 1960s was not actually experienced by the majority of South Korean people, who were living in rural areas or slums in the suburbs of big cities like Seoul and Pusan.310 The overtly fashionable urban-based modernity and democratic social and personal relationships described in comedy films are imagined and manipulated to reflect the desires of people who pursued such lifestyle,

especially after the April Revolution. The imagined reality of the urban centered South Korean modern nation has been established as a legible filmic grammar.\textsuperscript{311} In this sense, the commercial success of \textit{A Petty Middle Manager} means the vehement reception of a socially entrenched public discourse on liberal democracy or modern way of life that is codified in the filmic text.

The consumption of the manipulated democratic and modern image of South Korean life that is codified in the early 1960s’ comedy films, exemplified in \textit{A Petty Middle Manager}, reveals the popular desire of both critics and consumers—to buy such an image at this historical moment. The commodization of cultural products like verbal comedy films in this time period, in this sense, can be appreciated as a powerful way to make people actually communicate with the discourse of modern everyday life projected in the film text by their consumption. Although many remember the April Revolution as the most democratic milestone of South Korean history, the impact of it was not the sudden practice of democracy, as many people wanted to believe. Rather, through the projection of the nation based on westernized images of democracy and the embrace of such discourse through consumption, South Korean cinema at this time became a special cultural space in which desires of the nation and its people were actually met and were negotiated.

The next chapter discusses how such idealized desires subtly disappeared within the representation of films in the late 1960s when the government strengthened its control and the dreams of making a Korean Hollywood actually faced its demise. It will also specifically examine the rise of the “B” comedy style when the majority of the film industry fell into bankruptcy, and the suburb culture bloom in the late 1960s.

\textsuperscript{311} Regarding the urban-centered projection of South Korean realism, see Jinsoo An’s “\textit{The Money, Localism and the Rural Economics of 1950s},” in \textit{Maehok kwa hondon ŭi sidae}, Sodo, 2003.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Sign of Demise: Late 1960’s “Gender Comedy Films”

In the late 1960’s, a sub-genre of comedy film suddenly emerged as one of the most popular film genres in South Korea, and filmmakers intensified their efforts to cater to this new market demand. Sim U-sŏp is a case in point: a comedy director who directed over 30 comedy films between 1968 and 1970, many of them setting box office records. For instance, his film Male Maid (Namja singmo, 1968) attracted around 120,000 people in its first two weeks in Seoul\textsuperscript{312} and saved the famous, but then financially struggling, Sin Film from bankruptcy. Many of these films were more than conventional, mass-produced fodder appealing to the quirks of the market. In a subset that I call “gender comedy,” I explore these particular film genres that exposed audiences to non-normative gender codes with such motifs as cross-dressing and gender role reversal. Despite the coarse quality of these films, including their technical infelicities and their repetition of stock plot elements (they typically focus on poor, rural, lower class men and women, or sexually ambiguous men, who finally achieve victory in life with love and family), audiences loved them.

Nonetheless, how the film critics see these films is harsher than any other films of South Korean film history. As we discussed in previous chapters, comedy films of South Korea, in general, often fell into the category of low-brow taste and were not appreciated by film critics. However, the comedy films of the 1960s were labeled even lower than the 1950s’ comedian

\textsuperscript{312} Interview with director Sim Wu-sŏp (Sep. 2004). Within the context of Korea’s indirect distribution system, in place from the middle of the 1960s to the early 1990s, it is difficult to determine the exact statistics pertaining to the audience number. However, considering that the population of Seoul was 2,500,000 at that time, the film would appear to have been a remarkable box office hit. It is often said that if the opening theater (kaebongkwan) have 100,000 audience, the production cost would be covered. For a detailed study of the old Korean film distribution system, see Kim Mi-hyŏn ed., Han’guk yŏngḥwa paegūpsa yŏn’gu Korean Film Commission, 2003.
centered comedy films. One of the most influential South Korean film critics of the time, Yi Yŏng-il, lamented that “these absolutely low-brow, abnormal and perversely constructed comedy films only suit the vulgar taste of popular audiences.”\textsuperscript{313} Even contemporary comedy film scholars wrote that “the late 1960s’ comedy films are not even worthy of any attention.”\textsuperscript{314} The negative and even harsh labeling of late 60s’ comedies by Yi and other film critics has long constituted a powerful intellectual discourse that relegates gender comedies to the most marginal place in the history of South Korean film.

Only recently have some film scholars started to show an interest in these films as part of a broader genre study.\textsuperscript{315} While they attempt to canonize these film texts as meaningful cultural productions, they tend to read them from the perspective of realist aesthetics. Focusing on the films’ non-normative representations of gender, most of the debates on these comedies equivocate between two positions, seeing these works as either politically subversive or complicit in the South Korean patriarchal and authoritative social order. Most scholars have observed the narrative structure and ending of gender comedy and concluded that the narrative is disappointing and a cultural product designed only to support government national ideology.\textsuperscript{316}

However, these approaches do not explain, first of all, the popularity of these films. Obviously, these films were commercial films that were screened in theaters not in schools or public screening venues. A question, then, arises: why would people spend money if comedy

\textsuperscript{314} Kim Yun-a, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{316} Kim Shi-mu, Yonghwasa yesul ongho,Hyundaemihaksa, 2001.; Sŏ, Kok-suk, Study on the Popularity of late 1960s South Korean Cross-dressing Film, PhD diss., Tongkuk University, 2003.
films only ended up supporting government ideology? Is there no particular filmic pleasure we can find? In addition, the low-quality nature is not the problem of the genre as many film scholars criticized but it is largely related to the total demise of the film industry in the late 1960s. It is well-known that, in addition to the comedy genre, the South Korean Golden-Age of Cinema was decline in the late 1960s, and, as a result, the quality of film significantly deteriorated. Finally, the unique representation of transgression of gender image of these films is clearly related to family and class issues. Then, the transgression of gender image should not be understood as a one-dimensional judgment, whether it is subversive to governmental gender politics or not. Rather, we should carefully look at the complex dimension of gender images and ask, “Why gender?” at this historical juncture.

I pay particular attention to the above three dimensions of gender comedy films. The representation of gender, class, and family in gender comedy films has significant meaning showing the above three dimensions. First of all, despite the government’s efforts to modernize the film industry throughout Golden-Age, the South Korean film industry actually reached a crisis by the late 1960s. Also, different from the early 1960s, the end of the 1960s saw the consumer population of national film dispersed from the center to the suburbs of Seoul. Although the Park Chung Hee government forced not to show the suburb or the poor village of urban space in films, gender comedy films’ narrative is naturally set in the life of the suburb people.

Film’s gender, class and family configuration, thus, display sharp contrasts to many Golden-Age films, well exemplified in the early 1960s’ films. In the early 1960s’ Golden-Age cinema, the family image was depicted as an ideal space within which to overcome every hardship people experienced. Gender comedies, in contrast, describe the population of the
suburbs, which usually consisted of people from the rural areas such as a housemaid, bar girl (often called as hostess), and hairdresser, threatening the family image. The iconography of film also changed from “romanticizing” the family as an idealized locus to enforced inescapable space with an “evangelical” didactic and disjunctive style. This chapter will explore in what industrial and national context gender comedy appeared in South Korean film history and will analyze the way in which gender comedy’s gender configuration becomes an interesting site, revealing both violation and cooperation in support of the national ideology of gender, class and family.

The Demise of Golden-Age and the Emergence of B films

By establishing the film law, the Park Chung Hee government tried to control the film industry, foremost by financially supporting the big company system during the 1960s. However, film law did not completely control the industry due to the practices of small budget filmmaking during the Golden-Age. From 1961 (the year in which the first film law was passed) to 1971, the government amended the law three times. It might be controversial to say that the film law was not overly repressive during the Golden-Age.\footnote{It is often said that the film law of South Korean government during the Golden-Age was repressive. For example, see Kim Tong-ho ed., \textit{Han’guk yŏnghwa chŏngch’eaksa}, Nanam, 2005. It is not deniable that the main purpose of the film law was also in protecting national film industry as many filmmakers argued.} However, it is undeniable that the main purpose of the film law was to protect the national film industry and industrialize it as many filmmakers had advocated. The repressiveness of this law appeared only in the late 1960s and then in terms of controlling film content. During the 1960s, the film industry blossomed under the control of the government, which promised development and progress.
During this period, the economic development of the nation became a central issue and through its Revolution Public Promise (Hyŏngmyŏng kongyak), the military government promised greater economic development. The Park Chung Hee government sought to do precisely that through its Five Year Economic Developmental Plan (established in 1962). Based on Rostow’s model of unequal development, this plan prioritized state assistance to large companies, helping them to accumulate capital. This was believed to be an efficient way to revive the economies of these underdeveloped nations.  

In keeping with the Park regime’s national development project, the film industry became reorganized. The first South Korean Film Law was passed in 1962 to both promote and regulate the film industry. Sixty-five small film companies, which were regarded by the government as producers of low quality films in the late 1950s, were consolidated into twenty big companies. According to this first film law, film companies had to acquire proper film making facilities and own equipments such as at least three cameras, over 50kw lights and a studio that were at least 660km² in size. They also needed to register with the government.  

Since these film system requirements were too high for many film companies, most small film companies, with the exception of Sin Film—a rising film production company—merged with each other. The film law, revised in 1963, forced six large companies to merge, following the

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319 It is hard to know whether many people who had lived during this time actually had their strong belief to the national political and economic system. Also, it has been a strong controversy among scholars whether to see the people of this time as mere bumpkin followers of the national politics or as active social agencies against to the dictatorship. There had been an intensive debates on the characteristics of people’s attitude toward the government’s dictatorship whether people had somehow agreed with such political system or not. Regarding such debates, see Yi Sang-rok, “Popular Dictatorship: a useful tool for the analysis of Park Chung Hee system or a uncomfortable clothes?” in Chang Mun-sŏk and Yi Sang-rok, Kŭndaes ſi kaeyŏngkya esŏ tokijae rŭl ikta, Kūripi, 2006.; Kim Chun, “The Labor of Park Chung Hee Era: focusing on the Ulsan Hyundai Shipbuilding Laborers,” Ibid., pp257-292.; Pak T’aekyun, ibid.
model of the Hollywood Studio system. The revised film law, in turn, required each company to produce at least 15 films per year in order to prevent a decrease in the total number of films produced despite the fewer number of film companies. In this way, the industrialization of cinema production was accomplished.

However, even the big companies found it difficult to make 15 films per year and thus had to rely on a so-called sub-contracting (taemyŏŋ) system. This system gave the work of production to small film production companies that could not register with the government because of their lack of filmmaking facilities. Instead, they paid the big companies to use their facilities. In this way, the first film law itself was not as successful as the government had planned.

In 1966, the film law became revised again due to the complaints and protests by filmmakers who argued that the sub-contracting system was no different from the il-sa-il-jak system.321 Many of them protested against the governmental efforts to modernize the film companies, arguing that nationalization did not, in fact, mean modernization.322 Reflecting such complaints, the government loosened the standards for film company registration solving some of the problems of the sub-contracting system and the film quotas.

Nevertheless, in the second revision of the law, the government inserted an article stating that a company producing a “good quality” film would be rewarded with the right to import foreign films. This, in fact, became a de facto tool for political censorship,323 with the notion of

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321 Regarding il-sa-il-jak phenomenon, see chapter two.
322 Many filmmakers of the time believed that the industrialization of the first film law was de facto nationalization. Kim, Su-yong, Na ŭi sarang, cinema, Ssine 21, 2005. pp.83-86.
323 Sin Sang-ok said that this compensation system, however, had a bad effect to make a film based on the famous novel (Munye yŏnghwak) to be selected as the “good quality film.” Although such novel-based film sometimes get an attention from the international film festival, most of them only got the national fame. From Sin’s testimony, one
“good quality” based on political rather than aesthetic judgment. Prizes were usually awarded to companies that produced films with themes that supported governmental policies.\textsuperscript{324} Through these measures, even though the government gave up its goal of nationalizing the film industry, it still retained a certain amount of control over film contents.

When the Park government confronted various socio-political crises, this control became further heightened. By the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, the Park Chung Hee regime that had founded its sense of legitimacy on promises of economic development and national progress faced various symptoms of socio-political problems, which all indicated its declining degree of control. For instance, the government was faced with the unequal development between the city and countryside in the course of rapid urbanization as one of its problems. The rate of economic growth also sharply decreased from 13.8\% in 1969 to 5.7\% in 1972.\textsuperscript{325} The economic gap between the lower and upper classes widened, bringing about clashes between the two groups, as dramatically symbolized by the self-immolation and death of Chŏn t’ae-il, a laborer in \textit{Namdaemun} market laborer, in 1970.\textsuperscript{326} The Park regime also faced political dangers when Kim Dae-jung (Kim Tae-jung), his chief political opponent, showed an unexpectedly strong showing in the 1971 national election. Many suspected that Park was able to retain victory only by tampering with the votes. Moreover, the assassination attempt on Park Chung-hee by 31 armed spies from North Korea heightened the fear of war and sense of national crisis in 1970.\textsuperscript{327}

Moreover, while Park had succeeded in achieving a certain level of economic

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\textsuperscript{325} Ibid. p.67.
\textsuperscript{326} \textit{Korean Modern History 3}, P’ulpit.
\textsuperscript{327} Kang, Chun-man, \textit{Han’guk hyŏndaesa sanch’aek 1960s 3}, Inmul kwa sasangsa, 2004
development, he was heavily criticized for focusing on urban development, resulting in the decline of the rural areas. As a result, the incomes of farmers, which had been higher than those of urban workers in the early 1960s, were almost 40% lower by the end of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{328} The population of Seoul also drastically increased in the 1960s. In 1970, the population of Seoul was 5,850,000, far exceeding government estimates. Due to the rapid influx of people from rural areas—the population of Seoul increased at an annual rate of over 15% by the end of 1960s.\textsuperscript{329} High inflation and high unemployment became two scourges in urban areas leading to the formation of large slums in Seoul. Approximately three million people—or one in three Seoulites—were living in slums and young people without families in Seoul often lived in dilapidated housing called “hives” (pŏlt’ongjib).\textsuperscript{330} With an urgent need for urban planning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, experts called for the development of suburbs to ease the housing crisis. To fulfill the government’s plan was to move 10-15% of the total Seoul population out of the city to the suburbs, twelve new suburban centers were created and approximately 55% of the population living in central Seoul near T’oekye Street (T’oekyero), from Taehan Theater to Chongmyo, known as a redlight district (chongsam), was relocated from the late 1960s to the early 1970s.\textsuperscript{331} In contrast to the bright lights in downtown Seoul that boasted its economic development, the suburbs were unseemly blights on the landscape. Even though the Park government continuously made a show of displaying its national development to its own people and the outside world, the actual living conditions of ordinary people fell far below those of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[328] In 1969, the family income of the countryside was 65.3\% of the urban laborer. in Kim, Su-haeng and Pak Sŏng-ho, \textit{The Development and Demolish of Park Chung Hee System}. Seoul National University, 2007 p.62
\item[329] Korea National Statistics Office.
\item[330] Kim, Su-haeng and Pak Sŏng-ho ed., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 73.
\end{footnotes}
developed nations. In order to defend its tenuous political legitimacy, the Park Chung Hee government had to invent new ways to mobilize the nation and retain its social control.

Before the arrival of the Yushin system, a national campaign called the “Social Purification Movement (Sahwoe Chŏngwa Undong)” was introduced during the 1960s to control the everyday lives of people living in urban slums. This movement was later continued and intensified by Saemaül Undong. Yushin, itself, was a drastic measure to control the nation and its people. By restricting the civil rights of individuals and even modifying the national constitution, the Yushin system pursued absolute state control in almost all sectors of the nation. Along with drastic measures like changes to the constitution, Saemaül Undong (New Village Construction Movement, 1972) tried to raise people’s consciousness to the need to develop not only the urban centers but also the countryside. The period of the Yushin thus represented another stage of state mobilization of the nation under different socio-political circumstances.

As we see in the second amendment of the film law, the level of censorship also became significantly elevated in the film industry. In the first film law, the filmmakers had to submit their plans to make a film and get permission to screen their films. But by the second revision, the filmmakers had to get permission for both the film scenario and the film screening from both a civic organization and the Public Information Bureau (Kongbobu). The pre-screening of film scenarios was one way that the government tried to censor subversive political content. As a result, many filmmakers resorted to making films that were sex-oriented or action-filled in order to avoid government censorship and these types of films became the mainstay of the industry at this time. In the third film law revision in 1970, the government eliminated the compensation

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system which had given producers of art films the privilege to import foreign films. Under this system, many film importers had disguised themselves as filmmakers in order to take advantage of the quota for foreign film imports instead of making high quality Korean art films. To plug this loophole in the fourth revision of the film law in 1972, film importers and film producers had to now register separately.

The abolition of the compensation system, however, did not increase the quality of Korean films. Instead, the number of so-called “B films” drastically increased around this time. Looking back at this period of the South Korean film industry, it is ironic that it is often referred to as the demise of the industry. In terms of quantity, approximately two hundred films were produced in the late 1960s\textsuperscript{333} and the size of audiences had dramatically increased as well.\textsuperscript{334} Still, despite the frequent changes to the film policies in the 1960s, they turned out to be a failure. Instead of modernizing the film industry and creating a Hollywood film system, they merely resulted in the mass production of B films. The dream of South Korean filmmakers to make Korean-style Hollywood blockbusters thus remained a dream.

**How Were B Films Made?**

With the overflow of B films, many observers have labeled the end of the 1960s as the end of the Golden-Age of Korean cinema and the beginning of its “Dark Ages.” One might quibble about what exactly constitutes a B film. Is it a moral judgment or an aesthetic one? And what is the meaning of such cultural product? Regardless of one’s opinion, the basic criteria of a


\textsuperscript{334} According to a statistics of *A Hand book of Korean Film Data*, from there had been a great increase of the film audience from 1966 to 1969. pp.157-158.
B film is its low budget and targeted audience. In the late 1960s, many B films were produced and circulated for a target audience in the suburbs of Seoul.

Along with the increase in the suburban population, there was also an increase in the number of suburban theaters. In the early 1970s, there were almost 100 theaters in South Korea with many of them located in the suburbs after the mid-1960s. More specifically, in the 1960s, South Korea had seven to eight “first runners” (kaebongkwan) (theaters where films were first screened to the public). The rest were either “second runners” (yibōnkwan) or “double-first runners” (tongsigaebong). Varying with the admission fee, there were also so-called “third,” “fourth,” and “fifth runners.” Usually, when a first-runner film was released, it was sold to six local distributors. By the late 1960s, however, the filmmakers found it difficult to find theaters to screen their films. Meanwhile, the theaters in the suburbs began clamoring to become first-runner theaters. Many film companies had to choose second-runner theaters even for the first release of their films.

Meanwhile, in 1968, the Central Cinema Distributor (Chung’ang yŏngbae) emerged as an important film distributor even though it lasted for only a few years. Central Cinema Distributor was a joint venture of five suburb theaters—Yŏnhŭng Theater (Yŏngtŭngp’o region), Tong-il Theater (Ch’ŏngryangni region), Korea Theater (Chongno region), Sŏngnam Theater ,

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336 Double first-runner theater system is made after the emergence of the second-runner theaters. Usually, the first-runner theater had a monopolized its screening venue in Seoul. But after the second-runner theaters became more profitable, there were frequent occasions the second-runner theater had a contract to screen with the first runner theater at the same time. That is called “double first-runner” theater system.
337 Ibid., p.58.
and P’yônghwâ Theater. Its president, Chin Hang-bôm, testified that the size of the Seoul suburban film market was almost the same as the regional market of Kyônggi-Kangwôn, the nation’s third largest film market. Chin usually distributed the films of small companies, which had not found a first-runner theater, in this suburban market. By the end of the 1960s, however, this suburban market also began catering to large film companies like Sin Film, which strove to find theaters to screen their non-major and/or sub-contracted films. Actions such as these on the part of Sin Film were partly due to their unique “dual strategy” in producing films.

As explained in chapter four, Sin Film was the country’s most prosperous film company, which had its heyday during the promulgation of the first film law before meeting its demise when the fourth revision to the film law was made in 1973. As I had already mentioned briefly, Sin Film was the only company that was able to register independently when the first film law forced many companies to renovate their facilities. After the commercial success of its first film, Romance ppappa, in 1960, and the huge success of The Story of Ch’unyang in 1961, Sin Film became the most visible film company in South Korea. In 1962, Sin Film cheaply bought Hong Ch’ân’s An’yang Studio (An’yang ch’waryôngso), another large studio in Korea modeled after Columbia Pictures in Hollywood, after it came under government inspection for its high debt. Aspiring to become a major studio system like Hollywood, at the beginning, Sin Film employed 250 salaried workers and 30 directors, along with scenario writers with exclusive contracts and cinema-costume makers. In 1964, to nurture actors and actresses, make-up

340 Ibid., p.156.
341 Sin, op. cit., p.85.
342 Ibid., p.73.
344 The testimony of Yi Hae-yun, in Korean Film Archive, Han’guk yônghwâ rûl malhanda, Ich’ae, 2006. pp. 398-
artists, swordsmen, and even horse riders, *Sin Film* also established *Anyang yesul hakkyo*, a professional film school. Indeed, in the 1960s, it was the nation’s pre-eminent film company. Nevertheless, during the 1960, even *Sin Film* began to experience financial difficulties. Not owing its own theater in the local area, *Sin Film* did not have enough capital from the profits of its first release in Seoul or Pusan to make a new film. Sin Sang-ok recollected how “it was difficult to be in black even though we had many commercially successful films like *Samryong*, the Mute (*Pŏng’ori samnyong’i*, 1964), *The Red Muffler* (*Ppalgan mahura*, 1964) and *The Sino-Japanese War and Queen Min the Herein* (*Ch’ŏngil chŏnjang kwa yŏgŏl minbi*,1965). Therefore, we needed to make a film on a low budget.”345 In contrast, film companies like *Saehan* or *Hapttong*, with either established venues for screening their films in local areas (*Saehan*)346 or plans for only low-budget films like *Hapttong*,347 had a stable revenue. *Saehan* began as a foreign film importer but, after the first revision of the film law, it started to make films in order to get the foreign film screening quota. According to Kim Il-su, who had worked for *Saehan* as a distributor from the 1960s to the early 1970s, in the mid-1960s, *Seahan* had local agencies to distribute its products for several years. Although this unique production-distribution system did not last very long, it points to the importance of film distribution and reinvested profits to the overall system of production. Within this system, the local distributors and/or theater owners put up money for most of the production cost in return for exclusive release contracts with the producers. The president of *Hapttong Yŏnghwasa*, Kwak Chŏng-hwan, stated that he spent only

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345 Sin, *op. cit.*, p.86.
70-80% of the money that he received from a local distributor. Therefore, his company never faced a serious financial problem. Making low-budget films therefore was a crucial survival strategy for film companies that did not own theaters in local areas.

Some relatively low-budget films produced by Sin Film gained both commercial and critical success like House Guest and My Mother (Sarangbang Sonim kwa Ōmōni, 1963) but the low-budget usually brought problems of low-quality. Still, by the late 1960s, with Sin Film facing near-bankruptcies several times, it had no choice but to make more B films. Examining the registry of films produced by Sin Film during the 1960s, it appears as if most of the films were B-films, designed to help the company’s bottom line, with the exception of a few films targeted for international film festivals or national film competitions. For example, in 1964, Sin Film produced 13 films. Among these films, Sin Sang-ok only directed two films, The Red Muffler and Samryong, the Mute. The first obtained financial success and the second became invited to an international film festival. The rest of the company’s films were all made by small companies in the sub-contracting system. From Sin’s testimony, it appears easy to surmise that it sub-contracting film production to small film companies was one way for Sin Film to overcome its financial crisis (which, ironically, partly stemmed from the high production of films like The Red Muffler). Due to their small production budgets, the sub-contracted films became known as B films.

This sub-contracting system became a bigger trend in the late 1960s even though it was formally abolished. From 1967 to 1970, for example, Sin Film produced 54 films, an average of 13-14 films a year. Considering the fact that the number of films that had to be produced per year
had been reduced from fifteen to two per year in the previous years, Sin Film was producing films in far excess of the quota. Except for some quality films made by Sin Sang-ok, most of the films were martial arts, pseudo-Westerns, and comedies—all regarded as B films. The increase in the number of films produced, however, does not mean a huge growth of the film industry or the stabilization in the financial situation of Sin Film. Rather, it shows how the sub-contracting system was still in full effect, with the government’s control having little effect on production. Meanwhile, the changing composition of audiences and the growth of audiences in the suburbs further added complexity to the decision making process of the film companies.

A basic distribution strategy for Sin Film was to screen its major films in the central urban area then produce second-grade B films according to their financial needs. In the years 1968 and 1969, Central Cinema Distributor was the distributor of some of Sin Film’s “non-major” films. In 1969, six out of the 18 films were distributed to the suburbs. In 1971, many action films (usually pseudo-Hong Kong action films) or films that were co-produced by Sin Film were screened in Haliud Theater, known as a first-running foreign film theater. This means that some of Sin Film’s pseudo-Hong Kong films were regarded as exports regardless of their quality by using the “co-production” label. Conversely, from the perspective of audiences and consumption, the emergence of Central Cinema Distributor and genre production for the B film audiences reveal the breakdown of the A film industry backed by the government during the late 1960s.

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There is an argument that the reason for the mass production of the ‘B’ films and demise of the film industry were mainly due to the defect of national film law. For example, see Yi Kil-sông, Yi Ho-gǒl, Yi U-sǒk, 1970 Nyǒndae sǒ’ul úi kǔkjjang sanǒp mit kǔkjjang munhwa yǒn’gu, Korean Film Commission, 2004. p. 29. But this argument is not on the actual fact that the government only required two films after 1966 film law revision. Refer to the newspaper article, Chosǒn Ilbo, November 26, 1970.
The Rise of “Gender Comedy”


Sim U-sŏp, a well-known director of male-series, was notorious for his fast filmmaking style. Although he had been working as a film director from the late 1950s, he did not draw much attention until the late 1960s, when he became popular among production companies for his quick turnover time. In an interview, he stated that he spent only a week to make a film.349 Because he had a tight film production schedule, he did not waste much time or film. The high price of raw film took up a significant portion of the film production cost. Fast filmmaking with rapid continuity, Sim stated, was the key element to making a low-budget film. Sim thus became very popular among film producers for making cheap but profitable films.

Some directors complained about Sim because his success pressured them to make similar low budget films.350 Such films were generally released to the audiences in the suburbs.351 After the

349 Interview with director Sim U-sŏp.
success of Male Maid, released in Kukjje Theater, one of the central film venues, Sim went on to make Male Hostess for Sin Film and Male Hairdresser for Yŏnhap yŏnghwasa. The former was released in the suburbs by Central Cinema Distributor. Although neither film attracted as much audience as Male Maid, because of the films’ low production costs, the relatively low audience turnout did not adversely affect their profits and they were not considered commercial failures. B films were thus made with low budgets and shown to relatively small audiences. In general, gender comedies possess four main characteristics. First of all, they show gender masquerade, especially a pejorative masquerade of the female by the male. Second, they reveal the tumultuous and confusing atmosphere of contemporary life, especially when set in Seoul. In order to elicit laughter, they portray the confusion of country bumpkins in a new and complex urban setting. Third, the inverted gender code depicts the hidden nightlife of Seoul, including prostitution and the male bar culture. Finally, they tend to have happy endings that emphasize the values of nation and family, usually with the abrupt insertion of public service announcements into the text of the film. To discuss this male series, I will examine two exemplary gender comedy films, Male Hostess and Male Hairdresser, both produced in 1969.

By examining the storylines of Male Hostess and Male Hairdresser, which typify the characteristics of gender comedies, I will determine how they mirrored their time period. The two main characters of Male Hostess are Mr. Ku and Ho, the managing director of the company where he works, who fires Mr. Ku for his womanly behavior. Laid off, Mr. Ku follows a friend’s suggestion to work in a bar as a hostess. Changing es his name to Sanwŏl, Mr. Ku disguises himself as a woman and becomes a popular hostess. Ironically, Hŏ, who regularly patronizes the bar where Sanwŏl works, meets “her” and falls in love with her. Sanwŏl uses Hŏ for his money
to the extent that Hŏ’s wife suspects that he is having an affair. Hŏ becomes confined to his house by his angry wife who, questioning her own female desirability, visits the bar disguised as a man. Advised by Sanwŏl to serve her husband more faithfully, the wife repents and decides to become a better wife. Meanwhile, realizing that working as a hostess is not good for the nation, Mr. Ku quits his hostessing job and opens a small market with the money that he had saved working as a hostess.

Part of the Male Maid series, Male Hairdresser starts with a scene of Mr. Ku, a former housemaid, searching for a job in Seoul. One day he goes to a hair salon, where he is mistaken for a famous hairdresser, Andrea, who had ostensibly returned to Seoul after attending a beauty school in France. Disguising himself as this famous hairdresser, “Andrea” creates unique hair styles for his clients while providing “lewd” services as a masseuse on the side. As Andrea, Ku achieves fame and fortune. However, witnessing his clients’ (all of whom are married women) blind adoration for all things French, Mr. Ku/Andrea preaches the superiority of national to foreign products. Realizing the emptiness of success in Seoul, Ku returns to his hometown and dedicate his life to building an irrigation system for the town.

The most conspicuous trait of this genre is its representation of “abnormal” sexuality—an abnormal sexuality that is always associated with the protagonist’s low and “unbound” social status. In the late 1960s, many popular narratives in radio and television dramas as well as film comedies exploit these themes of marginalized sexual identities. One editorial in Chosŏn Ilbo’s lamented:

Why does our nation’s cinema make “sex” films from one to ten? We all

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352 In an interview, director Yi Hyŏng-p’yo testified that these kinds of themes were very popular at that time. Feb, 2006.
understand that our nation has become more open to sex, but our national films are only about sex. Not only films but television and radio programs deal too much with sexual content. These films are so “low culture” that they are a bad influence not only on children but also on adults.353

Such complaints do not seem to be exaggerated or based on overly strict moral standards. Many films, in fact, rely on gratuitous sex, especially in the titles to attract an audience.354

Examples of such films include I Prefer Mine (Nae kkŏsi tŏ choa, 1969), I Like It Hot (Ttŭkŏwŏsŏ choayo, 1969), The First Experience (ch’ŏtkyŏnghŏm, 1970) Two Wet Women (Pi e chŏjŏn tuyŏin, 1970), Turn off the Light (Pang ŭi pul ŭl kkŏjuo, 1970), and Hot Spring of Beauty (Minyŏ onch’ŏn, 1969). Sex was not only used to titillate the audience but also to discuss the conflicts that arose in parts of everyday life that were unregulated.

For example, in Male Hostess, Mr. Ku’s female disposition was the main reason for his dismissal from the company. From the beginning, Mr. Ku is portrayed as eccentric or queer. In the first scene, the camera pans from the left to the right, focusing on the bare feet of the female workers in the office. Then it alights upon Mr. Ku, who is knitting women’s socks instead of doing his masculine job. After losing his job and getting a job as a hostess, Mr. Ku wears a wig, heavy make-up, and exaggerates his effeminate gestures and voice. Although Andrea is a male character in the film, his foreign accent and long blonde wig make his gender identity neither male nor female. Working as a hostess woman, Mr. Kum falls in love with another hostess, Chong-mi, and confesses his love for her and they become a couple. To the other hostesses, they appear to be unnaturally close. In response, Mr. Ku replies “What do you think? That we’re having a gay relationship?”

353 Chosŏn Ilbo, March 17, 1967.
354 Such orientation including sexual contents are more intensified in the 1970s and 1980s.
With the depiction of gender/sexual ambiguity very unusual in South Korean film history up to then, Mr. Ku’s performances have become the central focus of many film scholars’ debates. Looking simply at the gender masquerade, one could argue for the subversive potential of gender comedies. One, however, also needs to consider the comedy genre itself to discuss the unregulated and uncensored themes of gender transgression. Compared to other genres, gender comedies certainly afforded a certain paradoxical freedom of expression otherwise impossible in Park Chung Hee’s oppressive regime. According to Judith Butler, gender parodies can be transgressive in subverting dominant notions of gender and sexuality especially under a politically repressive rule.  

Mr. Ku’s performances also provide the pretext to become a voyeur of Seoul’s dark underside. The naked bodies of men and women displayed in the hostess bars and massage parlors invite the audience to assume the male gaze. By providing a window into the dark underside of Seoul’s night industries, a voyeuristic frisson is produced for the audience, which, according to the filmmakers, was mostly female for the Male Maid. Beyond guessing at how gender switching might appeal to housewives confined to the home, it is very difficult to find out exactly what appealed to the audiences of Male Hostess and Male Hairdresser. Certainly, for women, it may be the pleasure of watching a female customer served by a young male masseur and vice-versa. Undoubtedly, the spectacle of secret spaces in Seoul also provided visual pleasures, regardless of their positivie or negative moral overtones. The protagonists’ “abnormal”

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356 In case of Male Maid, ----testified that “after the screening, we found that the theater became an almost toilet, because many woman urinated while they were laughing.” From this testimony, it seems that many of the film audience could be female audience, and there is no specific gender division in the audience like melodrama and action film.
sexualities thus provide a filmic language for audiences (especially those who have never been to Seoul), to catch a glimpse of a normally hidden part of urban nightlife.

B films thus brought unique visual spectacles to the theater. Even though they were often criticized for being “drab,” “odd,” “crude,” “sick,” “vulgar,” etc., they also had their own techniques to imitate experimental and art house films. With American B films parodying the film techniques of cinema verité, Sim U-sŏp, a gender comedy director, could take great pride in his filmmaking skills, which he stated that he had learned from Western art films, despite the scorn of the film critics. Sim boasted on how he had been experimented with various camera techniques in his first film *Madame paeng’nyŏn* (*Paeng’nyŏn puin*, 1959), which uses the rule of subjective angle rather than the objective one (in line with Hollywoods’ “180 degree rule”), even before many Koreans heard about the French *nouvelle vogue* films in the late 1950s. Although he failed to garner much attention for his technical experiments in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he still advanced his skills in making arresting and—if we are to accept his assertions—heavily influenced the filmmaking of gender comedies in the late 1960s.

In watching the gender comedies from the 1960s, it is clear that fast filmmaking requires a dexterous manipulation of filmmaking techniques. Unlike directors who tried to make seamless Hollywood-style films in the 1960s, the directors of gender comedy films displayed a variety of visuals in their film texts. First of all, compared to other film genres like historical or social dramas, melodramas, or even thrillers, which rely on a serious treatment of the film narratives, gender comedy films tend to be light-hearted. While, as a general rule, editing in classical

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358 Ibid.
359 Interview with director, Sim U-sŏp.
Hollywood cinema strives to create seamlessness in the visuals to create a filmic verisimilitude, gender comedy films rebel against this rule and try to communicate directly with the film audience through film diegesis.

For example, in the Male Hairdresser, the protagonist became famous for putting strange objects in his clients’ hair and exaggerating them in unusual ways. Accompanied by lively music, he actually performs avant-garde dances while working. After his “performances,” his “pieces,” named after various animals and exotic places, are displayed on the street. As a model walks down the street with a strange and funny hairstyle, the camera captures the reactions of the people on the street. The pleasure of watching the people’s surprised reactions is heightened by the film’s use of telescopic lenses, which has the effect of creating a “hidden camera” effect. These scenes are almost like a comedy show, inserted into the film to create pleasure. In order to provoke laughter, Sim also uses the editing techniques of fast forwarding and fast rewinding. To show the henpecked husband in Male Hostess running away from his wife, Sim fast forwarded the film and accompanied the scene with violent piano music to create cartoon-like visuals. From a Hollywood centered perspective, such techniques are coarse and inept. Interpreted in another way, they display another form of imagination to appeal to different audiences. In this manner, the popularity of gender comedies can be seen to stem from offering visually and temporally exciting spectacles with complex socio-political meanings and ramifications.

Analyzing the audiences of youth films (Ch’ŏngch’ŭn yŏnghwa or Ch’ŏngch’ummul) in the mid-1960s Yi U-sŏk argues against previous studies that viewed these films as high middle-class productions aimed at college students. With most college students usually preferring...
foreign films, he argues that the main audience for these films was actually young people who came to Seoul from the countryside. His analysis is useful in accounting for the increased number of viewers for B films in the late 1960s, when the urban population rapidly increased due to the large influx of people from the countryside. Scholars have debated whether these cultural productions were low culture or subculture. If viewed from the aesthetic judgments of bourgeois high culture, they can be considered low culture. If viewed as intentionally subverting the cultural consumption of the film audience, they can be called subculture. The South Korean suburban audience cannot be viewed as one homogeneous local community since it is fractured by differences of class, gender, family, and education. But if the main consumers of gender comedy films are viewed as this rural population, which was either new to Seoul or outcasts in the suburbs, then these films can be considered to reflect their tastes. In other words, the “coarse” film language of gender masquerades can be considered a reflection of their desires.

**Suturing Gender**

Along with the subversive nature of gender masquerade, it is also interesting to consider the performance of transgressive gender codes. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault asks, “Why has sexuality been so widely discussed? And what has been said about it?” He suggests that the pervasiveness of sexual representations—by putting sexuality into discourse—did little to undermine repressive modes of social control. Here, Foucault argues that “repression” does not constitute absolute control over speaking itself. Rather, by talking about marginalized or peripheral sexualities, the discourse of sexuality designed to “measure bodies and penetrate

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modes of conduct” could be put into effect. This keen analysis of sexuality provides an important insight into the explosion of representations of non-normative sexuality in gender comedy films. While the government heavily suppressed political criticism in cultural productions, it loosened the regulation for cultural content depicting gender or sexuality. On the one hand, the over-emphasis on sex functioned to distract people from political issues and to encourage self-discipline and engagement in the national mobilization project. On the other hand, this over-emphasis served to limit the proliferation of deviant sexual practices to spaces outside of the family in the sex industry. The discourse or practice of deviance thus failed to challenge the national ideology of family-nation.

Although gender comedies expressly dealt with themse of gender and sexual deviancy, they never experienced any censorship under the film law perhaps because of their “B” status which discouraged serious attention. However, authorities did not hesitate to censor films that seriously depicted acts of abnormal sexuality, such as Spring Dream (Ch’unmong, 1967), Woman in the Wall (Pyŏk sok ŭi yŏja, 1969), A Eunuch (Naesi, 1968) and Your Name is Woman (Nŏ ŭi irŭm ŭn yŏja, 1969). In contrast to the deviant sexuality portrayed in gender comedies, such as female masquerades which were too exaggerated to evoke a sense of realism, the sexual content in these censored films were too close to everyday life for the censors to ignore.

In an interview, both Sim Wu-sŏp and, a director of gender comedies, and Ku Pong-sŏ, a

362 The government strictly prohibited talking about political matter in cultural products, and as a result, to avoid censorship, many filmmakers chose to explore sexual themes. A 1966 film law prohibited “political content” through pre-examination of scenarios. In 1969, the government eliminated the compensation system, which gave priority to film companies that made “art” films or imported foreign films. Many so-called art filmmakers give up making serious films and others made commercialized films. At this time, “sex” was the one of the best selling themes in commercial film. Prevalence of theme of “sex” in popular narratives, in this register, reflects the government’s regulation of political expressionism film.
comedian, agreed that the government did not take the comedy genre seriously. Ku Pong-sŏ went even so far as to state that all these films amounted to so little in terms of their artistic value that he did not even want them included in his filmography. Ku’s rejection to take the gender comedy film seriously reveals the serious discrimination faced by comedians and actors working in this genre and the struggles that Ku had to engage in as a member of both groups. In short, reflecting the widespread devaluation of gender comedies as low quality entertainment, the consumers of these films were generally regarded as vulgar philistines, and the films themselves as low brow entertainment rather than subversive art.

Still, questions remain why these gender transgressions were permitted. I believe that the reason for that is because these films always end with the normative recuperation of that deviant behavior. Thus, these films not only contained these non-normative genders and sexualities within a limited space, they also engaged in a specific practice of disciplining them. Also noteworthy is how gender comedy films always focus on the female masquerade by the male instead of the male masquerade by the female. In Male Hostess, there is one scene where the angry wives masquerade as men so they can go to the hostess clubs (kisaenggijib) to see for themselves what happens in that space. Served by a hostess, they enjoy services that only men at that time could enjoy. In general, the female masquerade thus offers more psychologically liberating moments. Another film, My Mom and House Guest (Sarangbang sonim kwa ōmoni, 1963), portrays the struggles of a widow to find new love. Sneaking into the room of a house guest, she once tries on his hat. Smiling at her reflection in the mirror, the mother reveals her hidden desire and brief moment of liberation. Similarly, in Male Hostess, the sequence where the

57 Interview with director Sim Wu-sŏp and comedian star Ku Pong-sŏ.
angry wives storm the bar, masquerading as men, is accompanied by loud and upbeat music. Along with this music, the disjunctive editing dramatizes this moment of liberation for the women and brings great pleasure to the audience. However, this brief moment of liberation quickly dissipates when the film portrays, from a masculine perspective, these wives and sisters of the main characters as lacking in femininity, thus excusing their husbands’ and brothers’ sexual debauchery. In this bar scene, Ku’s gender masquerade teaches the wife of the main protagonist to properly perform her gender role—to serve her husband. The gender masquerade thus becomes a way to speak about “what man wants,” and to control and rectify the wife’s—not the husbands—actions. Even though it is hard to say that gender comedies are for man, they are obviously made from a male perspective.

Not only that, the female masquerades by the men almost always describe women in a pejorative manner. One day, in Male Hostess, Sanwŏl starts to talk about her life in front of some of the other hostesses who are suspicious of her sexual identity. Starting with a deep sigh, Sanwŏl asks, “who wants to be a hostess?” Sanwŏl begins her story typical of many melodramas, soap operas, and weepies—often considered to be women’s genres:

Like others, I wanted to be a good housewife. But it was not possible for me. I fell in love with a college student. I loved him so much. Our relationship became very serious. But because I was from the lower class his parents did not like me. He left and that was the end of our relationship.

After her story, Sanwŏl starts to cry, compelling the other hostesses to start crying too. They have accepted Sanwŏl into their community. This entire scene probably not only elicited laughter from the male audience members, it also ridiculed both this popular women’s genre of films and the
females easily moved by these weepies. As such, the subversive nature of these male masquerades of women was significantly compromised.

**Class Troubles**

In gender comedy films, non-normative gender performances are freely permitted, especially when performed with in the specific cultural space of the sex industry. As seen in the titles of films such as *Male Hostess* and *Male Hairdresser*, the sex industry often lurked in the back of gender comedies. Often, male comedians from rural areas, who could not find a proper job, performed gender masquerades. Meanwhile, in the 1960s and early 70s, it was common for lower class women from urban slums or rural areas to become hostesses, hairdressers, and masseuses. Although these jobs were officially different from licensed prostitution, which was outlawed in 1948, these women often performed sexual services with the tacit consent of the government. Among the male series, *Male Hostess* had the most exaggerated performances of masquerade. The hostesses not only masquerade for their job, they also masquerade for their hometown people by pretending to be successful in Seoul. The gender switching of the male comedians thus imitated the new occupations of these young women with lower class, rural backgrounds. From this perspective, these male comedian are performing a certain gendered and classed identity of a particular occupation, rather than merely performing the female gender.

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364 It might be a total coincidence that the popularity of comedy film always comes with the popularity of melodrama. In the late 1960s, a film, *Bitter, but Once Again* (*Miwŏdo tashihanbŏn*, 1968) was recorded the most successful box office records of the entire South Korean film history. This scene could be a parody of the same film or similar types of melodrama, which was though to be unrespectable types of genre form to many film critics.

365 One might think that hairdresser is not related to “sex industry.” However, beauty shop was one of the location that the prostitution was done in South Korea. See, Cumings, “Silent But Deadly: Sexual Subordiation in the U.S.-Korean Relationship,” in P. Sturdevant ed., *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia*. pp.169-175.

Not only that, both *Male Hostess* and *Male Hairdresser* can be considered to be critical reflections on the complex problems of especially rapid urbanization as they manifested themselves in the Seoul landscape. In both films, the establishing shot always shows Seoul crammed with tall buildings, rapidly moving transportation and crowds of people. Right after these establishing shots, the films depict the spaces of residence in Seoul by Ku—marginalized households or the offices of small businesses. In those spaces, the main character Ku, played by the famous comedian Ku Pong-sŏ, is depicted as being paralyzed. A rural man in Seoul to search for work, Ku confronts both unemployment and economic hardship. Without any social and familial roots in Seoul, Ku has no one to rely on except himself to find a job. He thus represents a new class of displaced urban dwellers. Paradoxically, Ku’s choice of “deviant” jobs such as male hostesses and hairdressers both reflects the upheavals of society and the incompetence of the government in creating proper employment for the (sub)urban population.

Interestingly, although many members of this (sub)urban population lived in substandard housing, none of this is depicted in the films in any detail. This was partly because of the government ban on depictions of poor households (*panjach’on*). Another reason was because these films mainly revolved around the aspirations of these protagonists from the rural areas to have either themselves or their siblings move up the class ladder into the middle class through taking on such humiliating work as male hostesses. This was typical of young girls from rural areas who came to Seoul to support their male siblings or their hometowns that were becoming economically unviable starting in the late 1960s. However, the space of Seoul rarely lived up to their dreams of reinvigorating their lives.

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While many comedy films in the early 1960s like Romance Papa pictured the familial space as a harmonious and comfortable space where everyday difficulties were easily vanquished, gender comedies rarely depicted these happy moments of domesticity, even though the main narratives still revolved around the stories of the family members. In the early 1960s, films were usually responsibly for creating images of ideal individuals, families, and national subjects to disseminate through various institutional channels. As I have examined in chapter four, the plots of the numerous comedy films in the early 1960s usually centered around a family, especially the father. Although these films cannot be described as propaganda films per se, they still played a crucial role in disseminating models of wholesome subjects, at least on the superficial level.

Most significantly, these films that were produced as a series were responsible for codifying images of proper familial and national subjects. Most of the comedy films in the 1960s thus shared similar film narratives, styles, and techniques. Set mostly in the city or suburbs, they take up middle-class family life in Seoul as their main theme, focusing, for instance, on class and generational conflicts. Also popular was depicting the precarious position of the father in terms of joblessness, sexual misconduct related to extramarital affairs, or new modes of marriage and living. Although much time and energy are devoted within these films to dramatize masculine hardships and ethical dilemmas, at the end, the family is always depicted as surviving, no worse for the wear, through the spontaneous expression of love and respect for the parents.

and the family by each family member. In order to shore up the position of the father, previously depicted as weak, the films often finish on an optimistic and peaceful note. I call this a “romanticizing strategy” and suggest that it worked as a cinematic continuation of the government’s ideological project.

A good example of this “romanticizing strategy” would be the comedy, Romance ppappa, produced by Sin Film in 1960. Based on Kim Hŭi-ch’ang’s popular radio drama, Romance ppappa was a commercial and critical success. The film starts off by narrating the father’s feelings of frustration in being recently laid off from his job in a health insurance company. Ashamed of his joblessness, the father pretends to go to work everyday but hangs out among crowds of elderly people in local parks and bars. To make money, he even sells his watch, a precious heirloom from his father symbolizing the patriarchal lineage of modernity. Despite this beginning, the film ends abruptly with the family members throwing him a surprise birthday party. While the father, wearing a formal western suit, is sitting at the center of the dinner table with other family members surrounding him, the daughter presents him with the watch that he had sold to the pawnshop. Realizing that the family already knew about his joblessness, the father starts to cry. As the son starts to sing happy birthday and other family members join him, the moment of crisis for the family is turned into its happiest moment. Through this contrived family union, the psychological damage inflicted upon the family due to the father’s joblessness is abruptly healed.

The ending of Romance ppappa thus dramatizes—albeit in a very Westernized version—

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370 According to Sin Sang-ok’s biography and the scenarios of the radio drama, this scene was added when he made a film. In this sense, its scene could be a pure cinematic projection which effectuates the cinematic presentation of the narrative crisis. Interesting thing would be that the crisis became a conclusion in this short moment. Sin, Sang-ok, Nan yŏngwa yŏtta, Raendŏm Hausū, 2007, P.67.
the belief in a healthy and harmonious family as the shield against all socio-economic difficulties that might befall the petit-bourgeoisie in Seoul in the early 1960s.  

Although Romance ppappa was made before the April Revolution and Park Chung-hee’s military coup in 1961, the images of the happy family became the most widely disseminated images in family dramas and comedies in the early period. In Park Chung Hee’s developmental regime, the state could provide only supply minimal social support; the family had to be almost entirely responsible for its living expenses.

To maintain his patriarchal authority and leadership, the father had to engage in unceasing effort to win the moral and spiritual support of his family. Within this context, the father’s joblessness could not but be, practically and symbolically, the tragedy of both the family and the nation. The ideological tint of this film and others like it were revealed at its ending. The dramatic suturing of a crisis of patriarchal authority through the motif of the happy home was a distinctive characteristic of the comedy films in the early 1960s, which pursued modes of political conservatism and ideological closure within the film text. Nonetheless, by the Yushin era, such coded images of family and gender started to be radically transformed, indicating different socio-political circumstances and stage of film production.

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371 To see the westernized aspects of these films and the intertextual relationship with Hollywood film, see my chapter four.
372 Some might argue that since such image was not first produced during the Park’s regime, I would see more linkage between those images as well as the policies. Although the April Revolution raised somewhat democratic atmosphere in society, the government policies on the national economies and society was not a liberal. Instead, Chang Myön’s second republic had a more state-centered development economic policy, which was succeeded in Park Chung Hee regime.
374 In contrast to the ideal image of a father holding the sacred familial responsibility with strength, the father in Romance ppappa is an emasculated and incompetent man representing an older generation no longer able to provide for the family’s economic needs. In fact, such images of incompetent and emasculated men had previously and frequently emerged in South Korean popular narratives. For example, film titles such as A Way of Body (1959) and House Maid (1960) portrays the process of middle class family’s breakdown. However, those films were exceptions rather than a rule.
Symbolizing a family on the verge of collapse is the iconic figure of the father who conceives a totally new vision of family. In *Romance* ppappa, like in other home dramas, the actor, Kim Sŭng-ho, played a benevolent father figure, reminiscent of many other lower middle-class or middle-class father figures wearing traditional Korean clothes or Western suits, depicted in other films. For instance, the actor, Hŏ Chang-kang, also played a father figure in *Male Hostess*. In other film genres such as action films, Hŏ, who was famous for his versatility, often played a villain. However, in *Male Hostess*, he takes on the role of a wily father, rather thin and weak, who eagerly seeks a mistress. The image of the mother depicted in *Male Hostess* could not be more different as well. In *Romance* Papa, Chu Chŏng-nyŏ always wore traditional Korean clothing and played a warm and understanding mother who diligently took care of her household. In *Male Hostess*, To Kŭm-pong, an actress known for her wild and sexy image, always wears Western suits, watches over her husband’s every action, and even physically assaults him. Ideal images of the family are also few and far between within gender comedies. In *Male Hairdresser*, there is no family to be seen and the hairdresser’s clients are all married women who satisfy their vanity with Western hair styles and their sexual desires with massages from the male hairdressers. In short, images of wholesome families and proper gender roles are almost completely absent in both *Male Hostess* and *Male Hairdresser*. With the “Seoul Dream” becoming a “Seoul Disaster,” the fantasy of belonging to a normative middle-class family and becoming a middle-class citizen completely breaks down. Compared to earlier comedy films that manage to suture patriarchal and familial crises through the romanticizing strategy, the gender

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376 Hŏ Chang-kang, Yŏngsang Munhwa Yŏn’gu, Korean Film Archive.
377 To Kŭm-bong, Yŏngsang Munhwa Yŏn’gu, Korean film Archive.
comedies have totally absurd endings full of disjunctures and pathos. In the next section, we will examine how gender comedy films suture the class troubles in their narratives.

The Strong Shield: Didactism and Nation in Gender Comedy

Although many gender comedy films focus on the dark underside of Seoul and Korea’s modernization project, both Male Hostess and Male Hairdresser manage, in subtle and ironic ways to reproduce the happy ending of many 1960s comedy films. Compared to the inscription of conventional images of the happy family in the earlier comedy films, however, the gender comedy films attempt to rehabilitate the damaged family and inverted gender roles in fragmented and nonlinear ways. For instance, a character might disrupt the film diegesis or the “fourth wall” of cinema to preach the glories of the nation to the audience or demand fathers and mothers to mend their ways, also in the name of nation. The awkward moment when a comedy turns into a didactic national epic is the typical ending of gender comedies.

One can easily suspect the government for inserting such encomium of the national epic into comedies. Indeed, the government’s new attitude towards films based on their political contents rather than their aesthetic value greatly influenced the insertion of such propaganda into the texts of the comedy films. As stated above, by the end of the 1960s, the concept of “good” cinema rested on whether it was supportive of the nation. During the 1960s, the Park government used propaganda, including films, to mobilize the people for national development.

379 Since the film law revision in 1966, a good quality film was often called as “literature film (Munye yónghwa).” Since it was hard to make a certain aesthetical criteria on the good film, literature film was often regarded as an art film: that is the reason why many film company produced a film based on a story of a famous literature.
On the surface, it appears as if he had succeeded. By all indicators, the South Korean economy had grown and the nation had undergone successful development. In this historical period, the number of so-called “culture films (munhwa yǒnghwa)” or “advertisement films (kwanggo yǒnghwa)” also increased dramatically. For example, while only four culture films were made in 1962, over one hundred of culture films were made between from 1967 to 1973. Nine hundred and forty-two so-called advertisement films were also made in 1967, thus showing the nation’s development. Somewhat different from propaganda films, the advertisement films such as documentaries (Munhwa kirok yǒnghwa) produced by the National Cinema Production and Korea News (Taehan nyusũ) visualized the national development with panoramic views. Frequent themes of these films designed to visualize national development were highway construction sites and irrigation systems, land and mountain reclamation sites, as well as industrialization of farms and national scenery. Theaters had to screen these films every time before the actual screening of the feature film. Although originally published in 1975 to propagate the success of the New Village Construction Movement (Saemaǔl undong, 1973-) among a foreign audience, the book, New Village, exemplifies the spirit of these films, visualizing through numerous photographs the backward past with the modern present. Such films and books helped to depict the progress and development of the modernizing nation; however, they also helped to cover up the numerous social problems ravaging the nation in the late 1960s.

Government control over South Korean society was revealed not only in these

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381 Various films and media records are found at [http://film.ktv.go.kr/](http://film.ktv.go.kr/)
382 Saemaǔl, Republic of Korea, 1975.
advertisement films but also in commercial films, where the voice of the government made itself heard in the film narratives. Examples include so-called “co-production” or “semi-commercial” films such as The Land of Korea Series (P’aldogangsan, 1967), about a father’s tour of his six daughters’ houses located in six different provinces. Using the father’s tour of his daughters’ houses as the pretext, the films introduce the development of each province.\textsuperscript{383} The main purpose of these films was to promote the recognition of diverse regions and Park Chung Hee regime’s development project. However, by inserting the music of famous singers and dramatizing the development of the nation, these films managed to be also commercially successful.\textsuperscript{384} It is uncertain which aspects of these semi-governmental films appealed to the people. Still, it seems reasonable to accept Kim Han-sang’s point that the use of popular singers helped to attract the people.\textsuperscript{385} At any rate, with the increase in social unrest, the government also increasingly relied on the mass media as part of its state apparatus.

Interestingly, Sim U-sŏp, the director of the Male series, also made a comedy parodying The Land of Korea. With no state intervention, he directed The Land of Korea: Son-in-law (P’altto sawui, 1969), The Land of Korea: Miser (P’altto norae’I, 1970), and The Land of Korea: Maid (P’altto singmo, 1970). As revealed by their titles, these films relied on the success of the The Land of Korea series to claim their own fame.\textsuperscript{386} By juxtaposing these commercial films with the advertisement ones, the former managed to create and exploit many comical disjunctures. According to an article by Kim Tong-ri, the nation-supporting films, from originally

\textsuperscript{383} Eight films were made as a series from 1967 to 1975.
\textsuperscript{384} Kim Han Sang, Choguk kŭndaehwa rŭl yuramhagi, Korean Film Archive, 2007.
\textsuperscript{385} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{386} It was not only the comedy genre that used the big hits of The Land of Korea. Another low-brow genre of South Korean film, action film, also adopted the storyline of The Land of Korea and made moderate hits. Examples are The Land of Korea: A Guy.
being very abstract, became very practical in the late 1960s. In 1970, pointing out the problems of the South Korean filmmaking system in the 1960s, Kim wrote:

In the past, the government rewarded companies that produced a “good” film. However, since the late 1960s, the concept of good film has changed as to support national policies. The concept of “supporting national policies” is more than just making anti-communist films. It can also be interwoven with the concept of good film. But “supporting national policy” is a goal that is very difficult to implement in the production of a feature film.\(^387\)

Kim Tong-ri’s concerns are understandable since government policies are too specific to squeeze those into the linear plot structure of a film. But behind such worries lay another concern that some genre films might be more conducive to such government interventions. For instance, it was easier to insert government policies into action films\(^388\) or comedies than melodramas, historical dramas or thrillers, which tend to have more structured narratives.

In the gender comedy film, *Male Hostess*, for instance, there is a scene in which Sanwŏl—Ku Pong-sŏ’s female counterpart—is asked to sing and dance. He/she mounts the stage of the bar and begins to sing a song with lyrics that read, “How foolish you husbands are! Do you really have that much money? If so, go home and take care of your families, you foolish people! Drink a glass of ice water and cleanse your stomachs. Then think about what you can do for your nation!” When Sanwŏl performs this song, there are audiences—the bar regulars in this film text and the real audience watching the film. Watching the incomprehending faces of the bar customers, who cannot understand what Sanwŏl is singing, the members of the real audience also crack up with laughter. While this phony performance is absurd and completely unrelated to the


\(^388\) From this kind of standard, main theme of the action films were catching up the North Korean Spies and became a millionaire over the night. Many comedy films in the late 1960s also had similar kinds of narratives in many cases.
narrative, it still functions as a great joke. In another scene of *Male Hostess*, Sanwŏl takes out a card that reads, “family month,” and show it to the audience. She then starts to preach about the importance of family. Delivered without much dignity or seriousness, Sanwŏl’s speech still manages to be funny despite its awkward insertion into the film narrative.

Also interesting is the ending of the *Male Hairdresser*, which refers to the Saemaŭl Undong’s spirit of developing the countryside. At the end of the film, the protagonist gives up his “improper” job in the city and returns to his hometown to construct a new irrigation system. This moment of supporting the national development policies of the government recalls other similar moments in the *Male Hairdresser*, for example, when Andrea preaches to women crazy about foreign cosmetic products that “Our national products are also very good. We should use our national products!” Of course, these are all very awkward moments in the film narrative. Nonetheless, treated as comic moments, their insertions work more smoothly in comedies than in other genres.

Intriguingly, many people seemed to have been in actual agreement with many of these pro-development messages. When I asked director Sim U-sŏp about the rationale for these messages in the films, he replied that such didactic moments were a natural culmination of the films. His answer seemed to contradict Yu Chi-na’s argument that these messages were merely a reflection of the government’s control over the filmmaking process. Interviewing Sim, however, I realized that such messages were not a mere interjection of propaganda into comedy films. According to Sim, Sanwol’s musical performance was deliberately used to critique people who did not think about the family or nation at all. His comment is very interesting in showing

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389 Yu China, *opt. cit.*
the aims of his film: to contribute to national development and instill a nationalistic ideology among the people. The strong government control over people’s everyday lives through such propaganda was not an issue for him. In this sense, the family-centered nation-building ideology seemed to have functioned successfully to discipline people like Sim. In a similar vein, the director, Sin Sang-ok, also stated that it was his own desire to support the Park Chung Hee government that motivated him to make The Rice, widely regarded as the most pro-Park film.\textsuperscript{390}

Such opinions mean that some people were actually active collaborators in the nation-building processes, although it is hard to know whether their support of the Park regime was consistent throughout. All in all, the jarring insertions of national messages into the films seem to have succeeded in reinforcing the government’s ideological project to mobilize the nation for its national development projects in the midst of socio-political turmoil. The national ideals of healthy family and nation, although on the verge of collapse in reality, were not only internalized but still function in contemporary era as an unchanging ethos in film as well as in real life.

The representation of family and the performance of gender was a major subject in the world of South Korean cinema in the 1960s. Along with the government’s efforts to disseminate a new national ethos based on the family-nation system, the early 1960s’ films consistently presented idealized models of the father and family as the constituents of the national workforce; yet such themes were transmitted only through a “romanticizing strategy,” since the films’ overall storylines rest upon male subjectivity and men’s considerable status anxiety. However, in

\textsuperscript{390} After watching some of the films, such as The Rice (Ssal, 1963) produced by Sin Film, one Japanese film director commented that “I never watched a film which displays such an ‘intension,’ before.” Such comments show obvious interventions of the government on the “spiritual mobilization” of the national subjects. Sin, Sang-ok, Nan yŏnghwŏ yŏta, Raendŏm Hausu, 2007. Also see an analysis of Sin’s film The Rice, see Steve Chung’s PhD diss., “The Scene of Development,” University of California, Irvine, 2007.
the late 1960s, seemingly deviant themes such as cross-dressing and reversal of gender roles became the most popular narratives. Based on this cultural trend, gender comedy shows the topology of the complex and paradoxical South Korean society.

On one level, the seemingly deviant gender expression in the late 1960s’ gender comedies incorporated the government’s efforts to distract people’s minds into other sectors of culture in the midst of the nation’s most unstable socio-political situation. In fairness, it should be pointed out that the films also present ambivalent voices within their narratives, insofar as they depict the already destructive family situation and the prosperity of dark industry in the Seoul landscape. It actually functions to invite the moral condemnation of the users and the workers in an undesirable industry. In particular, while they ask both fathers and mothers to return home and contribute to national development and progress, they also express the patriarchal or male-centered fantasy that mothers are more problematic, in that they do not provide proper service to fathers. On another level, while family dramas initially picture the significance of the family in a very romantic form in the early 1960s, the gender comedies transform this ideological frame by adopting an evangelical, didactic style. Although fragmented and isolated from the whole film structure, the gender comedies’ conclusions directly state support for the government’s project to improve national reconstruction and spirit. Despite the fact that these disjunctive moments invite various assumptions and judgments of the films’ ostensibly subversive implications, the performance of gender in gender comedy becomes the clear site of both the violation and cooperation in support of the national ideology.
CONCLUSION

Why Do We Still Watch Comedy Films?

“I love comedy. What do I like about comedy? That it is the fulfillment of your wish. Comedy is a wish-fulfillment. In comedy, things happen that never can happen in reality.”391

When I first interviewed director Yi Hyŏng-p’yo, who directed over 100 films including many comedy films during the Golden-Age, I asked him why he made so many comedy films. His answer was precise, as the above quote reflects. Comedy film fulfills his wishes. Although he did not say what he actually wished for, in another moment, he said comedy contradicts reality. Reality, he later said, was Park Chung Hee’s dictatorship, and comedy film contradicts the reality of a heavily controlled society and fulfills people’s wishes. Yi continued to say that every comedy film is a form of resistance, though it is not an active form of political resistance. He said that he made comedy films with such an intention, creating a form of resistance. After rereading the interview I did in the summer of 2006 with him, I was reminded of my initial question: what made comedy film so popular even while existing under the government’s severe military dictatorship?

It is quite clear that this old, honorable, decent and intelligent director who once was the best director throughout the Golden-Age period wanted to find critical approval for his films, since other film directors of the 1960s such as Sin Sang-ok, Kim Ki-yŏng and Im Kwon-t’aek are now regarded as great art directors, while he remains quite unknown to today’s film critics and film viewers. It might be possible that he justified his films during the Golden-Age because he told me this immediately after I asked the question without even taking a moment to reflect.

391 Interview from director, Yi Hyŏng-p’yo.
In another moment, however, he also said that he made films that people like. Then, how do we reconcile directors’ intentions of resistance and people’s tastes? Do people like resistance? Maybe. Or maybe not. Although he only mentioned that comedy film is a way of resistance, what comedy film actually fulfilled during the Golden-Age as a popular form of mass culture was not only subtle political action. Perhaps the audience of comedy films felt liberated when they watched comedy which let them escape from their hard lives. We might also imagine that watching comedy was a rather trivial activity, nothing more than a way to kill time. Or perhaps, quite at odds director Yi Hyόng-p’yo’s intentions, in the face of comedy film’s always recuperative endings, the audience registered lessons on how to act as a model citizen.

As I explored comedy films of the South Korean Golden-Age of cinema, primarily due to their surprising popularity and their vast quantity, interestingly enough, although I have tried very hard, it has been difficult to meet people who admit to having watched these films at the theater, except my mother. Lucky enough to have lived at the center of Seoul, Myόngdong, and as young teenage girl who was accompanied by her shy uncle who wanted to bring his new girlfriend to the theater in the late 1950s, my mother watched many comedy films in the theater. As a teenage girl, she loved comedy films and still remembers some of their songs. Like her, even though people do not remember what specific comedy films they watched, they do remember comedians’ names, their unique comic style, and their funny performances in the 1950s.392 However, except through those indirect routes, it was difficult to find people who actually remembered watching these films in the theater as an adult audience member. When I tried to find someone who watched the late 1960s’ gender comedy films, it was even harder. One of my

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392 EBS (Education Broadcasting Station) has a program, Old Korean Cinema. In their program website, there is a board of “request.” Many people requests to watch old comedy films saying some things about the comedian’s style.
colleagues said that she watched gender comedy films from television programs that were particularly made as Holiday special series during the 1970s when she was young, which really surprised me since many gender comedy films dealt with sexual content.\footnote{I guess the sensual part of the film content might have been erased before broadcasting, which is usual process when TV shows feature films.}

At any rate, the most important task to read comedy films was to answer the question “who were the audience of these films?” which turned out to be the most difficult task. Since comedy film production was a definite cultural phenomenon that signaled the beginning and the end of the Golden-Age with great popularity, it needs scrutiny, though explaining the popularity of comedy has been burdensome to many South Korean film historians. In the history of South Korean cinema, comedy films were never regarded as a part of national cinema. It might be safe and satisfactory for film historians to say that comedy films were forms of subtle political resistance, accepting them as parts of national culture with pride, as director Yi Hyŏng-p’yo said. That could be the truth in some cases but not for all popular comedy films as I have indicated in previous chapters. Since I could not meet any real viewers to ask why they chose to watch comedy films, my analysis on spectatorship could not but be limited to film text reading, statistical evidence, and magazine or newspaper reviews. It does occur to me, however, that even if I had been able to get definite answers from a person about why he or she watched those films, it would only be that person’s filtered answers – filtered thorough memory and the contemporary moment. The methodology of the direct interview also has limitations in explaining comedy film spectatorship, and such methodology on films of the past is impossible if too much time passes by. I have thus settled in this dissertation on indirect endeavors to obtain the possible meaning of film texts by extracting meaning from books, remaining records, and other references.
This dissertation is an attempt to analyze the complex nature of popular filmmaking, comedy film in particular, while paying constant attention to its unique historical, political, cultural, and industrial backgrounds. As we all acknowledge, the meanings of popular films cannot be determined based on one director or production company’s intention alone, since making film entails mass-collaboration and the fulfillment of the audience’s preference. As I discussed in previous chapters, many factors such as the heavy intervention of the state in the film industry, filmmakers’ arduous efforts to make national film, the active cross-cultural engagement of filmmaking, the specific demographic changes of the film audience and the changing socio-political situation all functioned differently to create different types of comedy films. Through such various types, comedy films sometimes fascinated people who were not familiar with new film modernity, such as my mother, giving some catharsis through social satire and trying to discipline people’s brains in support of the state apparatus.

Looking back on the popular films of the past and observing contemporary viewing practices, I also found that popular film watching registers similar codes of spectatorship. The demise of the South Korean Golden-Age of cinema in the late 1960s resulted in a different cinescape in the 1970s and 1980s, often referred to as the “hostess films era”—with some exceptions from a group of new directors’ films, referred to as the Korean New Wave. People stopped watching national films. In the late 1980s, after the liberation of the film market in 1985 and the end of the film-quota system, which was the stubborn protector of the South Korean filmmaking industry, the situation grew worse. Considering the fact that South Korea had experienced film-industry-wise a long depressed period from the 1970s to the late 1990s, the rise of the South Korean film industry in the 21st century seems almost a miracle. Recent statistics
show that 50% of people watch national films over foreign—mostly Hollywood—a situation not found in any other nation.\textsuperscript{394} In this recent rise, although many South Korean film directors, known as art directors, such as Im Kwon-t’aek, Park Ch’an-uk, or Kim Ki-dŏk contributed to the spread South Korean fame in the world with much success in international film festivals, the national film consumption is still focused on melodramas, comedy films or action films, as was the case in the 1960s’ Golden-Age period. Also, the standards for low-and-high culture still function as powerful discourses, regardless of people’s actual film viewing practices. While people say that they do not like B-genres, such as gangster comedies (chop’ok yŏnghwa), they keep watching them, especially after the IMF crisis in 1997. Then, it might be questionable what really constitutes national cinema or what Korean cinema is. Are Pak Ch’an-uk’s high-comedy thrillers representative of Korean cinema whereas gangster comedies are not?

I am not arguing that art film does not reflect South Korean national culture nor that all art films should be strictly separated from popular film. Instead, I want to emphasize that popular films open up various explanations of the life of people, what they desire, follow, and love through interaction with other people. Although this conclusion does not suggest one definite answer to the question of the audience of comedy film, I have tried to consider the meaning of mass-culture during South Korea’s authoritarian regime in a broader terms, seeking to explain the socio-cultural and political meaning of comedy films focusing on its particular mass consumption. With the discourse of national construction or national crisis, the government and the filmmakers once dreamed of making the South Korean film industry modern, just like Hollywood cinema. Comedy films that were not regarded as a part of national cinema, however,

\textsuperscript{394} Korean Film Archive.
contributed significantly to bring the audience into the theater and practically worked as the lifeline of the key companies. Reflecting or deviating from social realities with its own genre characters, the comedy film genre of the South Korean Golden-Age of cinema, though forgotten and remaining as only a fading memory, was the genre that people loved, and spoke to the dreams and reality of the post-war authoritarian South Korean society. As such, although the comedy films of our time also do not enjoy serious recognition as significant national culture—while art directors’ fame became the emblem of “Korean cinema”—we also need to think about why many people continue to choose comedy films at the theatre.
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