

Imperial Technology and Cinematic Collaboration *Spring on the Peninsula*, Talkie Film-Making under the New Political System

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Introduction

An entirely new situation was created when Korean cinema was completely incorporated into Japanese cinema in the late Colonial period. That reorganization was not, of course, conducted unilaterally. The Colonial Korean film industry had to make the pie grow to cope with the rapidly increasing cost of production since the introduction of the talkie film in the mid-1930s.

Under these circumstances, the demand for ‘industrialization’ requiring technological enhancement and a consistent system, and the demand to enter into markets other than Colonial Korea’s were significant factors in the optimistic anticipation of an intimate connection between Colonial Korean and Japanese film.

From the viewpoint of the Colonial Korean film industry, it simply did not mean collaboration with the war and the colonial government. On a very practical level, the integration into Japanese cinema was considered necessary in order to secure advanced technology and capital, as well as a broader market on the Japanese mainland (not to mention the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, including Manchuria).

The actual conditions, however, could not evolve in such an optimistic way. From the 1940s, the colonial Korean film industry was degraded into a mere market for Japanese films, under the direct control of Japanese capital. It had to face the prospect that even the category of ‘Chōsen film’ (Korean film) might disappear. In this paper, I will discuss how collaboration was related to the effects of industrialization, the new political order, and the new technology. The primary focus of my analysis will be the film *Spring on the Peninsula* (*Bando-eu-bom*) by Lee Byung-il, a representative film-maker in colonial Korea and the Republic of Korea.

1 Making Films in the Talkie Era

After the proclamation of the Korean Film Act (*Chōsen-eigarei*)¹, the first film that passed

¹ Except for Article 19 of Film Law of Japan that regulates the film committee, *Chōsen-eigarei* was basically identical to **Japanese Film Law**. Besides, ‘film that creates trouble in the governing of Chōsen’ was prohibited under Article 216 and 217.

inspection was *Spring on the Peninsula*. At first glance it seems to be a film that was poorly timed, made as it was at a time of fierce propaganda. It was based on Kim Sung-Min's Japanese novel, *Artists of the Peninsula*, which was a candidate for the contest held by *Sunday Mainichi* for original literary works. This film tells the story of the passion, collapse and hope of a group of filmmakers.

The hero, Youngil, works at a record company. He is introduced to Junghee, the young sister of one of his friends. Junghee is a prospective actress who is both pretty and talented. Youngil is currently producing a film called *Chunhyangjeon*, which is financially supported by the department manager in his company, a man named Han. The lead role in the film is played by Anna, who has a kind of 'relationship' with Han, but who seems to like Youngil. Youngil, however, gradually leans towards Junghee. The director of the film, named Hur, grows dissatisfied with Anna's insincerity. One day, Anna unilaterally declares that she will not be able to continue acting in the film because she broke up with Han. This situation causes Han to withdraw his financial support. Youngil then introduces Junghee to replace Anna in the role of Chunhyang, and embezzles 1,000 won from his company to continue filming. However, Han uses an evil scheme to discover Youngil's embezzlement, and Youngil is arrested, putting the completion of the film in jeopardy. As the director Hur tells his staff in mournful 'Korean language,' "A film cannot be produced with artistic conscience and passion alone. It is impossible without sound capital and an organizational plan."

This corresponds to the actual situation of the Colonial Korean film industry at the time. Sound capital and organizational plan were problems that had to be solved as soon as possible for the Colonial Korean film industry to develop smoothly.

The Colonial Korean film, which had exploded on the scene with the success of Na Wun-Gyu's *Arirang* in 1926, was threatened by the introduction of talkie films in 1933 and 1934. This threat was severe, since box-office receipts were dwindling rapidly². This was also a result of growth of an audience that had once maintained a high degree of loyalty to Colonial Korean films. Increasingly, intellectuals were drawn to European films; Japanese films that had not been in consideration until then were becoming potentially and in addition, an overwhelming number of Hollywood films³ were occupying the theater⁴. Now theaters were the places in which 'a standard time of the world' was operating. Accordingly, the acquisition of the 'standard technology' that was required by such 'standard time' had become a most urgent

2 Lee Young-II, *Korean Film History*, Sodo, 2004 (1969), p144.

3 According to the record of 1934, 62% of entire movie houses in Colonial Korea was filled up with American films ("Joseon" Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures 1938(New York : Film Daily, 1938) 1191-93). Brian Yecies citing this data examines the position of Hollywood films in colonial Joseon from 1926 to 1936 and explains how the objective of MPPDAA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America) for global expansion of Hollywood corresponds well with economic demand of the Japanese Joseon government. Brian Yecies 「Film Inspection as a Good Business in Colonial Joseon: Profiteering of the First Golden Era (1926-1936) of Hollywood」 『Research in Korean Literature』 No 30, Institute of Korean Literature Studies, Dongguk University, 2006, pp203-237.

4 Amount of foreign films to be released was limited to 3/4 in late 1930, 2/3 in mid 1936 and 1/2 after 1939. 加藤厚子, 『総動員体制と映画』, 新曜社, 2003, p215.

problem⁵. Another problem was that production costs per film were 4 to 5 times higher with the introduction of the talkie. This meant that the existing system did not allow new films to be produced at all. Industrialization had become as an urgent task faced by Colonial Korean filmmakers.

In the end, the desperate filmmakers of *Spring on the Peninsula* were rescued by the establishment of a large film company. Such a miraculous solution matched the opinions of filmmakers and critics of the time. The proclamation of the ‘Chōsen-eigarei,’ a Colonial Korean version of the Japanese Film Law, in 1940 brought the belief that the task of ‘rational industrialization’ could be achieved through the Japanese Empire. One year later, in response to such a belief,⁶ the ‘Chōsen Film Co., Ltd.’ was established through an initiative of the Government of Chōsen.

2 State as a System- The Term Peninsula in Bilingual Film

Spring on the Peninsula depicts a perfectly bilingual situation between the Korean and Japanese languages. The intellectuals in *Keijō* (Seoul) no longer exhibit the consciousness of a colony. They are perfectly bilingual, and none has even a trace of the ‘dialect’ that most Korean people were thought to use. To bilingual writers in the colony, problems of Japanese ‘pronunciation’ were an important basis from which the issues of differentiation and assimilation could be discussed. Considering this, characters in the film who can perfectly pronounce Japanese are no longer “different beings.” However, this Japanese language ‘freely’ positioned itself between Korean languages. This film had been translated from an original work written in Japanese. Therefore, such a bilingual situation can only explained as a film-makers’ intention.

Bilingual situation of male and female characters in this film are slightly different. While all male characters can ‘naturally’ move between Japanese and Korean, the language of the actresses depends on their characters. For example, Anna and Junghee, who are in a kind of love triangle with Youngil, are distinguished by their use of Japanese and Korean, and also by their contrasting attires. The innocence and courtesousness of the female student Junghee is the opposite of the dissolute and overindulgent Anna who is ‘assumed’ to have once been a waitress.

In this film, Japanese is accepted as a ‘cultural language’ rather than carrying the political implications associated with ‘national language.’ Japanese indicates something more modern. For example, in *Tuition Fee* (the first ‘Japanese’ film made in Colonial Korea, in 1940), which illustrates a Japanese teacher’s attempt to help a poor Korean student, the use of ‘Japanese’ was

⁵ First talkie of Colonial Korean film appeared in 1935, *Chunhyangjeon* (Lee Myung-Woo). This film was good box office but received a harsh criticism that “although it created a new record of ‘Colonial Korean film can also talk,’ it did not reach the point of recognition that ‘this is Chunhyangjeon.’” An Seok-Young, 『A Year of Joseon Film Industry』, Jogwang, 1936.12.

⁶ However, in fact, the initiative of this company with vice-president of Keizō Chamber of Commerce Tanaka Saburo as the president and chief producer of Nikkatsu Tamagawa Studio Nakada Haruyasu as the head producer was on Japanese people. Establishment of Chōsen Film Co., Ltd. meant creation of fourth large film company of Japan following Shochiku, Toho, and Daiei. All films made in Colonial Korea were now to be made by Chōsen Film Co., Ltd.

very political, because the problem of cultural and linguistic assimilation is embodied at the very moment ‘Japanese’ is used. However, *Spring on the Peninsula* uses Japanese to emphasize the relationship between Tokyo and Keizō rather than Japan and Chōsen. The intellectuals of Keizō regard Tokyo as possessing a superior culture.

This linguistic relationship can be seen in the very title, ‘Spring on the Peninsula.’ The term ‘peninsula’ (*hanto*) erases the historical and political contexts carried by the word Chōsen. Peninsula was preferable to ‘Chōsen’ from the late 1930s on because its implications were solely geographic. As long as this word was used, the relationship between colonizing Japan and colonized Korea could be framed as the relationship between mainland (*naichi*) and peninsula as an extension of mainland. ‘Peninsula’ is a falsely neutral word because the meaning of coloniality was greatly limited by the concept of ‘local color.’ The Korean language here becomes ‘local language.’ In the setting of a relationship composed only of (mainland) Tokyo and (peninsula) Keizō, coloniality disappears. Strictly speaking, the relationship between the colonizer and colonized disappears. ‘Colonial’ state power applied to ‘Chōsen’ appears as a ‘state power’ that acts on the ‘peninsula.’ Such a state power operates as a kind of system. This system ‘rationally’ controls and arranges the entire situation. Only that state can resolve the chronic problems of filmmakers who are suffering from a vicious cycle. That is because the state will protect artists from evil capitalists by rejecting commercialism, evenly distribute opportunities through fair allocation, and achieve a stable system through rational management⁷.

Imagining this idealized state can be connected with the Empire’s total war mobilization. Total war mobilization made the imagination of ‘the state as a perfectly rationalized system’ possible⁸. In Colonial Korea, the modern age arrived with colonization. Modernity is a awareness of lateness in colony (or perhaps a sense of lateness is essentially modernity itself). However, ‘state as a system’ was recognized as an opportunity to break away from this sense of lateness, a process for the completion of the modern project.

How could this be accomplished in film? As modern medium, film is itself a technological device, which can excite the belief of breaking away from coloniality by mediating a homogeneous space called ‘state.’ In particular, the demands of the film industry for rationalization coincided with the image of state as system.

Yet Imperial Japan only asked for the utilization of film when this ‘apolitical’ film tried to recognize the state as a system. In 1941, the film censor Mori Hiroshi argued the importance of film as the one and only entertainment of Colonial Korea, calculating that the number of

7 Chōsen Film Co., Ltd. assigned stock of 6 photodramas, 6 documentary films, and 12 news films news accomplished a ‘system’ in which all steps from planning to distribution were unified.

8 Yamanouchi Yasushi mentions the problem of social reorganization by total war system and criticizes the dominant view of contemporary Japanese history as “an abnormal course that breaks away from the natural maturing process that the modern society must follow,” pointing out the fact that the entire society became rationalized towards functionality for war under total war system. He defines the characteristic of reorganization operated by the total war mobilization as “shift from a class to a system society.” 山之内靖「方法的序論——総力戦とシステム統治、山之内靖・ヴィクタ・コシュマン/成田龍一編、『総力戦と現代化』拍書房、1995、pp9–12.

filmgoers exceeded 20 million per year⁹. Film was elevated as the sole means of education to an Empire that had to continue its war¹⁰.

3 Locality, a Sign That Must Disappear

The fact that the film within *Spring on the Peninsula* is *Chunhyangjeon* has a special significance. Throughout the colonial era, indeed throughout the history of Korean film, *Chunhyangjeon* has served as a battlefield for female stars, and a testing ground for new technology. Positively speaking, *Chunhyangjeon* is a representative product of negotiation between tradition and modernity and a symbol of greed that links pre-colony, colony and post-colony. The intention of Lee Byung-Il is clear¹¹: he probably wanted to create *Chunhyangjeon* with true ‘local color.’

Discussions about locality in Colonial Korean films begin around the same period as the talkie was introduced. Particularly instrumental was the critical success of *Traveler* (1936), that gave rise to the possibility of marketing talkie films in Japan. The establishment of the Manchurian Film Cooperative (*Manei*) in 1937 when the Sino-Japanese War broke out induced in the Colonial Korean film industry a rosy fantasy¹² that a market on the mainland and the continent could be established. There was a basis for such optimism. Before and after 1940, a kind of ‘Chōsen boom’ was taking place in Japan¹³.

At the very moment the reality of outside had to be envisioned, the problem of ‘locality’ was formed. Local color was a double-edged sword. If Colonial Korean film assumed the outside called the Empire and configure local color in response to the viewpoint of those others, then the Empire’s call for Colonial Korean films could be summarized by the phrase ‘continental supply base’. It meant that the ‘peninsula was a stepping-stone for military, economic and cultural con-

9 This value also shows a large difference from the number of charged film audiences of Japan at the time. Such an inequality actually became the reason why they became aware of ‘inland’ market. Based on 1940, number of film watching per person was 13.83 in Tokyo and 14.31 in Kyoto. 『昭和16年映画年鑑』, 日本映画雑誌協会, 1941, p 6–17.

10 “If a brother of Chōsen becomes a member of the Imperial Army without mastering the true Japanese spirit, what would happen.....Considering the important mission of Chōsen in the wartime, I want to repeatedly emphasize that the utilization of films is absolutely necessary to achieve such goal.” 森浩, 「朝鮮に於ける映画に就いて」, 『映画旬報』1943.7, p4.

11 The talkie film *Chunhyangjeon* released in 1935 was a failure as a film and Japanese version of the play *Chunhyangjeon* directed by Murayama Tomoyoshi of Shinkyo (with dramatization by Jang Hyuk-Ju) in 1938 received a bitter evaluation that it is just like an ‘*omiyage* at a department store.’ Lee Tae-Jun. *Exchange Between Literature and Film* (Symposium), Donga Ilbo, 1938.12.24.

12 In late 1930s, Colonial Korean film industry was in the process of adhesion to the inland film industry. This meant more of an advancement of inland films to Joseon than expansion of Joseon films. On the other hand, the problem of shift in generations in major human resources of film industry at the time in mid 1930s can be pointed out as a reason why such situation could be recognized. The new generation that began to appear starting with Lee Gyu-Hwan is characterized by the common point that many number of them studied abroad in Japan.

13 渡辺一民, 『他者として朝鮮』, 岩波書店, 2003.

nection to the continent¹⁴.⁷ Under this logic, local color thus must have its purpose in ‘resolution.’ Within the exceptional situation of wartime, heterogeneity carried by an absolute enemy created the necessary premise of a perfect and forceful unity within the Empire on the opposite side.

Spring on the Peninsula made a new articulation called ‘mainland’ and ‘peninsula’ instead of Japan and Chōsen. By merely removing colonization, they could imagine the creation of an ‘auto-ethnography’ to communicate with both mainland and peninsula. Yet the Empire did not approve of any distinction or difference at the time¹⁵. Colonial Korean film experienced a complete qualitative shift to the film of ‘Empire’ Japan at its peak of physical expansion¹⁶.

14 鈴木武雄, 「大陸前進兵站基地論」, 1939. 『朝鮮經濟の新構想』, re-included in 1942, p73.

15 Anna who shares (or rather replaces) the role of Chunhyang with Junghee in *Spring of Peninsula* seems to be a secretive yet very ‘cowardly’ comment by a colonial male. This woman who has Tokyo on her background does not have any indication of her being as Korean. Is she Japanese? Is she a Korean person? She is placed in a position in which this question cannot even exist. This character is given a freedom in which she is not bounded by ethnicity, but price for such freedom is gruesome. When Youngil leaves Anna, there is an element that can be explained as a conducted sadistic revenge attempted by a colonial man at the point in which he cannot ask about the colonizing-colonized relationship any more. A kind of symbolic revenge about an ‘extraneous thing’ that is not politically problematic is interposed in it.

16 During the same period, Karashima Takeshi who was a professor of Keizō Imperial University, the honorary chairman of Drama Culture Association affirms that ‘Chōsen Film Co., Ltd. exists to resolve itself.’