

Beyond the Marginalization of Women

Khaidu as a Feminist Experimental Film Collective

Over five nights in July 1974, a South Korean women's film collective threw a film festival on the rooftop of Shinsegae department store in downtown Seoul. In the eyes of moviegoers accustomed to commercial exhibition in theaters, almost every aspect of the festival appeared unconventional. Free and open to the public, it showcased seven experimental films by nonprofessional woman filmmakers working under a name that was unfamiliar to most Koreans: Khaidu, after Khutulun, the great female warrior of the Khaidu clan of Mongol. Four months previously, four women in their early twenties had formed the first women's film collective in South Korea with the aim of finding new film languages and platforms for women. Han Okhi and Kim Chömsön had graduated from Ewha, the country's most prestigious women's college, having studied literature and education, respectively. The other two members were Yi Chönghui, a literature major, and Han Sunae, a communications major, both of whom were still in college. Soon these self-taught filmmakers produced their first works, including *A Hole* and *OVER*, which featured innovative film practices such as the use of abstracting techniques, the recourse to small-gauge format, and a commitment to collaboration, to name a few.

The mainstream media quickly responded to Khaidu's film festival. Several published reviews welcomed the women's experiment with nonlinear form and style as a "willful endeavor to radicalize mainstream cinema," even as they diminished it as a mere "part of the tradition of 'underground movements.'"¹ Yet these reviewers seldom cared enough to delve into other political and creative meanings that Khaidu's practice might impart. In coverage by one of the country's most popular periodicals, *Sundayseoul*, each member was introduced in relative depth, yet little attention was paid to the rationale behind their filmmaking. The reporter included a quote from Han Okhi that claimed Khaidu was taking action for "gender equality in cinema." What follows this quote is a rather condescending comment characterizing the filmmakers as "unruly tomboys with bachelor's degrees," assessing their films as "rough," "immature," and "unsophisticated," without citing specific evidence.² But what if the play with focus, the haphazard framing,

and the disjunctive editing in Khaidu's films were not signs of incompetence but marks of a different vision as woman artists? As we will see in this chapter, Khaidu's interest lay in articulating such a vision, not achieving the maturity and sophistication of cinematic techniques. Its experiment with unconventional forms and styles foregrounded a desire for ways to represent women and their voices lacking in the mainstream media.³

Born in the late 1940s, Khaidu members had come of age during the rapid urbanization and industrialization that had unfolded in the grip of postwar state power. Unlike those of their parents' generation, they attended high school and university and considered themselves more individualistic and defiant in their life and career goals. Still, their country constantly mobilized women as mothers and housewives, discouraging women from pursuing professional activities outside the home. In their view, this marginalization of women reinforced and was reproduced by mainstream cinema's under- and misrepresentation of women. Growing up, they could not identify with any major female characters in films, as most seemed to be portrayed as "inferior" or "supplementary" to their male counterparts.⁴ The media rarely showed educated and professional women, and when it did, they were often depicted as a "threat" to the male-centered family and society. To the Khaidu members, it was evident that the media reinforced the patriarchy in its normalization of obedience and domesticity as "natural" values of women. Seeing this issue of representation as a product of male-dominant field of media, Khaidu's members transformed themselves from college students with limited work options into filmmakers bent on inventing new languages and platforms for women's cinema. Through this transformation that unfolded over the next four years until the collective's official disbandment, Khaidu fought against the marginalization of women in cinema as both a realm of representation and a field of labor. In this chapter, I will examine Khaidu's struggle toward a vision of a feminist, experimental cinema that enacted celluloid democracy not only by articulating an inclusive and nonviolent film language but also by expanding public spaces for women in the collective's film festivals, symposium, and performance.

Khaidu's work demonstrates that the mid-1970s was a watershed moment for more than just Western feminist film activism. Having learned from the women's liberation movement of the previous decade, women film critics and artists in the northern hemisphere reconfigured what women's cinema could and should be. From publication to organization, their work spearheaded new filmmaking trends and forms of activism centered on women's liberation and empowerment in opposition to the mainstream industry.⁵ Khaidu's formation resonated with this aesthetic and political movement that arose in the West, but this resonance should not guide us to a naive assumption that Khaidu's practice was merely a Western derivative or under Western influence. Tracing the influence of the Western feminist movement would ignore the fact that the works of Western film feminism reached few Koreans at the time, and fundamentally, it would reproduce the

orientalist perception of non-Western women as less developed compared to their Western counterparts.⁶ This chapter shows that a more careful way to understand Khaidu can be found in analyses of the conditions of its formation and of its extant work, as well as in conversations with its members and participants in its events. This approach will broaden our understanding of what constituted film culture in the 1970s, challenging the narratives about the development of film and feminist activism that center on the Western liberal sphere. In what follows, I attend to how the young women artists defined their work at the time and what experimental and feminist visions of cinema they promoted to shift the constraints set on women like them. In so doing, we can see how they struggled against the forces behind the marginalization of women: the nationalistic Cold War state and its power over the film industry, as well as its normalization of a patriarchal and hypermasculine order of society.

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

In the historiography of Korean cinema, the 1970s has been considered the “dark age” because of tightened censorship regulations and increased political control. Less than two years before Khaidu’s formation, Park Chung Hee had announced the era of Yusin, literally “revitalization” but really meaning his transition to dictatorship.⁷ With a revised constitution allowing him to prolong his rule indefinitely, he granted himself unlimited power to manipulate the right to free expression, normalize mass arrests of dissidents, and reinforce social surveillance by armed soldiers and plainclothes police officers. The Yusin film law, enacted in 1973, launched the Motion Picture Promotion Corporation to promote national policy films, pushing filmmakers to the margins. In the face of greater demand to produce feature and promotional films that propagated the state’s ideology, filmmakers in the mainstream industry lost many of their opportunities to experiment with the medium. Amid these challenges, a younger generation of filmmakers rose up in the mid-1970s to revitalize the industry, at least temporarily. For instance, the Visual Age group, consisting of filmmakers in their thirties, like Yi Jangho and Ha Giljong, articulated their cinematic language by bringing youth culture to the screen: beers, blue jeans and miniskirts, and Westernized folk music all symbolized the yearning for freedom from the restrictive social norms of society. With these symbols of youth culture, the filmmakers tweaked genre conventions and added more versatility to their style, speaking directly to the younger consumers of domestic film. Movies such as *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (*Pyöltürüi kohyang*, 1974) and *March of Fools* (*Papotülüi hangjin*, 1975) brought Yi and Ha, respectively, fame and box office success that were unparalleled for the time.⁸ These directors nonetheless could not escape the regime’s suppression, which crystallized in its campaign to “purify” society. Yi Jangho, among other popular artists, became a target of investigation for smoking marijuana in April 1976, and his activities were

suspended until the end of the era. Meanwhile, Ha Giljong had to endure almost every one of his features being harshly cut by the censors.

Out of these unfavorable conditions of filmmaking, new pathways for making movies were cleared from the margins of film culture. Young artists and critics were drawn to more radical kinds of experimentation with the cinematic medium. Neither the theory nor the practice of “avant-garde,” “experimental,” or “independent” cinema had established a solid base in South Korea. Yet there was a burgeoning underground scene, represented by a group of novices producing independent art, cinema, and theater. The increased repression of artists and writers engendered a sense of urgency among the younger creators that made experimentation outside the established system of art and media more feasible and desirable. At a time when the government strictly regulated the state-sanctioned media and commercial cinema, collectively produced, noncommercial cinema became a viable way for them to counter a highly manipulated mediascape. The experience of being pushed underground created a newfound solidarity, mutual support, and artistic cross-fertilization, and urban areas increasingly provided young artists with new spaces in which to network and collaborate.⁹

The earliest noncommercial film collective of the era was the Small-gauge Film Coterie (Hang'uksohyōng yōnghwatonghohoe), founded in 1970. Its inauguration demonstrated a rising interest in “nonindustrial and avant-garde cinema” across the broad fields of cinema. The members included well-known filmmakers such as Yu Hyōnmok and Ha Giljong and the young critic Pyōn Insik, as well as nonprofessional cinephiles.¹⁰ Through screenings and workshops, they initiated opportunities to discuss nonconventional filmmaking and avant-garde films from other parts of the world and practice their own. In less than two years, several students at Sogang University in Seoul formed another collective, named the Moving Image Research Group (Yōngsangyōnghuhoe). Setting themselves apart from the mainstream industry, its members—including Yi Iktae, whose film *From Morning to Evening* (*Ach'imgwa chōnyōksai*, 1970, 16mm, B&W) has been recognized as the country's “first underground film”—sought to articulate their vision for amateur cinema.¹¹ By organizing informal and spontaneous events around the campus, they offered a loosely organized community for young, nonprofessional filmmakers, including those from other campuses who were similarly invested in motion pictures. These two groups seemed to have little in common other than their interest in diversifying film culture, but they nonetheless signaled a new era of experimentation with cinema outside the norms.

In a sense, Khaidu's formation incarnated this new trend, which grew out of an aesthetic and political shift in the early 1970s. The influence of these earlier collectives on Khaidu cannot be denied, as Khaidu members had frequented the events organized by these groups and remained in contact with several members before forming their own collective. Han Okhi graciously acknowledges these collective members as her contemporaries, especially the senior filmmaker Yu Hyōnmok,

who supported Khaidu's work by sharing his knowledge and even his editing studio. Yet Khaidu stood out among these contemporary film groups in two ways. For one, Khaidu was distinctively a women's collective that "emerged out of a thoroughly male-centered world of art and media."¹² If other contemporary film collectives generally pursued formal and aesthetic experimentation, Khaidu gravitated more toward changing the male-dominant landscape of filmmaking across fields. This can be seen, for instance, in Khaidu's challenge to the conventional mode of production in which the male director wielded his power over other workers as the sole auteur of the film. The product of an apprentice system, the director often reinforced a hierarchy among film workers in order of seniority that had long been normalized in the industry. In contrast, Khaidu decided to work together as a group without prescribed positions such as "director" or "screenwriter." The members also financed their productions equally and made decisions via open discussions in which all the members participated as creators. This practice matured through their principle that women could raise each other up and channel the power of collaboration, helping them distance themselves from competition or domination.

Khaidu also distinguished itself from other collectives in its commitment to what its members called "*silhomyŏnghwa*," which literally means "experimental cinema." Khaidu clearly preferred this term over others, such as "*chŏnwi*" (avant-garde) and "*ŏntŏkŭlauntŭ*" (the Korean transliteration of underground). All these terms were used loosely by filmmakers and writers at the time, but Khaidu identified itself as a group of female filmmakers who were "path-finders of experimental cinema."¹³ This preference for "*silhŏm*" could have been a practical decision, given the Korean mainstream media's moral condemnation of avant-garde and underground art, not to mention the government's targeted investigation of drug use. Still, it is relevant that Khaidu envisioned a fundamentally new configuration of cinema through *silhŏm*, which, to the collective, meant "testing out an existing order of things and giving rise to something new."¹⁴ Both acts, testing the old and generating the new, had to complement each other in order to achieve the ultimate goal of experimentation: to undermine the dominant idea of what film should be and do. For these reasons, Khaidu refused to be constrained by either the label that the mainstream media imposed upon it or the trends in nonconventional cinema.

Khaidu's conceptualization of *silhŏm* did not yield a set of polished manifestos during its active years. Rather, it blossomed through the practice of making films. Using resources obtained from foreign cultural organizations, libraries, and other collectives, Khaidu's members taught themselves shooting and editing techniques. They chose 8mm and 16mm cameras over the standard 35mm film because of their affordability and portability. But their preference for the small-gauge format was also motivated by the desire to push the boundaries of conventional, theatrical cinema, characterized by the linear development of a story line and characters as well as seamless editing, among other features. Their earliest works demonstrate

how Khaidu wanted to shake up the existing film language and grammar. While the content of these films varied, the filmmakers were united in their intensive use of disjunctive editing and nonnarrative form.

A Hole (*Kumŏng*, 1974, 16mm, B&W), for example, begins with a naked woman and man and then jumps to trace the man escaping from a prison cell into the city. The man's restless wandering is accompanied by a soundtrack of breathing, ambient noise, jazz music, and silence, in which sound and images are layered into dissonance. At the film's end, the man returns to the cell. However, a lingering sound from the woman who appears in the opening shot leaves the film open ended. To the viewers, it remains thoroughly obscure who these people are, why the man escapes, or what the sound of breathing signifies. The film also embodies the director's physical, hands-on engagement with its material body. Using hand-held shots throughout, *A Hole* stresses—rather than erases, as conventional film tends to do—the subjectivity of the moviemakers' gaze and their relationship to the filmed object. Taken together, the nonlinearity, the shakiness, and the disjunction between image and sound all contribute to preventing the illusion of narrative linearity valued by mainstream filmmaking.

Another 16mm film, *Untitled* (*Muchè*, 1974, B&W), achieves a profound fusion of cinema and performance, collapsing the boundary between the screen and the real world. The film begins with a woman eating ice cream, and soon its space is expanded when the woman appears outside the frame as well. Until the end of the filmic time, she continues to eat both on- and off-screen. Outside the four-walled screen, the viewers are invited to see her handing them ice cream, interacting with them, and watching herself.¹⁵ This type of mixed-media work was not entirely new to Korean artists at the time. In 1970, the avant-garde artist Kim Kulim exhibited his *The Meaning of 1/24 Second* (*1/24ch'ŏŭi ŭimi*, 1969, 16mm color and B&W) as a backdrop to a performance that he staged with another artist, Jung Kangja.¹⁶ Considered the first work of "Korean avant-garde cinema," Kim's piece opened up a new tradition of expanded cinema, sprouting a series of other experiments in the following years.¹⁷ Drawing an idea from avant-garde art, Khaidu similarly pushed cinema into full dialogue with other media and, more important, invited the audience to ponder what constitutes the medium. Put differently, *Untitled* showcases not only the spontaneity and fluidity of intermedia work but also Khaidu's interest in blurring the traditional boundedness of cinema to provoke new questions about the medium.

Parallel to its experiment with the medium's boundaries, Khaidu's sense of filmmaking as feminist labor was pronounced, as shown in *OVER* (1974, 8mm, B&W). The film evokes what it meant to be a young woman in a world that ceaselessly objectified women and their bodies. In a frame divided horizontally into three parts, a young woman's eyes in close-up are located at the center, while the top and the bottom show selected sets of images: from an iconic pinup girl



FIGURE 9. *A Hole* (1974). Credit: Han Okhi.

in the advertisement to an image of an almost naked woman on a movie poster. The woman's eyes nervously glare at the camera, which captures her trapped between the images of hypersexualized women. Imprisoned by these objects of the male gaze, she endures discomfort, which is exaggerated by the annoying clicking sound that persists throughout the film. With this sequencing, *OVER* poignantly conveys how consistent the hegemonic representation of women has been in South Korean society.

The Khaidu members' critique of the mainstream media in *OVER* may have not resulted in a thorough conceptualization of feminism on their terms at the time, but it evolved through their search for new languages and platforms for women's self-expression and empowerment. This search, in many ways, necessitated their own reflection on their lived experience as women. The Khaidu members found themselves at odds not only with the pervasive depiction of women as sexual objects but also with the masculine culture that persisted even in the so-called alternative, countercultural film communities constructed around foreign institutions. Starting in the early 1970s, the French Cultural Institute and the Goethe-Institute organized regular film screenings of renowned European films that Korean audiences could not watch anywhere else.¹⁸ Visiting these institutions became routine for college students and cultural elites who wanted to distance themselves from most popular Korean and Hollywood commercial films. A fan of the French New Wave, Han Okhi discovered in cinema a potent

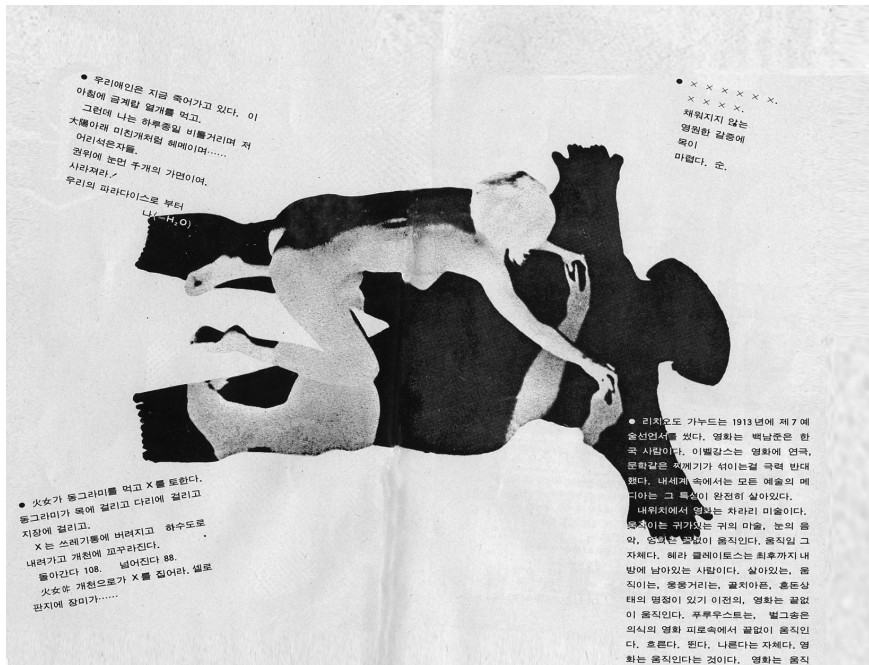


FIGURE 10. Khaidu members on their mission, published for the first film festival. One of them notes: “Fools and their thousand faces that have lost their sight to the power, please leave! This is our paradise.” Credit: Han Okhi.

way of experiencing the world beyond her small native country. Yet the spaces of cinephiles, often dominated by men, did not fully satisfy her thirst for a radically different cinema and an open space for women. She found herself frustrated by the male-dominated atmosphere at these screenings. “Even in these innovative films [of Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut], it was all about men, men’s voices, their desires. And the screenings were almost always occupied by men,” she comments.¹⁹

Their experience of viewing, making, and showing films in these environments prompted the Khaidu members to analyze how the marginalization of women was inscribed on all levels of society through language, images, and spaces. Even before naming their practice as a feminist intervention, as *OVER* manifests, a politics of representation became a focal point in their framework of silhöm. Sensing sexism and misogyny in the dominant way of representing women and their bodies, they started to turn their discomfort with the screen in conventional settings into a creative intervention. Their experience of the so-called alternative film spaces almost immediately pushed them to organize their own platform, Experimental Film Festival (silhomyŏnghwa p’esŭt’ipöl).

The inaugural festival took place in the spacious rooftop space of a department store in the heart of downtown, which filmmakers managed to rent for five evenings. At first, the idea of holding an open rooftop screening was seen as excessively wild, but filmmakers soon recognized the benefits of such an unconventional setting. Compared to theaters, the rental fee was minimal, thanks to a discount for using the space after hours. With the support of sponsors such as their neighborhood coffee shops, the filmmakers were easily able to cover the fee. Another advantage, perhaps bigger than the financial one, was the emancipatory possibility of demolishing the traditional relationship between the film and the audience staring at the screen.²⁰ Unlike most theatrical settings, which fixed the viewer into this mode of viewing, Khaidu's showcase allowed the viewers to move freely around the rooftop and socialize during the screening. The audience members could lounge in chairs, stand, or sit on the mat; they could chat with filmmakers while viewing the films. The biggest benefit for filmmakers turned out to be the enlarged opportunities for networking with other women who shared similar interests. They were able not only to receive immediate feedback on their work but also, surprisingly, to find comfort in other women's hunger for spaces where they could be seen and heard.

DEFINING WOMEN'S CINEMA

In Khaidu's next project, *silhöm* expanded to make salient the category of gender and gender hierarchy in all areas of inquiry and practice. This project was the Women and Cinema (*yösöngkwa yōnghwasekye*) symposium. Held in a rented hall at the United States Information Services (USIS) library in Seoul on April 19, 1975, it foregrounded the collective's commitment to filmmaking about, by, and for women. The first public event of its kind on the theme in Korea, the symposium featured two programs. The first part included presentations and a roundtable. Reputable writers, such as Pyōn Insik, Song Sukyōng, and Yi Oryōng, spoke about commercial cinema's depiction of women and the role of women artists in the society; the subsequent roundtable with two senior female filmmakers, Pak Namok and Hong Ŭnwōn addressed structural discrimination against women in film industry. In the second part, Khaidu showcased their works in progress, including three 16mm films: *Nonetheless, We Need to Begin Again* (*Kūrōmedo urinūn tashi shijakāeyahanda*, B&W); *75-13* (color and B&W); and *Three Mirrors* (*Segaeūi kōul*, B&W).

The symposium centered on the issue of representation in both the political and aesthetic senses as the key to defining the purpose of women's cinema. Khaidu proposed to interrogate the image of woman by challenging the stereotyped images of women in Korean cinema and the structural problems that enabled such images. In the group's manifesto, published on the day of the symposium, it declared:

There is no woman in Korean cinema. There is no woman, even if Kyong-a [the heroine of *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars*] is called a “dream girl” that our society has lost. There is no woman, even if Yeong-ja [the heroine of another mega-hit film, *Yeongja's Heyday*] is said to have a happy ending. There is no woman, insofar as the state censor absurdly forced a change from the film's original title *Woman, Woman, Woman* (女女女), only because the three Chinese characters for “woman” combined (姦) mean adultery. There is no woman in Korean cinema, where the hostess films dominate under the deceptive slogan of “films for the International Women's Year.” There is no Agnès Varda calling for cinema as women's art. There is neither Jane Fonda nor Melina Mercouri looking back in anger around us. Therefore, with urgency, today we must seek the woman in question.²¹

Here Khaidu clearly rejects the figure of the woman in two of the most commercially successful films of the era: *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (dir. Yi Jangho, 1974) and *Yeongja's Heyday* (*Yŏngjaui chŏnsŏngshidae*, dir. Kim Hosŏn, 1975). Widely celebrated as “hostess films”—with “hostess” generally meaning “prostitute”—these films feature young rural-urban migrant women, recently arrived in Seoul, who end up in brothels. Common to these and other hostess films is the tendency to depict the female protagonist as a sexual object through the lens of voyeurism. This strategy had the practical outcome of breaking box office records at a time dubbed the “dark age” of the industry. The genre's dominance is striking: at least one study reports that sex workers accounted for 87.5 percent of all female characters in Korean films produced from 1971 to 1979.²² Although this overwhelming number tells us little about the complexity of the individual characters or their narrative roles in each film, it certainly warrants Khaidu's critique that women were eroticized on the screen. The collective's criticism targeted not individual directors but the institutions that enabled the perpetuation of this depiction of women. Rather than comply with these institutions that normalized the objectification of woman, the Khaidu filmmakers intended to bring a sense of urgency to their commitment to changing it, urging the symposium participants to imagine a “woman.”

At this point, one might wonder whether the Western feminists mentioned in this manifesto provided Khaidu with a model for a “woman.” It is difficult, however, to estimate how the work of Varda, Fonda, and Mercouri influenced the South Korean filmmakers. Few of their works had traveled to South Korea, and even published Korean articles on these women paid scarcely any attention to their feminist activism and its generative impact.²³ But the Khaidu members were aware of the explosion of the women's liberation movement in the United States and other European countries. Han Sunae remembers the first time she learned about the influential figures of so-called second-wave feminism, including Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, in an ABC documentary aired via TBC, a South Korean broadcasting company.²⁴ She was impressed that her Western counterparts worked with the goal of social equality, with sexuality and reproductive rights being central concerns of the liberation movement. But this impression did not

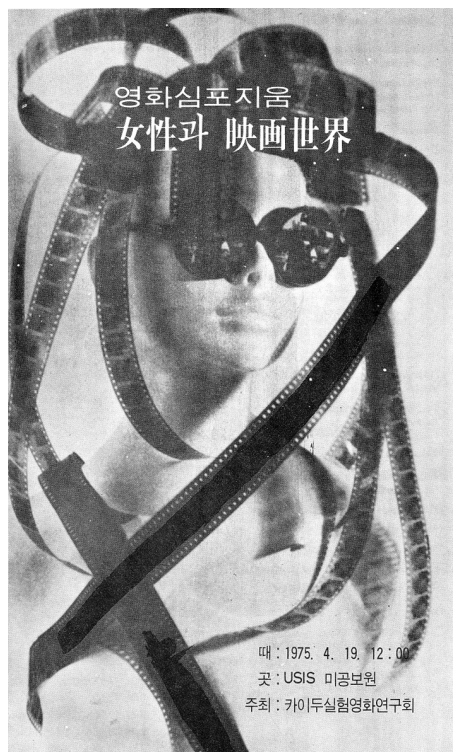


FIGURE 11. Cover of a symposium pamphlet. Credit: Han Okhi.

quite determine her collective's vision. To Han, the Western feminists' fight was "neither the exclusive origin of the [women's rights] movement nor its completion." Her negation of the Western feminist movement as a norm challenges the orientalist preconception that non-Western women needed to learn from their Western sisters, whose tradition of women's movements was allegedly richer. Although less documented and acknowledged outside their localities, South Korean women leaders and activists had also played a critical role in advocating for women's rights at the time. Since the mid-1960s, progressive church-based activist groups had supported the unionization of working-class women to improve working conditions, raise wages, and fight gender-based discrimination.²⁵ Moreover, Korean women across fields—whether they identified themselves as feminists per se—had fought fiercely for the reform of the family law that authorized men to be the heads of their families.²⁶ Through various campaigns and public education activities, they struggled to upend the patriarchal system that discriminated against women when it came to, for instance, inheriting property rights and securing child custody. While these movements were not specifically about the aesthetic representation of women, they spoke to Han more directly than those in the Western liberal sphere.

In this light, it makes more sense that the Western feminist movement that Han saw in the documentary did not necessarily appear as a model to follow but rather encouraged her to envision women and women's cinema on her own terms.²⁷

What could be, or should be, the "woman" in question, then? How did Khaidu's symposium make opportunities to articulate new visions of a "woman" and women's cinema? It should be noted here that Khaidu's call for a "woman" arrived at a juncture when the country was aggressively mobilizing women as developmental subjects in the service of the nation. Constructed by the official media and government-sponsored women's organizations, the developmental discourse on women confined their agency strictly to domesticity, motherhood, and productivity. Denouncing the women's liberation movement in the West, these institutions often accused its supporters of selfishly prioritizing gender equality over national development.²⁸ Perhaps the most succinct summary of this perspective can be found in the words of Congresswoman Sŏ Yŏnghŭi: "Women in developing countries must unite for development (palchŏn), not liberation (haepang)."²⁹

At least in the context of Khaidu's symposium, what was at stake was popular cinema's contribution to propagating this developmental discourse on women. Since its foundation in 1973, the Motion Picture Promotion Corporation had elevated cinema in the service of the state's anti-communist and nationalist agendas, while preventing anything deemed a hindrance to these goals from being shown in theaters. These measures significantly reinforced stereotypes of women in particular roles, such as industrious housewives and young workers in the service industry, whose worth was determined largely by their contribution to the nation or the lack thereof. For instance, *Parade of Wives* (*Anaetŭlŭi hangjin*, dir. Im Kwon-taek, 1974), one of the films sponsored and heavily promoted by the government, focuses on a persevering woman marrying a man in a rural village that has been plagued by poverty and disease. Thanks to her spirit of self-reliance and hard work, the village soon turns into a prosperous and tidy place to live. The film presents the village as a successful model of Park Chung Hee's rural development plan, called "Saemaeul"—meaning "new village"—in contrast to the older village, characterized in the state's framework by stagnation. While promoting the plan and its promise, the film strongly endorses cooperative and productive women who dedicate their lives to their family, village, and country as model citizens.

In this climate, Khaidu's invitation to search for a "woman" demanded other ways to imagine women and their subjectivities on screen. On the dominant figures in the cinema of the era, Han Okhi comments: "Women were often portrayed as agentless in their lives . . . no control over their bodies, no desire to fight for themselves."³⁰ There were, at least to Han, no women's voices in films like *Parade of Wives* and *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars*, the industry that produced them, or the policies that enabled their dominance. Her observation yields a certain notion of women's agency that prioritizes self-determination and freedom, while dismissing other expressions of agency; in so doing, she inevitably fails to acknowledge

her privilege as a college-educated woman whose opportunities were more bountiful than those of the urban poor and working-class women in these films. To acknowledge this, however, is not to downplay what she, the other Khaidu members, and the participants brought to the symposium: a rare and indispensable critique of the dominant convention in picturing women and the forces behind it. At least two speakers offered a reflection on the effect of mainstream media and advertising on body image, sex roles, and violence against women, which, in turn, fueled women's intervention in image-making during the discussion. The critic Yi Chinsöp, for instance, powerfully deconstructed a typology of images of women—an array of virgins, victims, and suffering mothers—and urged the industry members to listen to the diverse voices and experiences of women.

The screening of Khaidu's films following the discussion prompted more conversations about ways to complicate the objectification of women in cinema. In particular, the participants engaged with *Three Mirrors* regarding its strategy of challenging the prevailing erotization of women in cinema. The film upends the role of the male director who exploits a female actor's sexuality, including a naked female director turning the camera on a woman in clothes.³¹ In most films of the era, the male director's camera exposes the female protagonist's naked body—often with excessive use of close-ups—purportedly to entertain the audience, even when she is being raped or having intercourse. This portrayal of the woman as an eroticized subject is disrupted in *Three Mirrors* when the filmmakers, without a script, focus on two women looking at each other throughout the film. Tracing their synchronous interactions and body movements, the film presents women's reclamation of their space in a frame that was typically dominated by male protagonists who assumed the power to eroticize their counterparts. The journalist Kim Sönju, who attended the symposium, recounts how *Three Mirrors* opened something that did not yet exist. As she puts it: "Back then, [male] colleagues mindlessly applied the term 'yösöngyöngghwa' (women's film) to market commercial films that had nothing to do with woman's rights. . . . But when I saw Khaidu's film, something happened to me that I could not explain. There was not yet a feminist movement, but there was a feminist film."³² In the film, Kim saw the different figures of women who exercise their desire to see each other without being subjugated to others. These figures, who are not flattened into the stereotypes promoted by the state and the male-dominated industry, present themselves as who they are in the film.

Deconstructing the dominant representation of women, as Khaidu's manifesto proposed, necessitated a structural change in the film industry, which was a predominantly male-centered enterprise. In fact, its gatekeeping had long prevented women from building careers in cinema. To address this obstacle in public, Khaidu organized a roundtable, in which Pak Namok and Hong Ünwon spoke of their previously untold struggle. Pak, who has been credited with being the first woman to direct a Korean feature, revealed the constraints she faced in making her debut

The Widow (*Mimangin*, 1955), a film about a war widow's search for a career and love. During the film's production, Pak faced aggression targeting her as a female director at almost every stage, from the pettiness of male film workers to trouble financing her project. Even borrowing equipment or reserving recording rooms was extremely difficult for her, as most resources were under the control of male film workers.³³ Hong, known as the country's first female screenwriter, pushed through similar difficulties in making her debut, *Woman Judge* (*Yŏp'ansa*, 1962), a film based on the first Korean female judge. Despite the film's success at the box office, Hong encountered numerous barriers to financing her subsequent projects, an experience that ultimately forced her to leave the film industry.³⁴ These women testified to the toll of cracking the glass ceiling of the field, stimulating honest and robust conversations among participants about the patriarchal system that pushed women to the edges.

Simultaneously, this roundtable opened a new dialogue on whether the filmmakers' identity as women could make an essential difference in cinematic language and expression, helping Khaidu members define and compare their own notion of women's filmmaking. This discussion and the production of *Three Mirrors*, in fact, produced a breakthrough in which the filmmakers reached a consensus that just because one is born a woman does not mean one automatically assumes a "natural" connection to other women.³⁵ To them, mediating other women's experiences would require a deeper connection that had to be built by both the filmmakers and the filmed object as well by as their relationship to technology. It would be through this connection that the viewer would recognize a politically and ethically different dynamic in women's cinema, that is, an expansive capacity of empathy that would come from an acknowledgment of the systemic oppression that bound filmmakers and others together. Han Sunae emphasizes this power of empathy as the basis for what constitutes women's cinema: "There was a strong sense that women's cinema must see the world through women's eyes." She continues: "Most men in our society would never be able to understand women's experience . . . [of] being regarded as an object. While looking at Kyong-a being raped and tortured by men in the film [*Heavenly Homecoming to Stars*], I had to close my eyes. I just could not look at the scene like others in the theater. How could you? The scene was full of pain that reminded me of the suffering of other women."³⁶

Han's refusal of the film that used another's pain to entertain did not happen simply because she identified as a woman. An imagination of women's cinema had to begin otherwise: it was Han's active noticing that made her attentive to their shared pain and its cause. Such attentiveness to the other's experience allowed her to guard against becoming complicit in the perpetuation of sexism and to imagine more dialogical relations to other women. By sensing violence while refusing to see it through the lens of objectification, the lens used by the

male director and viewers, Han resisted the forces that sustained sexism and its dominance in cinema.

Through the symposium, the Khaidu members realized what they wanted to do with cinema, namely, dream up new languages, new images, and new spaces that would help them deconstruct the old order and write the future—to be precise, a more just future for women and women artists. But they also found themselves caught in the difficulty of sustaining their nonprofit filmmaking and organizing. For the past two years, Khaidu members had managed to find sponsors for their public events while financing their own filmmaking in order to maintain their autonomy. This independent filmmaking nonetheless pushed them to face reality. Later in her 2004 interview, Kim Chömsön revealed why she had to stop making films after the symposium: “Filmmaking cost more than painting or performing. My mother had funded me over the years not because she was affluent but because she wanted me, unlike her, to pursue what I wanted. . . . I simply could not continue if I had to milk my mother again and again.”³⁷ Kim’s confession presents an acute recognition of what made her independent work possible: the inadvertent exploitation of another woman. While a concern with representation—in both the political sense and the aesthetic sense—had strongly united the four filmmakers up to this point, their search for a “woman” at the symposium seemed to leave them with more difficult questions than answers about their practice.

MOVING FORWARD

After a few months of hiatus, Khaidu returned with a new project in February 1976. Magazines spotlighted the group’s return with a “haep’üning,” a romanized term for “happening” that seems to have been borrowed from the American artist Allan Kaprow.³⁸ The happening as an art genre emerged in the US and Europe in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the term eventually became a flexible concept used to describe a wide array of performative pieces that combined visual and aural material. Since the early 1960s, South Korean artists had similarly been experimenting with the nature of art practice, going beyond sculpture and painting to introduce a blending of mediums. In the ensuing decade, a boom in intermedial art yielded an array of diverse forms of performance that spoke against the repressive and domineering social fabric.³⁹ Like their contemporaries, the Khaidu members turned to creating a multimedia project composed of daily objects and situations. Han Okhi recalls:

I read about artists like John Cage and Nam June Paik, but never saw their work at that time. I was close to several Korean painters and sculptures who were at the forefront of the avant-garde movement, and we were all interested in blurring the boundaries between art and life. We called most experimental performances

“happenings,” and I saw them roughly as an expression of creative ideas that could only be conveyed via an action. It was difficult to pin down what a happening really is. This difficulty hooked us.⁴⁰

As is the case with most other happenings, little documentation has been left of Khaidu’s performance, which took place near the Cheongnyangni Station, one of the busiest areas of Seoul. A magazine article provides some description of the performance:

Three masked women walked through the flood of people. And a woman in a shamanic costume danced, holding a bell and a knife just like a real shaman using them to drive out evil spirits during a ritual ceremony. Calling up the spirits of the dead that inhabited the world, the shaman circled and turned hypnotically. When an old lady among the crowd chanted after the shaman, the shaman’s movement became more intense, as if she were encountering those spirits.⁴¹

In addition to this detail, the article notes that the performance was set to commemorate the victims of the massive fire that had occurred at Taewang Corner, a large shopping mall in the area.⁴²

Another look at the performance, in close dialogue with the performers, offers a different story. The article provides little information about the format of the happening. In fact, it was through interviews with the artists that I was able to ascertain that the film was part of their performance. Han Sunae states: “Cinema played a pivotal role in conceiving the idea for the happening, and we brought a Bolex to document what was happening on site and how we and the audience members were interacting, not just what we were doing.”⁴³ The magazine’s description is also disputed by the memory of a professional actor, Kim Tongju, who played the shaman as a guest performer: “The shamanic ritual began with a commentary on the unfortunate deaths. But the whole thing was not about them.”⁴⁴ She and two other performers danced to the sound of a drum and a stringed instrument while encouraging the audience to stamp to the sound. Kim recalls: “From the beginning, our commanding presence created a palpable air of curiosity among the audience. Most people there did not even notice that we were performing. But they were mesmerized by us.” Following the opening, Kim recited a poem, written by one of Khaidu’s founders, Yi Chŏnghŭi. It reads:

a young girl, upon becoming pregnant after rape, hangs herself
on a cold night; the dawn has not yet come
hard to tell how many yards of cloth were used to wrap around the abdomen
her pure and precious body
has been wrecked by a gray wolf during the dark night
aigo, aigo, it is terribly sad.

The poem targets both physical violence inflicted by “a gray wolf” and the symbolic violence that forced the woman to hide her body from the social stigma

surrounding pregnancy in unmarried women. During the performance, this evocative critique of violence against women was delivered several times. No one in the audience asked whose story it was or why it was narrated multiple times, but Khaidu's telling of this woman's story transmitted her suffering to others. Kim discloses: "I did not just memorize the lines. I was so affected that I could play with anger and sorrow in my gut. I wanted to comfort her spirit as if I were a genuine shaman." For more than an hour, Kim slowly but surely sensed the affirmative energy of others responding in empathy, listening with patience, and chanting the interjective expression "aigo, aigo," which encapsulated complex emotions from frustration to sadness.

Combining film, theater, music, happening, and poetry, Khaidu's 1976 project embodied a radical openness that expanded its earlier *silhöm*—it extended the boundaries not only of cinema but also of women's representation. This performance met its audience at a time when the pro-choice group's efforts to legalize abortion had faced pushback from local conservative and religious groups. Soon after Khaidu's happening, the National Assembly suspended its consideration of the revision of the anti-abortion law in the name of protecting "public morals."⁴⁵ Speaking to this moment, Khaidu's project permitted the unjust burden imposed upon women to be seen and heard in the street. During the performance, the performers did not precisely name the oppression in question as a product of patriarchy and hypermasculinity. However, the performers initiated an act of solidarity in artistic response to the injustice against women in their society. Members of the audience joined the act by listening to the story, by answering in their murmuring of "aigo," and by standing with the performers. Together, they enacted the embodied memory of women living in a culture of deeply rooted sexual violence and stigmatization, ultimately widening the stage to the street. Han Okhi recalls: "The march [on the populated street called Mangwu-ro] was never planned. It was a response from the audience that moved us [the performers] to walk with them. We marched for about an hour."⁴⁶

Khaidu's happening also disturbed, albeit temporarily, the authoritarian state and its normalized control of public space. The group began the performance an hour before the monthly defense drill that forced the entire country to stop for about half an hour. No exception was granted in this shutdown mandated by the state's farcical mission of protecting society from the threat of communists. The police officers, "arming themselves with batons," were prepared to arrest anyone who defied the mandatory drill and eventually put an end to Khaidu's performance.⁴⁷ However, the Khaidu members resumed their performance for another hour, until the police arrested Han Okhi and Yi Chŏnghŭi for violating the traffic laws, which mandated any public activity on the road be preapproved by the police.⁴⁸ This was not the first time they had run afoul of the police: they had been detained on exactly the same grounds at the previous day's rehearsal. Despite being warned and fined, the members insisted on proceeding with the

performance the next day.⁴⁹ By insisting on their presence in this way, they essentially reappropriated public space as a shared space that belonged to citizens, not exclusively to the state.

. . .

Following the 1976 happening, Khaidu paused its collective activity and officially disbanded a year later. As they moved forward, these still-young women carried on the struggle on their own terms. Han Okhi moved to Germany in 1980 to study film and continued to experiment with unconventional filmic expression. Han Sunae broke the glass ceiling of the broadcasting industry, becoming one of the very few women TV producers in the country. Yi Chŏnghŭi worked as a teacher and writer, struggling to remain attentive to those at the margins of society. Finally, Kim Chŏmsŏn expanded her horizons through painting, performance, and writing until her death in 2009. During their short yet vital existence as a group, none of them quite believed that their work would dismantle the status quo, but they knew they must continue doing it. Individually and collectively, they reckoned with the conditions of unjust representation of women in cinema as both a field of artistic representation and a field of labor.

Khaidu pursued feminist experimental cinema many years before the arrival and subsequent discussion of terms like “experimental cinema” in South Korea. The political potential the Khaidu members saw in other kinds of cinema informed the ways alternative modes were discussed in the coming decades. As the next chapter investigates, the 1980s saw more efforts to politicize the small-gauge, independent cinema that sprouted up across college campuses. In the following decade, during the country’s democratic transition, various film initiatives facilitated the process of decentralizing the state’s power and diversifying the film community. The term “experimental cinema” gained currency later in the 1990s, with a surge of film clubs, cinematheques, and video archives across big cities. The boom in new spaces for alternative cinema prompted numerous screenings of foreign, “classical” avant-garde films and videos, including the work of Fluxus, and gave rise to a range of film festivals, such as the Experimental Film and Video Festival in Seoul (EXiS).⁵⁰

Khaidu’s legacy also lies in its politicization of cinema as a medium for feminist visions in 1970s South Korea. The young filmmakers made and exhibited their work at a time when women artists rarely had a platform of their own, and no radical discourse on women’s liberation was ever approved for publication. Their pursuit of other cinema continued in the next generation’s film discourse and practice, which have been broadly termed “cine-feminism.” Later, in 1989, Paritŏ, a women’s film collective of young critics and graduate students, produced several 16mm documentary films on working-class women, such as *Even Little Grass Has Its Own Name* (*Chakŭn p’uredo irŭm issŭni*, 1990). Although not long-lived, it collaborated closely with grassroots women’s organizations and presented a feminist

model of solidarity through its filmic rendition of urgent issues such as childcare and discrimination at work.⁵¹ In less than five years, a group of filmmakers and scholars took the lead in the cine-feminism movement, from translating Western feminist theory and organizing the Seoul International Women's Film Festival (SIWFF) to demanding fairer representation of women artists.⁵²

To bring Khaidu's *silhöm* for an alternative cinema into our time is not to romanticize the short-lived collective. More than four decades after Khaidu's debut, the members still alive in 2017 and 2018 watched a younger generation of women in South Korea and abroad break the silence about sexual violence in unprecedented ways. Emboldened by these women's courageous demands for change, many South Koreans began to acknowledge the structural misogyny that remained unshakable at every level of their lives. The surviving Khaidu members found the so-called #MeToo movement relevant and empowering.⁵³ Yet they also saw the younger women as burdened with a long-postponed task of their own. Han Sunae regretfully admits: "Look at the girls in the street to abolish the Anti-abortion Law and women film workers breaking the silence. . . . These things should have happened back in the 1970s, not today. If we had been able to change, none of this would have happened in 2017 and 2018, don't you agree?"⁵⁴

Her question feels weighty. In today's film culture and beyond, many women's experiences of systemic oppression are still silenced and even denied. It was only in 2018 that the Center for Gender Equality in Korean Cinema (Han'guky ōnghwasōngp'yōngdūngsentō) was launched to raise consciousness about the structural issues in the field. In response to the new wave of feminist activism that has swept the country, women film workers—in both the mainstream and independent sectors—have organized themselves to redress the lack of female voices in cinema; an emerging group of younger self-identified feminists across all industries has demanded justice in areas from salary differences to everyday bias against women.⁵⁵ Notwithstanding these much-needed voices, the field is still strikingly hypermasculine and misogynistic. According to the Center for Gender Equality in Korean Cinema, despite the recent increase in the number of women working in the industry, only about ten percent of features were directed by women, and more than three-quarters of leading cast and crew roles went to men. Worse yet, more than seventy percent of women in the film business experienced sexual harassment in 2019–20.⁵⁶ Han Sunae's frustration feels contagious at a moment when a more just and equitable future for women seems too far away. Where do we go from here to imagine a future where no woman is marginalized? If anything can be learned from Khaidu, it is that we need to experiment in every possible way to push against all forms of oppression, whether of ourselves or of others. The power they saw in radicalizing cinema and women's voices asks us to return with them to a moment of profound intervention. And that invitation itself can be a marker of hope, something we can grasp as we move forward from our difficult present.