

In Search of Democracy

Cinema in the Postwar Classroom and Its Grassroots Network

“Democracy has to be dreamed up every day.” The elderly woman, whose name I had yet to learn, spoke slowly, as if in a new language. We were sitting next to each other at a café attached to the National Library in Seoul. A half hour before, she had been several feet away, occasionally eyeing me reading postwar newsletters published by the Korean Audiovisual Education Society. “Pardon me,” she finally said, approaching my table. “I couldn’t help but notice that you’re reading something I might have written.” Within minutes, our conversation about old papers had evolved into a meditation on how we make sense of democracy, or the lack thereof.

“Democracy has to be dreamed up every day,” she repeated, as she turned her eyes to the magnolia trees outside. The woman’s name is Yi Chŏnghŭi. Born in Incheon and a graduate of Teacher’s College at Ewha, she became one of a handful of female, college-graduate teachers in 1956, at a time when her country was still struggling with the scars of the Korean War (1950–53). The postwar years hit almost every Korean hard, leaving them to sink or swim with meager resources amid rampant poverty.¹ Even though Yi secured stable work as a teacher, she was not spared the harsh economic realities of the time. She had to count herself fortunate to work in a school building equipped at least with the very basic necessities, such as blackboards and desks. In her first year of teaching, the limited resources in the school turned out to be less bothersome than the remnants of Japanese imperial education, or what she calls “slave education.”² Having grown up in a classroom structured in a rigid hierarchy, where lecturing was the primary mode of teaching, she noticed that these remnants were continuing to prevent students from owning their learning. “The kind of education shut down the power of the voice in everyone,” she said. Yi was not the first vocal critic of this type of

education.³ Few aspiring teachers, however, sought to abolish it through their everyday work as she did.

Interestingly, Yi was one of the early practitioners of “sichönggakkyoyuk,” literally translated from the American term “audiovisual (AV) education.” Introduced by American educators during the US occupation (1945–48), AV education had been known only to a tiny circle of Korean elites who appreciated American progressive education as child-centered and innovative.⁴ The term was still novel to most Korean teachers and educational administrators. It was only in her last semester of college that Yi experienced audiovisual aids as a means to facilitate learning in the classroom. She wanted to explore more so that she could eventually apply these new methods to her own teaching. The lack of school supplies constrained her efforts, but she soon figured out what she could do: with a camera borrowed from a reporter friend, she started to create and use a set of images in her teaching. As a junior teacher working in a vertical school structure, this required courage: “The principal often scolded me that I spent more time taking pictures of birds and bugs in the field than sitting at a desk, but students loved seeing these detailed pictures rather than the poor illustrations in the textbook.”⁵

My conversation with Yi Chönghui evolved into a series of dialogues in 2017 and 2018 with other courageous postwar teachers. Yi introduced me to two alumnae of Ewha, Cho Ünsuk and Chöe Yunok, who began their teaching careers at Kyodong and Namsan Elementary Schools in Seoul, respectively. One of Cho’s church members put me in contact with Kim Yönggün, who first landed at Daegu Middle School. Kim introduced me to his old friend from high school, Yi Sanghyön, and to Yi Hyönggün, whom Kim befriended at a teachers’ conference. I became acquainted with Kim Chaehui through a family friend. Born between the mid- and late 1930s, these seven teachers survived through the end of colonial rule, the immediate national division, and the Korean War. They graduated from Teachers Colleges (or the equivalent two-year teacher’s training), where they first had a quick taste of AV education. Their interest in AV education significantly expanded through teacher-training workshops led by Americans from the George Peabody College for Teachers—a hub of progressive educationalists and AV education advocates—in the late 1950s. These events helped them use cutting-edge tools of AV education, but also led them to find themselves at odds with their teaching environments. During the formative years in their careers, from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, the Korean government implemented new curricula under an educational reform intended to render classrooms homogenous.⁶ Facing a restrictive and nationalistic curriculum, these teachers sought out any chances they could find to democratize their classroom and pedagogy.

These teachers worked as primary media distributors, exhibitors, and programmers who designed classrooms with new film-mediated discussion practices and built a grassroots network of AV educators. They were by no means professional film workers, yet their efforts with the cinematic medium present the

possibility of reconfiguring the industry-centered history of postwar cinema in a way that illuminates an important dimension of celluloid democracy. The dominant historical narrative has focused on the so-called golden age of Korean cinema that took off with the reconstruction of the film industry and a new generation of filmmakers in the mid-1950s; it has traced the decade-long dramatic growth of commercial cinema not only in aesthetic terms but also in relation to socioeconomic phenomena.⁷ It has nonetheless yielded a limited view of the “industry,” excluding a rapidly expanding network of cinema that encompassed film distributors, commissioners, and exhibitors, including those who combined film with education. The inclusion of these players is key; many of them worked on both the national and transnational levels to shape not simply postwar cinema but also South Korea as part of the US-led “free world.”⁸ Their work involved and authorized distinct kinds of institutions, audiences, and varied modes of viewing that arose alongside commercial cinema and its conventions during the era.⁹ Expanding the earlier information activities that I described in the previous chapter, Americans and pro-American Korean elites continued to work in the belief that AV media should be deployed to implant “democracy” in South Korea as an US ally. Portable projectors at schools, churches, and town halls operated under the celebratory premise that the motion picture was a vehicle of mass education.¹⁰ The teachers examined in this chapter critically evaluated this premise while reconfiguring cinema as a democratic medium for social empowerment and community building. Their work reveals the interplay of competing visions of postwar cinema, modernity, and the Cold War democracy.

The aspirations of these teachers are not documented in the state archives or in the historiography, and the silences in both sites are closely connected. The records of the Ministry of Education in the Korean national archive are filled with the voices of the powerful: lawmakers and policy makers. Their names and ideas are printed in letters, reports, and memos. Some of those higher up on the bureaucratic ladder are more present than others in that their existence is well-documented in signatures, pictures, and videos. Compared to the overwhelming presence of bureaucrats, the invisibility of teachers like Yi is striking. Because they were appointed by the central and local governments under the Civil Servant Law, teachers were, on paper, part of this bureaucracy. Their absence in the archive means something; to me, it reflects how the eyes of the state looked at the ordinary teachers as mere cogs in the system. Similarly, these Korean teachers are invisible in the records of American AV education specialists who collaborated with Koreans. Located at the US National Archives and Records Administration, the documents of these Americans are evidence of the time they devoted to their work in postwar Korea, time that they spent *with* Korean teachers.¹¹ The Korean teachers, who also existed in that time, remain absent or appear only briefly as targets of the US educational reconstruction program. “Because it [my story] isn’t important enough? I don’t know,” Yi Chônghŭi said when asked why her experience has never been

documented. What does it mean to be “important enough” to be heard and written? I am writing this chapter to share the stories of postwar teachers and their experiment with portable cinema in the classroom, but at the same time, I am compelled to recognize that the logics of national archives (and therefore historiography) have disqualified it as “not important enough” to be written.

In what follows, I present the stories of seven teachers with an emphasis on their relationships to democracy and cinema’s potential. Both US and Korean administrators highly valued AV media, particularly cinema, as a universal language that could contribute to the building of the anti-communist and democratic world. Korean teachers critically assessed this notion of cinema and the gospel of democracy through their participation in the Peabody workshop, in the ways they applied AV educational practices to Korean classrooms, and in their creation of a grassroots network of AV educators. In these works, teachers treated democracy not as a political institution but as a set of sensibilities that needed to be cultivated in themselves and in children through deliberate cinematic practices. In so doing, they enacted a relationship between cinema and democracy in which cinema was no longer weaponized to preach state ideology and depoliticize the population. Not bound to the simplified function of showing and viewing films, their work substantiated celluloid democracy. Through their engagement with cinema in ways that encouraged creative adaptation and community building in and beyond the classroom, the teachers ultimately reclaimed democracy as something to be felt and dreamed in their lives and in the lives of those they taught.

COLD WAR DEMOCRACY AND CINEMA

From the outset of the US occupation, the American construction of Cold War democracy mobilized cinema extensively in Korea, operating under the assumption that cinema could instruct Koreans in democracy in an efficient way. Still, South Korea was a low priority in America’s postwar foreign policy until the outbreak of the Korean War. As the peninsula became a testing ground for the competition between “democracy” and “communism,” a new urgency drove the American claim that cinema must be used to provide a rapid mass exchange of information at home and abroad.¹² The educationalist Edgar Dale, one of the influencers who framed this sense of urgency, warned: “We must have worldwide free and open communication of ideas or we shall have a worldwide disaster.”¹³ The American idea of building a “free” and “democratic” world brought forth a range of new AV media projects to maximize the flow of information, and South Korea was one of the emergent postcolonial countries that, according to Dale, had to be protected from “the hand of tyranny” with the help of AV strategies.¹⁴ During the early postwar era, US aid in various forms flowed into South Korea. From the US administration and its information agencies to nonprofit organizations such as the Asia Foundation, Americans invested in building a new film studio, training AV media specialists, and hiring Koreans to produce and exhibit films.¹⁵

Administered through a range of US governmental and private agencies, often in cooperation with the South Korean administration, various programs served to realize what Christina Klein calls the “enmeshment of South Korea into an array of Free Asian and Free World networks.”¹⁶

Education emerged as one of the main sites where the increased role of cinema in promoting Cold War democracy became pronounced. Roughly from 1954 to 1961, the so-called Peabody team put substantial effort into transforming Korean students’ learning with the aid of AV media, with the conviction that its work was in the service of democratizing South Korea.¹⁷ Under contracts with the International Cooperation Agency of the US State Department and the Korean Ministry of Education, the group of American educators, including Harold R. W. Benjamin, Winfield D. Armentrout, and Willard E. Goslin, headed a range of programs to train teachers and provide basic resources.¹⁸ In one of its earlier works, titled *Curriculum Handbook for the Schools of Korea* (1956), the Peabody team suggested that AV media, especially films, would be transformative for students’ learning; by using their senses to comprehend the learning materials, students would be able to cultivate “an experimental attitude, an inquiring mind, and a flexible willingness,” and when these traits were fostered, democracy in Korea would be “stronger, broader, and more enduring.”¹⁹ The Peabody’s emphasis on the efficacy of cinema became more palpable in later years under the leadership of Goslin, who was sent to Korea as “one of America’s ablest and best-known school administrators and as a battler for freedom and democracy.”²⁰ During these years, American educators not only developed a dozen model institutions, where they were dispatched to give hands-on instruction for AV education, but they also organized workshops to introduce the benefits of AV education to Korean teachers. Hundreds of Korean administrators and thousands of schoolteachers participated in these programs.

Through these workshops, Americans endorsed film as a new teaching instrument that, when properly used, would help students understand what they regarded as aspects of democratic life, including the ability to think critically, a commitment to compassionate action, and a desire to actively participate in political life by engaging in local decision-making processes. Using instructional films, they tirelessly associated cinema with what were claimed to be democratic behaviors and mindsets.²¹ One such film is *Manners in School* (1958), which features “Chalky,” a cartoon character, teaching Larry about good manners. As Larry ignores his responsibility to clean the blackboard, disrespects his teacher, and hurts other people’s feelings, Chalky invites him to consider his behavior from the third-person perspective. In this review, Chalky details how each of Larry’s actions “negatively” impacts others in the classroom. After realizing the consequence of his inconsiderate behavior, Larry promises Chalky that from now on, he will be a “good” member of the class. By setting limits on attitudes that are “bad” and “irregular,” the film defines the expected standards of social conduct for children. Larry’s assessment is self-led, not directed by a teacher, resulting in new action that will improve both him and his community.



FIGURE 3. Chalky, a cartoon character, teaches Larry about “good” manners in school. *Manners in School* (1958). Credit: McGraw-Hill Books.

To maximize film as a teaching instrument, Americans suggested that post-screening discussion under the guidance of an expert was even more crucial than showing a film.²² They diffused this idea by having Korean teachers engage with films that showcased classroom discussion in America. One of these films, *New Tools for Learning* (1951), presented a successful example of the method. In a scene where students engage with an educational film on democracy, the camera patiently attends to each student, using zoom-ins and close-ups. In this way, the film highlights the role of each student as an active participant who contributes to the classroom conversation. When the debate gets too heated, the teacher gently reminds his pupils of the learning objective for the day, and upon a student’s request that the class rewatch a portion of the film for a more productive discussion, he lets the entire room decide. Like other films in this category that flourished in the postwar US, *New Tools for Learning* brings to light the advantages of technological development: the portable projector’s playback capability enables learners to do the close analysis of audiovisual material. Still, the overall emphasis is placed on the post-screening discussion encouraged by a teacher nurturing a cooperative and egalitarian ethos—what the Peabody team wanted to instill in Koreans as the spirit of democracy.²³



FIGURE 4. *New Tools for Learning* (1951). Credit: University of Chicago AV Center.

To a certain extent, the Peabody team's showcasing of democracy in the classroom inspired Korean teachers seeking to change the dominant way their students were taught. But it also prompted them to see the chasm between what they had learned about democracy and what they were experiencing. While the active participation of students in discussion seemed fascinating, Kim Yōnggūn doubts it could be realized in the Korean context, where teachers were expected to "direct" the classroom culture. Kim's skepticism about the applicability of the "American way" sprang at least partly from systematic problems in Korean education. In the late 1950s, most classes remained centered on teachers and textbooks, with lecturing, oral recitation, and rote memorization as the norm. Kim and the six other teachers worked under the first Education Law, which regulated every aspect of education as strictly and uniformly as the colonial state had done. In the name of "democratic nationalistic education," the law not only regulated courses and class hours, but also granted sole authority to the government to publish all the textbooks used in primary schools and the key textbooks for secondary schools, including those for Korean language and literature, Korean history, and civil ethics.²⁴ Coined by An Hosang, the country's first minister of education, the term "democratic nationalistic education" signaled the Korean state's utilitarian vision

of education, which was to serve as an “instrument for producing loyalty to the state.”²⁵ This view motivated the Korean authorities’ investment in AV education through the Peabody team. An’s successor Ch’oe Chaeyu signed the contract with the Peabody, proclaiming that democracy would be achieved “only by infusing the democratic national spirit into the throbbing veins of the youths throughout their process of growth.”²⁶

However, Kim Yōnggūn’s observation conveys more than a critique of systemic problems in his country. It reveals that the Peabody’s importation of American-style democratic education was carried out with little to no consideration of how it might land in the Korean context, as he comments: “The American way of discussion might shake the existing dynamic up if it indeed succeeds at enacting a different social relation. But such change has to happen in the everyday lives of Korean students and teachers, not in the heads of Korean and American administrators. Students and teachers should be convinced of the value of democratizing the classroom, not forced to adapt the American tool.”²⁷ This situation indicated, at least to these teachers, that Americans’ primary interest lay in the dissemination of film as a mere vehicle rather than in its reception. As Kim points out, in the program that seemed to demarcate Korean teachers as passive receivers of the American way, Americans were far less interested in activating the meaning of democracy as a process than in spreading their own ideas. “If the audience was assumed to merely receive the messages of the film, then how would that be different from prewar education [under the Japanese rule]?” he asks.²⁸ Kim Chaehŭi also does not believe that the Peabody’s program was progressively democratic, not only because it was organized unilaterally by the Americans, but also because it was run under the hierarchical assumption that Koreans were meant to learn from the higher-up Americans. She remarks: “Americans were rushed to complete their task, there was so much pressure on their side that they should be able to implant the ‘American way,’ but why is it that the Korean way was meant to be an import of an American way in the first place? What is democratic about that?”²⁹

While rebuking both the Korean and American authorities, Kim Yōnggūn turns his frustration inward as well. He confesses that he had neither a “clear pathway” for democratic education nor the capacity to reform the system. He was not alone in this struggle. When asked what concrete practices were in use to transform the classroom into a democratic space, other teachers could not answer right away. Their responses, often followed by a long pause, show that various practices were implemented to improve students’ classroom experience, as I will soon discuss in more detail: using more AV materials for discussion, incorporating discussion into lesson plans, cultivating horizontal relationships, and so on. Yet they often found themselves torn between adhering to the norms and rebelling against the school system. This predicament was hardly their fault. From the implementation of the first education reform in 1955 to its revision in 1963, education essentially became

a developmental strategy used by the state to reinforce nationalistic ideology and vocational training.³⁰ Under these circumstances, teachers who envisioned the possibility of democratizing their world were forced to reconcile their vision with reality to some degree. But it was also from this impasse that teachers came to grasp more palpably the barriers to realizing democracy in their everyday space. Their realization of the contradictions in Cold War democracy then prompted, on the one hand, a commitment to cultivating what they saw as democratic feelings in the classroom; on the other, it led them to build grassroots networks of teachers in the pursuit of expanding access to AV education resource in their local areas. In these works, they intervened slowly but surely in the American gospel of importable democracy and the belief in cinema as a vehicle for this purpose.

FEELING DEMOCRACY

The seven teachers I interviewed had grown up learning about democracy as a form of government at its best. In high school textbooks, chapters on democracy provided an understanding of the liberal democratic system by covering an array of topics, including popular sovereignty, the separation of powers, and the electoral process. Democracy had been thus conceived as an objectifiable mode of politics, one that could be defined by a fixed set of attributes. What often overwhelmed this perception of democracy was the curricula's underlying emphasis on an anti-communist, developmental morality. As Charles Kim reveals in his analysis of postwar education ideologues, textbooks for subjects such as history and ethics instilled in students a "staunch state nationalist orientation"; they presented an abridged narrative that highlighted the stark contrast between democratic forces and those in opposition, such as feudalism, totalitarianism, and communism, to legitimate the Republic of Korea and its political system, as well as to elevate the capitalist over the communist bloc.³¹ Fully integrated into the postwar curricula, this Cold War notion of democracy influenced the ways the seven teachers made sense of themselves and their nation to a certain extent. They nonetheless felt acutely that something was wrong with this state of affairs. Regardless of the institutionalized electoral democracy, they found their government under the leadership of Syngman Rhee rather "undemocratic." None of the teachers can elaborate instantly on why this was the case, but they are distinctly aware of the gap between what they had learned democracy was and what they actually *felt* in society.

For instance, Yi Sanghyŏn confesses his discomfort with the self-proclaimed "pro-democratic" Rhee and his Liberty Party, which held an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly. For him, it all went back to the 1954 general election, when he witnessed the regime-backed police arresting other parties' candidates during their campaign. Confident in its impunity, the Rhee regime ignored the constitution. Its revision of the constitution to permit Rhee a third term in office

was indeed “undemocratic” to Yi. While Rhee received one vote short of the necessary two-thirds majority in the national assembly, he pushed through an amendment to allow him to run for the 1956 presidential election at the age of eighty-five. Rhee also mobilized all the possible networks of state power to ensure that he and his party won the race.³² It was evident that the election was rigged when Yi saw plainclothes police officers disrupt the speeches of the candidates of the Democratic Party. The unexpected death of Sin Ikhüi, a popular Democratic presidential candidate, before an election day seemed too timely for Rhee’s victory. Yet Yi went out to vote for Sin, whose name was still printed on the ballot. Yi comments: “It was very difficult to sense democracy in action when elections failed to represent people like me [against impunity]. . . . If holding elections meant what democracy was, it hardly felt like I was living in a democratic country then.”³³ Yi’s discontent with state power was by no means exaggerated: about twenty percent of voters threw their votes to Sin Ikhüi, which made their ballots ineligible. The fact that an independent politician, Cho Pong-am, earned thirty percent of the eligible votes confirmed the strong oppositional voice of the citizenry against the ruling power. In their response to Rhee’s narrow victory, commentators and minority party leaders, including the Democrat Cho Pyöngok, declared “the people’s victory over the political authority.”³⁴

Yi Sanghyön’s criticism of elections expresses more than his frustration at the then-incumbent president. It indicates that he distinguishes democracy as specific, lived experiences from an institutionalized polity determined by the rulers. This perspective was rarely encouraged by those in power at the time. As the 1956 election approached, popular dailies published numerous articles to boost voter participation. These articles predominantly presented democracy as realized only in the form of competitive elections featuring multiple parties. While commentators regularly listed what they perceived as basic principles of democracy, such as freedom of speech, their notion of democracy remained tied to the abstraction of electing a “good” president to “govern” the country.³⁵ And such qualities certainly did not extend to schools or to their populations of younger citizens. The imaginary of democracy backed by the state, to Yi, simply reinforced the idea that people were subjects of the president and his leadership, not citizens of a state that must be accountable to them. As Yi sharply points out, that alone contradicted the second article of the constitution on the people as sovereign: “The sovereignty of the Republic of Korea shall reside in the people, and all state authority shall emanate from the people.” The undemocratic nature of the power being exercised upon the people brought Yi to an acute recognition that democracy should enact new social relations between the leaders and the people, and in turn, this recognition influenced his work in the classroom.

How could such relations be realized in a society where the relationship between the state and the individual was fraught with massive power inequalities? Although teachers may have differed in their articulations of what democracy as a

mundane experience should be, they agreed that a deliberate integration of cinema into the classroom helped them challenge the normative dynamic in school. This consensus does not necessarily mean an unconditional approval of the Peabody team's faith in the greater educational capacity of AV media compared to other teaching tools. Korean teachers saw this capacity not as inherent in the media but as something that had to be activated by teachers and students, using American films and methods with caution.

Ch'oe Yunok often realized that the American films on a given topic were "less valuable" than she thought they would be. When planning a lesson on "cooperation" for her civics class, for instance, she found that these films and their emphasis on individual responsibility and sense of community contradicted the familial and national values that Korean textbooks sought to promote. Rather than abandon the American films or reiterate the norms of the textbook, she designed a guided, customized discussion that inspired students to assess the world outside their country and value systems other than their own. In her classroom, this type of discussion proved helpful for making sense of the world, encouraging students to imagine different ways of living while also instilling critical media literacy. Because both Korean curricula and textbooks replicated many aspects of imperial education that dismissed the capacity of children as active learners, Ch'oe wanted her students "not to be overwhelmed by what they 'must be' or 'should do' from an early age," as she had been. She adds: "This required me to figure out how to cultivate different mindsets in students, and I used more open-ended questions to have students reflect on themselves than other teachers."³⁶ She saw the benefit of cinema in democratizing the classroom when it provoked students to ask new questions and be curious about solutions other than those dictated in textbooks.

Meanwhile, Yi Hy'ongg'ün often mediated the cultural difference shown in American films, turning it into an opportunity to spark a new discussion on what were perceived as democratic principles in his classroom. He recalls:

One of the Americans [in the Peabody team] asked me why Koreans are so shy about talking about their opinion. I explained that it is because our culture prioritized modesty and respect for others. But I also thought, though not being able to say this back then, of fear . . . fear of speaking up. I read about people getting arrested on the allegation of being communist when they criticized the Rhee administration. . . . I should have said that my sense of freedom as a Korean is different from yours as an American. In Korea, what could be freedom or not was . . . determined by the people in power.³⁷

Aspiring to address the peculiar condition of freedom in Korea, Yi used American educational films to teach a lesson on freedom. He had students watch, for instance, a Korean-dubbed American film on class discussion in which the American children were not afraid of asking questions and speaking up. Before the screening, he guided students to put together a list of factors that produced their reluctance to speak in the classroom. The sources of reluctance varied, but the fact

that each student had a voice pushed him to initiate a conversation about freedom. Like Ch'oe, he also prepared prompts to facilitate self-reflective discussion in smaller groups. Many students were able to articulate how their fear of saying something wrong prohibited them from being active participants in class; they were afraid of disagreeing with others, especially authority figures such as teachers. In the momentum produced by this exercise, Yi encouraged students to confront the limits on freedom of dissent, and though the conversation was not always productive, it offered a chance for the students to practice the freedom in question. Allowing more diverse conversations to enter the classroom through the strategic use of AV media helped Yi nurture the students' capacity to think and speak in a collective setting, which, to him, was the first step toward democratic education.

What these efforts show is that the teachers creatively appropriated and intervened in the process by which new technological infrastructure and American methods penetrated the classroom. This reflected their approach to cinema in the classroom as a means in the making, not in the completion. Displacing the focus on AV technology as the singular force of change in the classroom, the teachers cultivated a space for the medium to evolve in dialogical relation to other components of the setting, such as viewers, ideas, and the curriculum. In so doing, they encouraged more horizontal relations between teachers and students as well as between students. Contrary to the norm that the teacher dominated the discussion, film-mediated discussion in small groups enabled a new dynamic. When students could talk to each other and discuss class topics, the teacher became less the main focal point of the room than a guide.

The fact that these teachers were a minority should not lead us to evaluate their work as impotent. The temptation to diminish their work gets in the way not only of our ability to listen to the robust experience of the teachers but also, more glaringly, of our powers of imagination. Here I am reminded of Édouard Glissant's reflection on the decolonial imagination and its effects: "No imagination helps avert destitution in reality, none can oppose oppressions or sustain those who 'withstand' in body or spirit. But imagination changes mentalities, *however slowly* it may go about this."³⁸ Teachers may have failed to dismantle the education system, but they were committed to bringing specific changes to their everyday space via the imagination of democracy as new sensibilities and relations. This imagination could not happen all at once; it demanded that teachers dedicate themselves to making democracy in action. And this imagination of what might be called tangible democracy was, to Yi Ch'onghŭi, "different from what politicians would look for." She goes on: "Their notion of democracy felt like floating clouds that I should look up and could not reach. When students disagreed with me, when they worked as collaborative groups rather than competitors to each other, when their eyes were filled with curiosity, not fear, that made me *feel* democracy."³⁹ These teachers proved that feeling democracy had to begin with a

series of changes in themselves, their relation to students, and their ways of learning with students and collaborating with other educators.

REALIZING GRASSROOTS NETWORKS

At the end of the 1950s, Korean administrators concluded that the Peabody program had made little impact on technical and vocational training, which to them was the most important project of postwar reconstruction. The Peabody's focus on academic curriculum reform and AV education did not seem to address their pressing need.⁴⁰ By the time the first cutback to the program was made in 1959 (it was closed in 1961), the Ministry of Public Information had become the regime's most powerful organ, influencing the making, censoring, and screening of motion pictures.⁴¹ This ascendancy was manifested when the Korean administration and the US State Department announced a new contract with AV technicians from Syracuse University to train Korean public information officials. This new group of American AV "utilization specialists" came to provide "technical advice" to Korean officials on establishing a state-run motion picture studio and laboratory.⁴² Even the administration of these institutions, a project initially under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, was handed over to the Ministry of Public Information.

The closure of the Peabody program alarmed the teachers who saw cinema's capacity for democratizing classrooms. The increasingly didactic tone of the state-commissioned films, for instance, validated their suspicion that the political authorities were interested in cinema exclusively because they wanted to propagate their self-legitimizing message. Having witnessed the government's aggressive mobilization of cinema as a state weapon, the teachers committed themselves to expanding what they saw as democracy. Crucial to their commitment was the creation of a grassroots network to share AV resources in response to community teaching needs.

For instance, in April 1958, Yi Chŏnghŭi formed the Seoul Woman Teachers' Association (Sŏulyŏkyosakonghoe) with four others who aspired to experiment with AV education. At the time of its launch, its members—female teachers working in the same district—anticipated building a mutual support group. The first few meetings centered on discussion of Korean books on AV education, but over time the reading activity became less central, and their function as producers and providers of film information rose to become their core activity. Yi describes it this way: "We were encouraged to use a film projector or a slide reader in our schools, but there was very little information about how to use the equipment, what films could be shown, and how these films benefit the learners. The bureaucrats never cared about how to make these resources more accessible."⁴³ A new initiative her group undertook addressed this issue of access for teachers in their district. Yi and other members wrote and circulated pamphlets to help

others in finding and acquiring educational films. In these pamphlets, they shared information about the films (length, synopsis, language, etc.) that they were able to use in the classroom, and also commented on each film's level of difficulty for students. While updating their research on available films over the next few years, the group also led a slide-bank initiative that encouraged teachers to share creative ideas about slides and to lend their slides to those in need. Yi was particularly excited about this project, as she could help others who could use her botany slides for Grade 3, while using someone else's slides on, for instance, math for Grade 3. This mutually beneficial exchange through the local network not only saved individual teachers the time it took to prepare materials for multiple subjects but also strengthened the connections among them.

Likewise, Kim Yönggün organized a network of teachers in his region after recognizing a significant gap between Seoul and other cities in AV resource distribution. In 1956, at least two Seoul-based organizations held a weekly screening of educational films, whereas no such program existed in his town, Daegu, a midwestern provisional hub. This regional difference prompted him to find other teachers in his area who were seeking to innovate in their classrooms.⁴⁴ In summer 1957, Kim founded a study group with a handful of Daegu-based teachers, and the group began a new initiative to compile a list of AV education resources. To do so, the teachers researched the available projectors and films at local churches and a local branch of the US Information Services (USIS). After sorting out about two dozen films that would be suitable for children, they put together a catalog that included brief information on each film. The first catalog was published and circulated in schools in an urban area, with aid from two local churches that also agreed to loan their projectors to teachers in need. The group members quickly established themselves as local AV education specialists and acted as a clearinghouse of information on accessible resources. Over the next few years, the goal of making AV more accessible to local teachers sustained their work, and the members came to see their community-based work as a civic responsibility.

The commitment to grassroots networks extended to the organization of local events that combined discussion and screenings with the aim of holding public conversations about democracy and education. Yi Sanghyön programmed a quarterly screening for other teachers and audiences, and it often helped him communicate with others who remained skeptical about AV education. Rather than persuade them with his words, he showed these audiences what his classroom felt like: the attendees were not merely instructed on the topic but also expected to participate, familiarizing themselves with the idea of free expression in which different ideas could be encountered and exchanged in participatory forums.⁴⁵ One day, he showed an animated film on Admiral Yi Sunsin, an educational film by the Center for Korean Instructional Film, with a prompt for discussion.⁴⁶ Previously, he had used the film in his history class on the Japanese invasions of Korea in the sixteenth century, and this experience had yielded suspicion regarding whether

the film's message would be effective for learners. In the absence of considerable background information about history, the film seemed to excessively glorify Yi's victory over the Japanese navy. While redoing the screening and discussion in order to receive feedback from a different audience, he and the participants debated the film's strengths and weaknesses. This type of conversation led his peers to offer honest feedback on the teaching materials in use. But what was most rewarding to Yi was feeling a growing consensus on the power of the interactive discussion that could be facilitated by films. Yi says: "I wrote down all opinions about the films and then invited the audience members to look at all different ideas and feelings. 'Look, we interpreted the film in many ways. Compared to our textbook, an educational film can be useful to create an environment where students could be encouraged to think and speak more freely.'"⁴⁷ Initially envisioned as a temporary gig, Yi's film programming continued for several years because he noticed a few peers who used to be conservative about new teaching tools become regular contributors to those events.

Kim Chaehŭi also coordinated a regular screening of educational films at her school attached to Seoul National University of Education, which the Peabody team used as one of its home bases starting in May 1957.⁴⁸ When an American specialist asked her to proofread the Korean subtitles of American films, she secured, in return, a promise that these films would be screened informally in her school. Her interest in sharing these films with her peers generated a monthly screening during the academic year, starting in March 1958. Kim's knowledge of the Korean curriculum shaped her program in a way that helped other teachers consider applying AV materials more directly. Although the programming required significant work, Kim felt more linked to other peers: "There had been no connection among teachers in the same district other than the fact that we were hired by the government and that we could be moved to other posts at any time in our career by those in power. But the screening program offered an opportunity to find not just practical but moral supports."⁴⁹ This opportunity inspired her and a few others to form an AV education study group in September 1960. After the closure of the Peabody program, the group members continued to use their platform by organizing showcases to introduce new Korean educational films to teachers.

Through these works, the teachers themselves emerged as the foremost authority of AV education while forging horizontal networks that linked the educators, districts, and regions of South Korea. It is difficult to overestimate the ways their work catalyzed a paradigmatically new way of thinking about democratic values. By selecting, curating, and presenting films and their relevant materials for community members, these teachers created an environment in which anyone could show, access, and discuss a film. While their work evolved unevenly and slowly, they took up AV media in ways that encouraged creativity, connection, and occasionally subversion of the officially sanctioned media content. Tapping into the power of technological infrastructure, such as portable projectors and the films

that played on them, they contributed to multiplying the locations of cinema outside the highly centralized commercial industry. Often presented to small audiences and private individuals in community, these forms of viewing also invited more dynamic interactions among participants.

The teachers' community-oriented work stood in stark contrast to the state's development-oriented approach to AV education and resource distribution. The government installed a set of government-run AV education institutes, first in Seoul in 1959 and then in Busan and Gwangju in 1961. These institutions assumed responsibility for maximizing teachers' capacity to run projectors, publish and circulate film catalogs, and persuade the public of the benefits of AV education. From the outset, their program showed no concerns about equity—that is, about making these resources accessible to all with few to no barriers and building a more inclusive decision-making process for teachers. The administrators were instead preoccupied with celebrating their first-year program as a “success,” which was measured only by the number of teachers receiving their training, the number of copies of pamphlets in distribution, and the size of the audiences that came to their events.⁵⁰ Their obsession with these numeric development metrics overpowered any concern about how their program practically benefited students and teachers.

The work of teachers also distinguished itself from that of the technologically invested, American-educated elites who championed the place of AV media in the future of modern society. For instance, Wŏn Hŭnggyun, a well-known advocate for AV education, declared in a 1956 article for a popular daily, *Donga Ilbo*, that AV education had become standard practice.⁵¹ As one of the early adopters of AV education in teaching, he proudly celebrated how the school where he served as head had modernized students' learning through slides, films, and radio broadcasting. In his observation, students were much more eager to engage with learning when taught with the AV aids. Wŏn thus suggested that both educational administrators and teachers be proactive in applying these technologies instead of maintaining the traditional pedagogy. For educators like him, the adoption of film and other media technologies in classrooms was inextricably tied to social and technological change that could only be accommodated by modernizing schools with more technology. They often referenced the American AV education of the 1950s, which centered on a national network of schools, libraries, and film clubs under the auspices of the National Education Association and the Film Council of America.⁵² Inspired to create a similar Korean network, these elites often urged educational administrators to import cutting-edge American practices into the Korean classroom while underscoring the gap between the two countries.⁵³

To teachers, this elitist approach appeared to be as problematic as the governmental one because it too neglected the agency of students and teachers in imagining democratic education. Even when elites characterized educational films as crucial for spreading the gospel of democracy, most teachers believed that their

ulterior motive was “being able to compete with or catch up with the American standard of life.”⁵⁴ This impetus, in their eyes, would further enrich elite, urban spaces without addressing the broader need for more accessible resources. Moreover, the elitist approach seemed unrealistic to many teachers who were already exhausted by other structural difficulties: a high student-teacher ratio, limited resources, and bureaucracy. In an op-ed, an anonymous teacher denounced educational administrators and elites for failing to understand the pressing issues in the classroom and burdening teachers with unreasonable expectations such as that they learn new AV tools. The writer called for a fundamental transformation, warning that “simply bringing a film projector to the classroom would never solve the existing problems.”⁵⁵ The seven teachers in my interview agree with this writer’s view. Despite their continuous work against barriers in AV education, they recognized that the structural issues had to be solved before technological infrastructure was added to the classroom.

It should not surprise us by now that these teachers anticipated that the collapse of the Rhee regime in 1960 would bring some change to education—and more broadly to the relation between the people and state power. Mass protests throughout the spring of 1960, or what has been called the April Revolution, called for an end to anti-democratic rule. Teachers witnessed how the growing momentum of the protests enabled many students to articulate their frustration and anger over the regime’s abuses of power and corruption. The outburst culminated in Rhee’s resignation on April 27, and until the military coup by Park Chung Hee on May 16, 1961, a new imagination of society flourished in many public spaces. During these thirteen months, teachers saw the possibility of democratizing schools by making their voices heard in the policy-making process and holding the government accountable. While not everyone joined the new teachers’ union in May 1960, many teachers felt seen when local chapters of the union quickly grew across the country. In just two months, about twenty thousand teachers, twenty-two percent of the total number, joined the union in an attempt to gain labor and political rights.⁵⁶ Although the union aimed primarily at liberalizing the school system, not the curriculum per se, its rapid expansion helped these teachers anticipate how systematic change would enable them to innovate in their classrooms and community work. In the eyes of the state administrators, however, the union’s expansion provoked a crisis in education to be resolved through nondemocratic means. Laws such as the Labor Union Law, the National Public Servants Act, and the National Security Law were made to ensure that teachers could not form collective groups or speak out about their circumstances. The national assembly under the interim leadership of Chang Myōn made the teachers’ union illegal, an action that ultimately led to the arrest and imprisonment of union leaders soon after the military coup in May 1961.

Observing the repression of the teachers' movement, all seven teachers reckoned with the cost of their optimism about the post-Rhee era. Yi Hyönggün says: "After we ousted Rhee, the school was immediately filled with dynamic conversations about how to reform education. But when teachers attempted to translate these ideas into practice [by forming and legalizing a teachers' organization] the people in power framed us as being 'selfish' and even 'commies (ppalgaengi)."⁵⁷ The new government under the leadership of Park Chung Hee promised a fundamental reform of education, but teachers soon discovered that its approach to education was even more nationalistic and utilitarian than that of its predecessors. One indication came from Park's stronger emphasis on vocational and technical education so that the skills taught in schools would meet the country's economic needs. Another indication could be seen in the added emphasis on subjects such as "Anti-communism" and "Morals," which reinforced ideological education. The ethos of anti-communism overshadowed the curriculum, and though more Korean AV materials became available thanks to Park's increased investment in government-sponsored films, the messages of these films seemed more "black-and-white" and "parochial."⁵⁸

These new directions, on top of the enforced disbandment of unions, frustrated teachers, but these changes did not entirely stop their work to make democracy tangible in everyday spaces. Some teachers gave more weight to the enactment of horizontal relations in the classroom than to the increasingly militaristic fingerprints on the curriculum. Both Ch'oe Yunok and Cho Ŭnsuk integrated more collaborative work and discussion in assignments and class "in opposition to the system overemphasizing individual excellence in exams."⁵⁹ Many teachers also continued to work closely with the grassroots networks of AV education throughout the 1960s. Due to the government's increased suppression of teachers' associations, they were forced to protect themselves from the suspicious eyes of other teachers and even students' parents. Both Yi Sanghyön and Yi Chönghui renamed their local networks as religious book clubs so that they could continue their community building "in the guise of a small, depoliticized group."⁶⁰ Nonetheless, they carried on their community work to ensure improved access to AV materials. Crucial to their work were efforts to eliminate the threshold for accessing what they deemed to be public resources ("konggongjae"). Yi Chönghui adds:

A handful of administrators dominated the whole decision-making process [about what materials should be purchased and how they should be accessed] as if public resources were their own. But these materials were meant to serve many students and teachers. . . . I had to do what had to be done to make access more equitable. I did what I did because I could not wait until someone would do something about it [building a community network].⁶¹

Other teachers similarly saw the AV materials as public resources, not the state's instruments to use exclusively for its political purposes. And by claiming their

right to access them—not just for themselves but also for others—they exercised a vision of a radically different ecology for all participants in AV practices.

. . .

Often when I was speaking with them, the seven teachers wondered why their stories would matter. Despite their self-doubt, their experiences offer a remarkable story of how young, ordinary teachers dreamed of democracy in their everyday lives. They critically assessed the postwar powers' superficial notion of democracy, enacting new relations and bringing experimental teaching practices into their classrooms. While the Peabody team's showcasing of the American way influenced these teachers, they did not implant it into the Korean classroom as they were taught; instead, they worked to translate and appropriate the American practices to cultivate democratic feelings in the Korean classroom. Their aspiration for democracy was also realized through the formation of grassroots networks for teachers. Against the state's top-down distribution of teaching and AV resources, the teachers created more community-based networks and programs in hopes of benefiting the members of the community who needed them. Their organizing work contributed to creating more accessibility to AV materials, subverting the state's monopoly on the production and distribution of relevant resources.

The stories of these teachers ask citizens of modern democracy to reflect on our imagination of democracy. When speaking about democracy, we tend to limit ourselves to the realm of institutions rather than considering the relations between people and a centralized authority. Even when considering the relations between constituents—the people—and their representatives, we reduce our imagination of democracy to the concepts of elections, representation, and mandates. The postwar teachers' experience is valuable even today because they showed the importance of being cognizant of the gap between democracy as an institution and democracy as a daily experience. It was their judicious recognition of the gap—as constituents living in a democratic republic but feeling their society to be undemocratic—that generated diverse imaginations of democracy. Their articulation of democracy might not have always been as explicit as they wanted it to be, but their work confronted the conventional notion of democracy as fixed and objectifiable. It was through their practice as AV media distributors, exhibitors, and programmers that they transformed themselves from subjects of power to citizens of society, from bricks in the rigid school system to conscious teachers and community builders who creatively engaged with celluloid to reshape education. Their stories, more than anything, prove that democracy must be constantly imagined and reimagined by asking who counts as a citizen, where participation can and should happen, and how forums for the exchange of resources and ideas can be made more inclusive.