

## Conclusion

The 1950s came to an abrupt end in South Korea. Outraged by political corruption and authoritarian abuses, the student-led April Revolution of 1960 ousted Syngman Rhee from the presidency and introduced a thirteen-month period of democratic openness under Prime Minister Chang Myon. That interlude came to end, in turn, with a military coup on May 16, 1961, led by Park Chung-hee (1917–79), which ushered in three decades of rule by military generals. The Cold War cosmopolitan sensibility that Han Hyung-mo had captured on film came under immediate attack and quickly faded from public life. The postwar period was over.

“Austerity” became the new byword after 1960. Student activists campaigned for a “lifestyle reform” that targeted foreign goods and encouraged the consumption of domestic products in their place.<sup>1</sup> The military men who came in their wake took austerity to new levels and infused it with an aura of moral purity. “A week after their military revolt,” *Time* magazine reported, “South Korea’s generals were full of puritanical zeal. Khaki-clad troops with rifles patrolled the streets of Seoul, arresting jaywalkers and hauling prostitutes off to the cells. Caught dancing in a nightclub, 45 hapless young men and women were herded before stern military judges and sentenced to terms of up to a year in jail; when the police ran out of handcuffs, they lashed the prisoners together with ropes. To keep people at home nights, the authorities arrested 10,000 for violating the nightly curfew.”<sup>2</sup> A. M. Rosenthal characterized the ruling junta as unified by the “conviction that everything that went before in South Korea’s official life was slothful and decadent and the new way is the way of righteousness.” The campaign against decadence—led by “men who prided themselves on leanness, hard muscles, fatigue uniforms”—was wide-ranging.<sup>3</sup> A new law banned the import of two hundred “extravagant” foreign

consumer goods.<sup>4</sup> Smuggling and the black market were severely (if only temporarily) repressed and foreign goods were set ablaze in public spectacles that, like inversions of Han's films, attracted thousands of viewers. Condemned to the bonfires was the rich material culture of Han's *mise-en-scène*: "cosmetics, ornaments, Hong Kong brocade, alligator-skin handbags, Swiss watches, radios, phonographs and records, foreign-made suitings, American shirts and neckties, Japanese toys, imported liquor, American cigarettes and tobacco, imported cooking oils and seasonings."<sup>5</sup> Goods that couldn't be burned, such as machinery parts, were dumped into the sea. "American coffee vanished from Seoul tea rooms," noted *Stars and Stripes*, and "American whiskey, beer, and soft drinks also disappeared from bars and dance halls."<sup>6</sup> The generals targeted fashion as well, requiring civil servants to wear "austerity suits" and staging a public display of simple, functional dresses for women; *Yŏwŏn* dutifully covered the event with a photo spread.<sup>7</sup> A month after the coup, *Stars and Stripes* reported, "housewives are afraid to wear Western dresses or carry parasols no matter how hot the sun. Many have put away the high heel shoes which they had scrimped and saved so long to buy."<sup>8</sup> Park's rule was a reaction against the society and culture of the 1950s, and he set out to cleanse South Korea from what he regarded an excessive Western influence that had weakened the country.

Park launched a program of rapid industrial modernization and economic development that channeled the country's resources towards production for export, rather than for domestic consumption. For two decades the regime kept wages low, restricted imports, and maintained high consumer prices in an effort to ensure profits, and thus economic viability, for the emerging industrial conglomerates, or *chaebols*—which meant that few consumer goods were available. Park bolstered these economic policies with speeches extolling the spiritual and national rewards of frugality. According to Kyung-Koo Han, "government campaigns denounced extravagance and needless consumption as the enemy of the developing nation; production and thrift were praised as a source of national salvation." Under Park, writes Laura Nelson, "quotidian frugality was ideologically transformed into an act of popular patriotism."<sup>9</sup> Consumer culture in the 1960s and 1970s barely existed. Like labor rights and political opposition, it was repressed in Park's drive towards a fully industrialized modernity. Park's economic agenda was aided by increased regional integration. Having been educated in the colonial military system, Park lacked Rhee's visceral anti-Japanese sentiment and in 1965 he normalized relations with Japan, bringing South Korea's foreign policy into closer alignment with Washington's and opening up a stream of investment and aid that helped finance industrialization.<sup>10</sup>

The cultural nationalism and postcolonial traditionalism that had been one strain of 1950s intellectual life now became dominant, as Park deployed them to salve the social tensions that his policies generated.<sup>11</sup> Against the previous decade's

feminized cosmopolitanism, Park promoted what Seungsook Moon has called an “androcentric” nationalism that rooted itself in Confucian gender ideology and elevated patriarchal “tradition” as the essence of Korean national identity.<sup>12</sup> Critical of Western liberalism—including individualism and democracy—and eager to legitimize both his presidency and his political repression, Park promoted traditional values of hard work, loyalty to the state, and self-sacrifice. He also sought to transform public culture. As Michael Robinson has noted, Park “mobilized the power of the state in the service of nationalist cultural construction.”<sup>13</sup> Seeking to restore an “original, primordial” Korea untainted by foreignness, he created an Office of Cultural Properties and instituted the Cultural Asset Protection Law, which preserved heritage sites such as warrior tombs and shrines that gave form to militarist values and connected the nation to its mythological, male founders.<sup>14</sup> In his official cultural politics, Park was an antic cosmopolitan: as Youngna Kim has written, Park’s brand of nationalism advocated “a return to the past and an assertion of cultural identity uncontaminated by Euro-American culture.”<sup>15</sup> This revived patriarchal gender ideology affirmed women’s essential identity as wives and mothers, even as young, mostly poor and rural women poured into the industrial workforce. The cosmopolitan woman-in-public lost her prominence as an icon of modernity within public culture, as she did in the pages of *Yŏwŏn*, which dramatically reduced its visual content and increased both the number of articles espousing traditional values and the number of photographs of men.

Cinema was not exempt from the changes sweeping through South Korean political, economic, and social life. The glamorous cosmopolitanism and women-centered narratives of Han Hyung-mo’s films soon disappeared from theater screens. Women’s pictures gave way to films centered on the experiences of men, including male melodramas that cast modernization as an experience of emasculation and status loss (*The Housemaid* [1960], *Aimless Bullet* [1961]); modernization comedies that narrated the displacement of old-style Confucian fathers by their younger, more modernized sons (*The Coachman* [1961], *A Petty Middle Manager* [1961], *Under the Sky of Seoul* [1961]); and more robustly “masculine” genres such as war pictures (*The Marines Who Never Returned* [1963] and Manchurian Westerns (*The Man with No Home* [1968]) that reduced women to secondary roles, often as victims. The affluent families of Han’s films were superseded by working-class heroes and heroines (*Tosuni: The Birth of Happiness* [1963]). Even Han, in a major departure from his earlier work, made a film about a struggling lower-middle-class couple duped out of their savings by a Korean American who entices them with tales of easy money made via black marketing (*A Dream of Fortune*, [1961]). Given the suppression of foreign goods, it is no surprise that the visually dense mise-en-scène of 1950s films gave way to a cinematic version of Park’s politically inspired austerity. Gone were the European-style party dresses, the electric irons, the fresh bananas, the elaborate dance halls, and the miniature golf, replaced by a distinctly spartan mise-en-scène. Story lines often reinforced what Charles Kim

has called the “optimistic developmentalism” of the Park regime, and more than one reached its happy ending by sending its female character to work in a factory (*Bloodline* [1963], *Tosuni, Coachman*).<sup>16</sup>

Lee Man-hee's *Black Hair* (1964) stands as an exemplary instance of 1960s filmmaking and a sharp contrast to Han Hyung-mo's aesthetic. Like Han, Lee was a commercially and critically successful director known for having a distinctive artistic vision, which he expressed primarily in war films and tragic male melodramas.<sup>17</sup> *Black Hair* is a gangster film that combines a highly stylized cinematography built around high- and low-angle shots with an “austerity style” mise-en-scène centered on shabby rooms and harsh, high-contrast lighting. While the male characters' actions drive the narrative, the female protagonist (Moon Jung-suk) suffers ceaseless degradation. A gangster's wife, she is raped, has her face slashed with a broken liquor bottle, becomes a prostitute, supports a heroin addict, is slapped by a customer disgusted by her looks, and nearly murdered by being pushed in front of a train. Once disfigured, her value is so diminished that she can be abused by men without compunction: “Since you can't fix your face,” one man tells her, “you're better off dead.” While the film could be interpreted as a critique of patriarchal ideology, it wallows in its depiction of a woman's entrapment within that ideology rather than imagining her escape from it. Moon's character is a far cry from the strong-willed and independent women she portrayed in Han's *A Jealousy* (1960) and *My Sister is a Hussy* (1961), who actively sought alternatives to what Helen Kim called “the typical unhappiness of Korean women.” The film does have a transnationally inflected style, most notable in its rock-inflected soundtrack, visual nods towards expressionism and film noir, and bits of narrative business derived from Japanese *yakuza* films, including a finger-severing. But the optimism that characterized Han's films has been replaced with an air misery and violence, and the numerous acts of casual misogyny make clear that this is a man's world. It is a claustrophobic film, inward turning and dark, whose narrative unravels in a cramped basement gangster hangout, a warren of brothel rooms, narrow alleys, and cluttered hallways. One of the film's few open spaces is located beneath a hulking concrete structure—perhaps a highway overpass or a partially completed infrastructure project—that suggests the sacrifice of human needs to a brutal and barely understood project of modernization. Far from opening out to the larger world, the film offers a vision of contemporary South Korea as a dark, dangerous, and small place.

In his drive towards modernization, Park turned his attention to the film industry, and in 1962 the first Motion Picture Law was enacted, with subsequent revisions to follow. Park sought to stabilize, rationalize, and industrialize the work of filmmaking, while also protecting it from foreign competition and policing it ideologically. In addition to establishing and enforcing an import quota on foreign films, the law called for the centralization of filmmaking into large, highly capitalized companies and pushed out smaller production companies and independent

producers. Han Hyung-mo was unable to make the transition to the new system, and his career declined in the early 1960s; he released his last film, *The Queen of Elegy*, a bio-pic of female singer Lee Mi-ja, in 1967. Shin Sang-ok's Shin Films was the only company able to satisfy the new criteria and register as a production company, and as a result it dominated filmmaking throughout the 1960s, a decade in which the quantity and overall quality of films increased substantially. By the early 1970s, however, the industry entered a sustained period of decline, strangled by regulation and losing market share to the imported pictures that dominated the box office despite their reduced numbers. After running into financial problem, Shin Productions was deregistered in 1975, and in 1978 Shin was "abducted" by North Korea and relaunched his career in Pyongyang.<sup>18</sup> The Golden Age of South Korean cinema, which began with *Chunhyang Story* in 1955 and *Madame Freedom* in 1956, was over by 1972.

After nearly three decades of stagnation, South Korea's commercial cinema began to rebound quite spectacularly in the late 1990s and has sustained its growth and quality for twenty years. This New Korean Cinema has significant similarities with Golden Age cinema, albeit ones not often recognized by South Korean filmmakers themselves.

Some of these similarities reside in the kinds of films being made. The most successful and respected directors working today—Bong Joon-ho, Park Chan-wook, Kim Ji-woon—are known as commercial auteurs: they make films with a coherent artistic vision that also manage to please audiences and succeed at the box office. Eschewing the rules of arthouse cinema, they make genre central to their creativity, playing with familiar conventions in unexpected ways and bringing new genres (science fiction films, monster movies) into the Korean industry. In this sense, they are heirs to Han Hyung-mo, who pioneered the well-made commercial film while introducing new genres and combining their conventions in fresh ways.

Other similarities can be found in the relationship to foreign cinemas, Hollywood in particular. Park Chan-wook, when asked recently about films that had influenced his creative vision, singled out works of classical Hollywood cinema such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), which he described as "decisively influential," and *Johnny Guitar* (1954), which he identified as a film that he had enjoyed as a youth. When asked if earlier Korean films had been important to him, he mentioned only one, Kim Ki-young's *Woman of Fire* 82 (1982). Bong Joon-ho, when asked the same question, responded in a similar fashion, waxing enthusiastic about postclassical Hollywood films such as *The French Connection* (1971) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974). He, too, singled out Kim Ki-young as the only post-war Korean director whose work he was familiar with, praising *The Housemaid* in particular.<sup>19</sup> Their responses make clear that Korean cinema has not experienced a linear form of development in which each generation of filmmakers absorbs the lessons of the previous one. Instead, that development has been marked by historical ruptures that cause filmmakers to look outside South Korea for inspiration.

The result, during the Golden Age and today, is a body of films marked by cultural and stylistic hybridity. As with their predecessors, the relationship of today's auteurs to foreign cinemas is both admiring and ambivalent, and in both periods directors have used what they learned from Hollywood to nudge American films out of their dominant position in South Korea's domestic film market.

Finally, the commercial auteurs of today have also sometimes drawn on the resources of the US military. Bong Joon-ho in particular has spoken of the importance of the US military's TV network to his film education. As a child he spent many hours watching American movies, cartoons, and TV shows on AFKN (Armed Forces Korea Network), which was aimed at American GIs but accessible to Korean viewers, who thus constituted an unintended "shadow audience" for its programming. Like many young people of his generation, Bong was enamored of American popular culture, and AFKN was his preferred means of accessing the mother lode of what he desired. AFKN was an American military institution that functioned, inadvertently, as a Korean educational institution, teaching young Koreans about film form and the world beyond their national borders. The network was an important part of Korea's film culture in the 1970s and 1980s, when this generation of filmmakers—routinely characterized as a cinephile generation with an omnivorous appetite for all kinds of films—was growing up. AFKN offered an escape from Korea's national media environment, which Bong saw as flooded with dreary propaganda and films of inferior quality and which was subject to strict censorship. AFKN thus provided its own kind of Cold War cosmopolitan culture, offering an education in genre via films from around the world.<sup>20</sup>

The hybridity of South Korean cinema in both the contemporary and the Golden Age periods has been well recognized by film scholars. This book has sought to deepen our understanding of that hybridity by revealing some of its historical and structural underpinnings. It has explored the connections between cinema and the Cold War, in part by showing how the project of incorporating South Korea into the transnational networks of Free Asia and the Free World had cultural consequences. The Cold War cosmopolitan aesthetic that loomed so large in 1950s film and public culture was one consequence—simultaneously intended and unintended—of that enmeshment.

