

**K-MOVIE**

**KOREAN CULTURE No.5**

**K-MOVIE: The World's Spotlight on Korean Film**

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*“Some of the finest and most exciting films I’ve seen in recent years have been Korean, from filmmakers like Park Chan-wook, Hong Sang-soo, Park Chan-ok, Kim Ki-duk and Park Kwang-su.”*

Martin Scorsese (director, writer, producer), 2006

*“A terrific hybrid-genre fantasy and a seriously scary freakout. Tensely wound scenes as effective as any in War of the Worlds. The best film I’ve seen at this year’s Cannes Film Festival.”*

Comment on Bong Joon-ho’s *The Host*, Manohla Dargis,  
*The New York Times*, May 23, 2006

*“Pieta, a brutal, beautiful South Korean film jolts Venice.”*

Comment on Kim Ki-duk’s *Pieta*, Reuters, September 5, 2012



## PROLOGUE

Hollywood films may dominate the world's box offices today, but in Korea it's the homegrown product that has been capturing the public's attention. Korean films enjoyed a 52% share of the domestic market in 2011, putting them over the fifty-percent mark for the first time in four years. It was the most prolific year for Korean filmmaking yet in the 21st century – 216 new movies. Meanwhile, Korean film directors were getting major press at international film festivals. Exports were booming, and the films that reached overseas audiences found a warm reception there. Exported films netted some \$15,830,000 that year, reversing a six-year trend of negative growth. Their number – 366 – was also at a historic high.



Kim Ki-duk's *Pieta* won the Golden Lion award for the best film at the 69th Venice Film Festival.



The 6th annual London Korean Film Festival

Low-budget independent films and art movies were drawing a bigger audience, too. Six and half million people headed to theaters to see such films that year, including an audience of 2 million for the animated *Leafie, A Hen into the Wild*. Releases from the year before – *Don't Cry for Me, Sudan* and *Miracle on Jongno Street* among them – joined the diverse crop of independent features that met new viewers in theaters.

This is where the Korean film industry stood in 2011. It didn't happen overnight, of course. Korean cinema has been through many twists and turns since its earliest days, when filmmakers nourished themselves on

a mixture of Western influence from the early 20th century and Korea's own unique cultural perspective. These were tumultuous years: first colonization by Japan, then the ravages of the Korean War. But each new crisis only left Korean cinema with a stronger foundation. Its filmmakers are as committed, its audiences as unwaveringly loyal as any in the world's most developed countries, turning these crises into opportunities for qualitative leaps and bounds. It is a cultural experience that this book aims to share with the rest of the world through looking at the dynamic past and present of Korean film.



(Top) *War of the Arrows* (2011)  
(Bottom) *The Thieves* (2012)

## Chapter One

# A LOOK INSIDE KOREAN CINEMA

### The Korean Film Industry Today

Two major currents prevail in mainstream Korean cinema today: the Korean-style blockbuster and the so-called “well-made” film. The former is an overt attempt to mimic the Hollywood strategy of maximizing profits through economies of scale. It is emblematic of the industry’s quantitative growth over the years: soaring production and market costs, with box office numbers to match. The latter, in contrast, is a highly polished form of commercial feature that is designed to satisfy audiences and critics alike with its combination of strong writing and acting with ever increasing technical proficiency in cinematography, lighting, art direction, and sound. If the blockbusters grew the overall industry pie, then the discourse of the well-made film has fed qualitative advancements in Korean commercial cinema. Both give a glimpse at development strategies that have recently been put to work in the Korean film world.

## 'Korean-Style Blockbusters'

The Korean-style blockbuster follows an important strategy that may be unique to Korean cinema. It emulates the Hollywood blockbuster with its comparatively lavish production costs, but it also has to deliver content that appeals to local audiences. Korean filmmakers have nothing like Hollywood budgets to work with, so they need to be exceedingly clever, achieving all of the impact at a fraction of the cost. The resulting blockbusters are more creative than anywhere else in the world.

The term “Korean-style blockbuster” dates back to 1998 and the publicity campaign for *The Soul Guardians*. This was a big-budget movie for its day, costing \$2.1 million at a time when the average Korean film was made for around \$1.3 million. It represented the first attempt to copy the Hollywood blockbuster strategy with magnificent spectacle and aggressive marketing. Unfortunately, it was not a hit.

But another blockbuster did break out that year. The success of Kang



*Shiri* (1998)

Je-kyu's *Shiri* showed that the strategy could pay dividends. An action thriller set against the backdrop of inter-Korean tensions, the film was made for \$2.7 million and drew a record audience of 6.2 million within three weeks of its release. It was also a hit in Japan, becoming the first Korean film to attract more than a million viewers to theaters there.

*Shiri* inaugurated a new era in Korean cinema history. One film after

another adopted the Hollywood-style economy-of-scale strategy: huge production costs, saturation marketing, wide release. In 2000, Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* hit a new high water mark with an audience of 5.83 million nationwide. The blockbuster strategy was now a *sine qua non* for industry growth.

The accent in “Korean-style blockbuster” is on the “Korean.” If the typical Hollywood film is a transnational spectacle that relies heavily on fantasy and sci-fi elements, its Korean counterpart focuses on dramatic recreations of incidents from the country's stormy history. This demands solid scripting and a firm footing in historical episodes or situations that were traumatic for the Korean people (of which there is no shortage). Many have dwelled on the ongoing conflict with North Korea, and the tragedy of a single people pitted against each other by their nation's division. This approach spawned such box office hits as the aforementioned *Joint Security Area*; *Silmido*, a 2003 film that broke the 10 million viewer mark; the 2004 Korean War epic *Taegukgi: Brotherhood of War*; and *May 18*, a 2007 recreation of the 1980 massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in Gwangju.

Korean viewers are used to foreign films, so the blockbusters have to be both realistic and spectacular in a way that takes this into account. This



*Joint Security Area* (2000)





*Haeundae* (2009)

has forced Korean directors to come up with ingenious ways of generating spectacle without breaking the bank. In the process, they've gained experience of how to make a \$10 million movie look like it cost twice as much. Cases in point include *The Host* (2006) and *Haeundae* (2009), both of which pulled more than 10 million Koreans into theaters; *Sector 7* (2011), Asia's first-ever 3-D blockbuster; and *My Way* (2011), whose stunning battlefield sequences seem pulled straight from a Hollywood war movie.

One other thing worth noting is the wider range of choices that the blockbuster genre has offered viewers. Seemingly every new film takes on a new genre. The reason so many films have been able to break the eight-digit mark with audiences has to do with their ongoing efforts to meet ever more discerning standards.

### 'Well-Made' Films

It was in 2003 that the "well-made" film really came into its own. Over a twelve-month period, a handful of commercial releases hit it big with audiences (with upwards of 3 million viewers) by offering a dazzling display of directorial talent coupled with gripping storylines: Bong Joon-ho's *Memories of Murder*, Lee Jae-yong's *Untold Scandal* (which transported the story of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* into Joseon-era Korea), Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, and Kim Jee-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters*. To describe this new breed, the country's film journals and critics adopted a Koreanized term from English, calling them "well-made." The "well-made" movie was increasingly seen as a healthy counterweight in an industry that was becoming ever more dependent on aggressive blockbuster tactics.



(Left) *Tazza: The High Rollers* (2006)  
 (Right) *Blood Rain* (2005)

This trend hit a new peak the following year, when *Oldboy*, a box office sensation that drew 3.26 million people to theaters in Korea, claimed Grand Prix honors at the 57th Cannes Film Festival. More films emerged to carry on the mantle over the next few years: Choi Dong-hoon's *The Big Swindle* (2004) and *Tazza: The High Rollers* (2006), Kim Dai-seung's *Blood Rain* (2005), Kim Jee-woon's *A Bittersweet Life* (2005), and Lee Joon-ik's *The King and the Clown* (2005). The last of these, in particular, was a huge success that proved blockbusters weren't the only films that could hit the 10 million viewer mark – a comparatively low-budget “well-made” movie could do it, too. And Choi Dong-hoon's most recent work *The Thieves* (2012) clocked up more than 12.9 million admissions, recording the second best-selling Korean film at home (as of September 2012).

## A Touch of Diversity

Audiences haven't just supported commercial films. In 2001, a year when screens were dominated by Korean-style gangster films like Kwak Kyung-taek's *Friend*, an independent movement was afoot among viewers to protect the “small movies” – artistically accomplished, but unable to score the theater space they needed to draw a big audience. Examples included Lim Soon-rye's *Waikiki Brothers*, Jang Hyun-soo's *Raybang*, Moon Seung-wook's *The Butterfly*, and Jeong Jae-eun's *Take Care of My Cat*.

This newfound attention led to re-releases and extended runs, generating some measure of box office performance.

*Take Care of My Cat* (2001)





(Left) *Repatriation* won the 'Freedom of Expression Award' at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival.  
 (Right) *The Journals of Musan* (2011)

People began talking about the importance of diversity in cinema. Low-budget movies and art films needed at least some opportunity for theatrical release, they argued. Meanwhile, the re-release campaign continued unabated, granting second chances to films like *Taekwon Boys* (2004) and *Epitaph* (2007). Viewers were trying to change the multiplex culture, with its overwhelming focus on the blockbuster, and stake out new “viewing rights.” This support went a long way in contributing to the diversity of Korean cinema.

A turning point came in 2003, when the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) launched the ArtPlus Cinema Network, an alliance of art cinemas and low-budget independent theaters geared to providing a new viewership for particularly outstanding films and giving audiences the right to a

more eclectic selection. As a result, documentaries that had previously been denied any screens to speak of in theaters (Park Ki-bok’s *‘Mudang’: Reconciliation Between the Living and the Dead* (2003), Kim Dong-won’s *Repatriation* (2004), and Kim Myung-jun’s *Our School* (2006) among them) were now receiving official openings. They found new viewers, and many of them more than 10,000, enough to set new box office records for the genre.

*Our School* was an especially big hit. The moving documentary, which looks at the lives of Korean-Japanese students at a Hokkaido school from admission to graduation, was seen by more than 70,000 viewers in Korean theaters. Around half of them ended up doing so not at formal theatrical screenings, but through the noncommercial Community Screenings network. Another documentary sensation was *Old Partner* (2009), about the friendship between an old farmer and his aging bull. This film rode a word of mouth wave all the way from indie theaters to the multiplexes, drawing an utterly unprecedented final audience tally of 2.99 million.

Government and audience support have helped to nurture a steady stream of low-budget independent films in different genres. Some of the most prominent examples include *No Regret* (2006), *Breathless* (2009), *The Journals of Musan* (2011), *Bleak Night* (2011), and *The King of Pigs* (2011).

## A Foreign Perspective

### Focus on the Director

Darcy Pacquet, Korean correspondent for the American film site Screen International, says the new Korean films of the 21st century – a regular

presence at international film festivals – are playing a crucial trend-shaping role in Asian culture. In particular, he notes the prestige enjoyed by the director, whose grip on the filmmaking process is rather tighter than is the case in the United States or other advanced countries. The industry's ever-evolving technical capabilities are allowing these filmmakers' talents to shine, opening new paths for them to share their unique and original cinematic visions.

Korea traces its first experience with the film medium back to the early 20th century, the days of Japanese colonial rule. For a long time, the filmmaking process followed a kind of apprenticeship system (itself rooted in Japanese practice). Apprentices started out doing basic jobs on the film set, moving their way up the ladder as they honed their practical skills and strategies by watching their more experienced colleagues at work. The system was rigorously hierarchical, and gave the director unquestioned authority – quite a difference from the producer-dominated American studio system.

Lee Chang-dong and his staff at set of *Poetry*



But as the pictures got bigger and more costly, Korea began looking to the American system as a model, seeing its practices as more systematic and rational. For a while, the two forms coexisted, giving birth to a unique production culture; as Pacquet observes, the director remained a very influential presence. This production environment, and its trust in directorial talent, would later provide a crucial underpinning for directors like Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, and Kim Jee-woon, whose “well-made” films became an industry mainstay.

Not everything has been about commercial appeal, though. Some directors have painstakingly nurtured unique perspectives that are anything *but* commercial – and found audiences for them not just (or not even) at home, but in overseas art film markets. Emblematic of this trend are such respected figures as Hong Sang-soo, Kim Ki-duk, and Lee Chang-dong. These directors enjoy fervent fan bases in the domestic art film market and have been hailed by overseas media and critics for distinctive approaches that stand at the very forefront of Asian film aesthetics.

### Avid Viewer Interest

Another hallmark of Korean cinema, Pacquet says, is the high level of audience attention it enjoys. Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* provides a good example of this. Despite its shockingly taboo subject matter, the film drew 3 million viewers to theaters at home and claimed the Grand Prix at Cannes – a testament to Korean audiences' regard and love for their country's cinema.

Discerning and open to the adventurous, those audiences have furnished a solid support base for the growth of their national cinema. It is doubtful that viewers in other countries would have been as receptive to

a homoerotically charged historical drama (*The King and the Clown*, 2005) or a blockbuster monster movie with strongly political associations (*The Host*, 2006), but both were 10 million-plus sensations in Korean theaters. It is also unusual to find a country where fully one-quarter of the film-viewing population heads to the theater to see the same movie, as has often been the case in Korea.



*The King and the Clown* (2005)

## Flourishing Film Media

A boom in film media has been crucial for Korean cinema's growth, Pacquet notes. Most of the country's major media companies have their own journals featuring in-depth coverage of anything and everything film-related. *Cine 21*, which dates back to the pre-blockbuster days of 1995,



may be the leader of the pack, but a number of other weeklies (*Film 2.0*, *Movieweek*) and monthlies (*Kino*, *Screen*) are also there to survey the peaks and valleys of cinema history, making a rich contribution to Korean film discourse.

## Help from the Government

Last but not least, the overseas attention enjoyed by Korean films has been facilitated by support programs from the national government. The country has a screen quota system in place to provide cinema space for Korean movies and ensure a certain level of cultural diversity. Meanwhile, the Korean Film Council has been the focal point for efforts to expand film infrastructure, assist local films in finding overseas audiences, improve working conditions in the industry, support low-budget independent work, and – through the Good Downloader Campaign – eradicate the practice of illegal film downloading. In these and other ways, it is working to lay the groundwork for the industry's development.

## Fostering New Talent

With so many Korean viewers showing a strong interest in film, many younger people dream of someday working in the medium themselves. Audition spots and film studies department seats are hotly contested. Cinema departments have been set up at nearly every level of schooling – arts high schools, vocational colleges, four-year universities, and graduate schools. In addition, aspiring film professionals have a wide assortment of private academies and film production societies to choose from.

All told, Korea has around 100 universities offering film studies programs. The most representative examples may be found at the Seoul Institute of the Arts, Chung-Ang University, Hanyang University, Dongguk

Korea National University of Arts' School of Film, TV & Multimedia



Amateur filmmakers within Kyung Hee University

University, and the Korea National University of Arts. These institutions have systematic curricula and talented faculty churning out accomplished graduates to serve as the Korean film leaders of tomorrow.

Then there is the Korea Academy of Film Arts, which some have dubbed the “West Point of Korean film.” Founded by the Korean Film Council in 1984 for the purpose of training specialized film workers, it is famously choosy – after all, it has to train key professionals through a brief but rigorous specialized curriculum.

Meanwhile, a number of private institutions are also at work developing education film professionals. Seoul Media Center, MEDIACT, the Hankyoreh Education and Culture Center, and the KT&G Sangsangmadang Academy are just a few of the places offering regular coursework on every aspect of cinema production, from practical areas like screenwriting, directing, cinematography, lighting, and editing to more abstract fields like criticism and theory, producing, marketing, and publicity.



## Chapter Two

# GOING GLOBAL

### Hallyu and Korean Film

Before Hallyu – the “Korean Wave” – took Japan by storm with K-Pop and hit television miniseries, there were Korean movies. In the Land of the Rising Sun, quality films like *Christmas in August* (1998), *Shiri* (1998), *Joint Security Area* (2000), and *My Sassy Girl* (2001) drew major attention, and no small audience turnout, in these early years. *Shiri*, in particular, enjoyed a wide release, opening simultaneously in 150 venues across Japan and drawing 1.3 million audience into theaters.

In those days, Korean film’s major export market was other Asian countries – especially Japan, where no fewer than 30 Korean movies opened in 2004 alone. This success ignited hopes that these movies might take the place of Hollywood product in Japan. After a string of bank-breaking American duds, people began looking to Korean movies that accomplished much more for far less. Adding to the appeal was the fact

that these films came from East Asia and shared similar cultural elements, making them more accessible to audiences.

Things came to a head in 2005, with the monumental success of the TV miniseries *Winter Sonata* (released in Korea in 2002). Suddenly, Korean actors were at the forefront of a new Korean Wave in Japan. As Hallyu took off there, the archipelago came to account for 79.4% of Korea's film exports. The major driving force was star power, and such high-wattage names as *Winter Sonata* stars Bae Yong-jun and Choi Ji-woo, Lee Young-ae of *Jewel in the Palace* (2003–2004) fame, Lee Byung-hun and Song Hye-kyo from the hit miniseries *All In* (2003), and Jun Ji-hyun – *My Sassy Girl* (2001) herself. That same year, three Korean films opened in Japan to a strong response: 2 billion yen for *Windstruck* (2004), 2.75 billion yen for *April Snow* (2005), and 3 billion yen for *A Moment to Remember* (2004). The first two performed better in Japan than they had at home, thanks in no small



*A Moment to Remember* (2004)

part to their hugely popular leads (Jun Ji-hyun and Bae Yong-jun, respectively). The third's success may have most impressive of all, since it had more to do with the film itself than the bankability of leads Jung Woo-sung and Son Ye-jin. Meanwhile, big-budget films like 2005's *The Duelist* (\$5 million) and 2006's *The Host* (\$4.7 million) were getting pre-sold with minimum guarantees. Hallyu fever sent Korean film exports skyrocketing by 13.3% in the space of one year, from \$58,280,000 in 2004 to \$75,990,000 in 2005.



*The Duelist* (2005)

It didn't last. *Running Wild* (2005), *Typhoon* (2005), *Daisy* (2005), and *Now and Forever* (2006) all flopped; just like that, the Japanese market had dried up. Between 2005 and 2006, film exports to Japan free-fell 82% from \$60,320,000 in 2005 to \$10,390,000 in 2006; overall film exports tumbled 68% from \$75,990,000 to \$24,510,000 over the same period. Some attributed the nosedive to an overreliance on the Hallyu star ticket draw.

Over the last few years, a new, more rational export strategy has taken shape. This one is less about big stars, and more about the quality of the film itself, as well as the genres that are popular in the export market. It was in China that the cinematic Korean Wave suddenly crested once again. *Late Autumn*, a Kim Tae-yong melodrama, opened there in March 2012 and went on to set the box office record for a Korean film. Boasting an attention-getting pairing of Korean star Hyun Bin with Chinese actress Tang Wei (of *Lust*, *Caution* fame), it received excellent reviews in Korea.





*Late Autumn* got people talking by casting popular Korean actor Hyun Bin and Chinese top actor Tang Wei.

Also in China, it was a smash, with a take of 64.8 million RMB (around \$10 million) – streaking past the previous Korean film record of 27.7 million RMB set by Shim Hyung-rae’s *D-War* (2007).

What was the secret to its success? In large part, a combination of the familiar presence of Tang – well known to Chinese audiences – with a restrained love story that resonated with fellow East Asians, and all of it presented with an assured touch.

The lack of financial success didn’t stop it from leading to more collaborations with Hong Kong. Filmmakers there excelled at creating exotic spectacle on the relative cheap. When Shin Films (the company of star Korean director Shin Sang-ok) collaborated with the Shaw Brothers in 1962, it marked the beginning of a prolific string of co-productions that lasted through to the early 1980s.

There were problems, though. Korean film companies may have been equal partners in terms of the production, but Hong Kong held the overseas rights. Also, the films were not very Korean in their subject matter, which was based almost exclusively on Chinese history and mythology.

After a few quiet decades, co-productions were suddenly an item again in the 2000s, with *Legend of the Evil Lake* (2003), *Three Extremes* (2004),

*Three Extremes* is a joint Korea—China—Japan omnibus film featuring work by directors Park Chan-wook, Fruit Chan and Miike Takashi.

## Working Internationally: Co-Productions

Korea has a long history with international productions, dating back to the 1950s. In 1957, the biggest film company of the day – Korean Entertainment Inc. – worked with Hong Kong’s Shaw Brothers to develop Korea’s first-ever co-production. Called *Love with an Alien*, it was co-directed by Korea’s Jeong Chang-keun, Hong Kong’s Tu Guangqi, and Japan’s Wakasuki Mitsuo. The hope was that Korean film might be able to establish some kind of a foothold in Southeast Asia through a collaboration with the brothers, whose films were massively popular there. But while it did fairly well with Korean audiences, its performance in Hong Kong and other markets was dismal.



*The Promise* (2005), and *Wind struck* coming in the early part of the decade. In making these films, Korean filmmakers were focused less on short-term gains and more on acquiring crucial trial-and-error experience with co-productions and overseas markets. Indeed, they have helped spur on a wider range of collaborations: the past few years have seen more fully realized co-productions that take into account concerns like overseas marketability. The aim has been to ensure maximum returns by developing international films with commercial potential in various regions of the world. The methods are more sophisticated, too, with co-investment and co-productions designed to increase market reach and spread the risk around, along with the sharing of directors, producers, actors, and special and visual effects methods.

Most of these co-productions have been with the Sinosphere: the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong,

and Taiwan. These include *Seven Swords* (2005), *Daisy* (2005), *Battle of Wits* (2006), *Assembly* (2007), *Sophie's Revenge* (2009), *A Good Rain Knows* (2009), *Reign of Assassins* (2010), *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010), and *Dangerous Liaisons* (2012). Other major partners have been Japan (*First Snow* (2007), *Cyborg She* (2009), *Boat* (2009), *Sayonara Itsuka* (2010), *Ghost* (2011)), the United States (*Sam's Lake* (2005), *August Rush* (2007), *Never*



*Reign of Assassins* (2010)

*Forever* (2007), *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008), *The Warrior's Way* (2010)), and France (*A Brand New Life* and *Dooman River*, both 2009).

In their collaborations with China, Korean filmmakers have put their superior visual effects and sound mixing techniques to work, elevating the quality of action blockbusters and war films based on blueprints sketched out by Chinese production companies. Impressed by the battlefield sequences in *Taegeukgi*, the Huayi Brothers decided to let Korea's Demolition company do F/X work for its upcoming wartime blockbuster *Battle of Wits*. The result more than met their expectations; the film was a smash in China, opening the floodgates for a torrent of Korean technical prowess to pour into the country. Korean companies went on to do visual effects for movies like *After Shock*, *Detective Dee*, *Reign of Assassins*, and *The Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* (2011). Indeed, they all but took over

*August Rush* (2007)



the post-production process for many of the blockbusters coming out of the Sinosphere.

Collaborations by Korean filmmakers have become more frequent and diverse in recent years – evidence of both the greater prestige Korean cinema enjoys today and the importance of its film market. But these co-productions have more than just commercial significance: they also promote cultural interchange and communication between countries. As Korean cinema gains more and more recognition throughout the world, we can expect to see more collaborations with more countries in the years ahead.

## Acclaimed Directors

### Park Chan-wook

An inveterate B-movie aficionado, Park Chan-wook discovered the films of Alfred Hitchcock in his college days and was spellbound. He made up his mind then and there to become a film director, a dream that came to pass in 1992 with his first feature film, *The Moon Is . . . the Sun's Dream*. The producers had requested a carbon copy of the hit American comedy *Ruthless People* (1986), but Park had other plans. The end result was an experimental movie that tweaked the structure and conventions of genre film.

It was also a commercial and critical bomb. Park soon found himself a man stigmatized – shunned by film companies as a “cult director.” It took another five years after his debut for him to direct his follow-up, but *Threesome* (1997) followed down the same road as the first one.

What finally established Park as a director to watch was his success



## PARK's Filmography

*The Moon is . . . the Sun's Dream* (1992)  
*Threesome* (1997)  
*Joint Security Area* (2000)  
*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002)  
*Oldboy* (2003)  
*Three Extremes* (2004)  
*Sympathy For Lady Vengeance* (2005)  
*I'm a Cyborg But That's OK* (2006)  
*Thirst* (2009)

with the 2000 film *Joint Security Area*, produced by Myung Films. A canny combination of commercial film style with the hot-button topic of inter-Korean conflict, it was a major hit with critics and audiences alike. Next up was the hard-boiled *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002). Packed with intense and graphic violence, it divided critics and garnered a lot of attention, but not much in the way of ticket sales.

Park bounced back from this cool reception with the second part of the “revenge trilogy” he had begun with *Sympathy*.

*Oldboy* wasn't just a box office hit – it was a global phenomenon, taking the Grand Prix at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival. In 2010, it ranked 27th among the top 50 movies of the 2000s as chosen by the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), the world's largest online repository of film information.

The trilogy wrapped up with *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005), which turned heads by making elegant actress Lee Young-ae its avatar of retribution. In all three movies, Park uses provocative style and subject matter to explore moral dilemmas. Ostensibly about vengeance, they eventually arrive at denouements where the boundary between the victimizer and victimized has dissolved away completely. In so doing, they repudiate the societal values of the previous generation.

Park is currently working on his Hollywood debut, a Fox Searchlight Pictures and Scott Free Productions film called *Stoker*. Written by *Prison Break* actor Wentworth Miller, the thriller stars Nicole Kidman and Matthew Goode. American film magazines have expressed their keen anticipation at the news.

*Oldboy* (2003)



## HONG's Filmography

*The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (1996)  
*The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998)  
*Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000)  
*On the Occasion of Remembering the Turning Gate* (2002)  
*Woman Is the Future of Man* (2004)  
*Tale of Cinema* (2005) / *Woman on the Beach* (2006)  
*Night and Day* (2007) / *I Like You Know It All* (2009)  
*Hahaha* (2010) / *Oki's Movie* (2010)  
*The Day He Arrives* (2011) / *In Another Country* (2012)



### Hong Sang-soo

Park may have taken a while to get going, but Art Institute of Chicago graduate Hong Sang-soo made a big splash right away with his feature debut, *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (1996). Actually, the film got more notice overseas than at home early on, netting Hong top prizes at international film festivals in Rotterdam and Vancouver. Korean critics lauded the unusual style as something never before seen in Korean film, offering a glimpse at a new Korean modernism. The French film magazine *Cinéaste* called the style reminiscent of Robert Bresson and Eric Rohmer. Hong's follow-up, *The Power of Kangwon Province* (1998), went to Cannes. His enshrinement as Korea's foremost art film director was complete.

The January 2005 edition of the preeminent French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* featured an exclusive on Korean film, and it was Hong who drew the biggest notice. Indeed, France has been more vocal than any



French actress Isabelle Huppert appeared in *In Another Country* on a no-guarantee contract.

other country in its praise for Hong's films. When *In Another Country* screened in competition at the 65th Cannes Film Festival in 2012, it was his eighth appearance there – a record unequalled by any other Korean director. These Cannes appearances included competition slots for *Woman Is the Future of Man* (2004) and *Tale of Cinema* (2005), Un Certain Regard nominations for *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000), *Hahaha* (a winner in 2010), and *The Day He Arrives* (2011), and a Directors' Fortnight invitation for *Like You Know It All* (2009). France also provided bankrolling for *Woman* and *Tale* in the screenwriting stages, while world-renowned French actress and Cannes favorite Isabelle Huppert made a no-guarantee appearance in *In Another Country* – proof positive of the unconcealed affection France's cineastes feel for Hong and his work.

The American film critic David Bordwell places Hong's work in a tradition of "Asian minimalism" alongside Taiwan's Hou Hsiao-hsien and

Tsai Ming-liang and Japan's Koreeda Hirokazu. Like them, he focuses on the everyday, omitting major incidents and background information in favor of an unresolved ambiguity about the characters' motivations. At the same time, Bordwell points to a distinctive and original approach to narrative structure that sets Hong apart from other directors. Despite superficial similarities, each of his films shows a different style and cinematic approach. At the same time, they aren't filled with the kind of "metaphysics" that is often associated with the art film. Hong consciously rejects the conventions of art film and commercial film alike, constructing his own unique cinematic universe in the process.

### Kim Ki-duk

Kim Ki-duk was born in 1960 to a poor Protestant family in the mountain village of Bonghwa, North Gyeongsang. His father was a disabled veteran, his mother blind. The young Kim dropped out of high school and worked in factories until the age of 20. He then served as a noncommissioned Marine



## KIM's Filmography

*Crocodile* (1996) / *Wild Animals* (1997)  
*Birdcage Inn* (1998) / *The Isle* (2000)  
*Real Fiction* (2000) / *Address Unknown* (2001)  
*Bad Guy* (2001) / *The Coast Guard* (2002)  
*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (2003)  
*Samaria* (2004) / *3-Iron* (2004)  
*The Bow* (2005) / *Time* (2006) / *Breath* (2007)  
*Dream* (2008) / *Arirang* (2011) / *Amen* (2011)  
*Pieta* (2012)

Corps officer until he was 25. Already, his life had taken a very dynamic, dramatic shape, and his lack of a formal education would later set him apart from his contemporaries. As a young man, Kim had no opportunity to encounter film – or any other cultural or artistic field, for that matter. After his discharge, he spent two years with a Christian volunteer group for the blind, hoping to someday become a missionary. Kim’s experience in the military, and his Christian connection, would eventually become a pivotal part of his films and their characteristic narrative dynamism.

In 1990, Kim decided on a whim to go to France and become a painter. It was his first experience as an artist: leaving behind a Korea that had become like a prison to him, he opted for the life of the street painter. The

following year, he saw three movies that left a deep mark on him: Léos Carax’s *The Lovers on the Bridge*, Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *The Lover*, and Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs*. He had a new dream now. He was going to be a director.

Upon his return to Korea, he went to work penning screenplays, one of which (*Crocodile*) would become his directorial debut in 1996. It was the first in a string of films that showed a highly idiosyncratic world view, one that embellished on peripheral lives lived under the shadow of brutal violence and coercive sex: *Wild Animals* (1997), *Birdcage Inn* (1998), *The Isle* (2000), *Address Unknown* (2001), and *Bad Guy* (2001). The intense, graphic nature of his work had many grouping him with Japan’s Kitano

Takeshi and Miike Takashi as practitioners of the so-called “Asian extreme,” gifted originals working in the aesthetic of brutality.

But Kim had a surprise in store. With the German-funded *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (2003), he made a qualitative leap: from a director of violence and destruction to one of penance and salvation. Set at a temple floating on a lake, it renders Buddhist thought cinematic against beautiful seasonal scenery and a minimum of dialogue. *Spring* opened in countries like Germany, Spain, Russia, and the United States, making it his biggest worldwide success.

By the following year, he was firmly entrenched as someone whose films were



*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... (2003)*

better received abroad than at home. *Samaria* and *3-Iron* won back-to-back director honors at the Berlin and Venice International Film Festivals. Kim also began working with noted foreign performers, including Taiwan's Chang Chen (*Breath*, 2007) and Japan's Odagiri Joe (*Dream*, 2008), helping to cement his reputation as a global director. But then the famously prolific filmmaker, whose films kept coming on a near-yearly basis, suddenly went into seclusion. He wouldn't return until 2011, when he came out with the autobiographical documentary *Arirang*. And he still had it: the new work claimed Un Certain Regard honors at Cannes. Most recently, *Pieta*, his first feature film in six years, won the Golden Lion award for the best film at the 69th Venice Film Festival.

*Pieta* (2012)



## LEE'S Filmography

*Green Fish* (1997)  
*Peppermint Candy* (1999)  
*Oasis* (2002)  
*Secret Sunshine* (2007)  
*Poetry* (2010)

### Lee Chang-dong

A native of Daegu, Lee Chang-dong was born in 1954, and worked as a high school Korean teacher-cum-budding novelist before venturing into direction. He went on to debut as a director in 1997 with *Green Fish*, a noirish work set against the backdrop of heavy redevelopment in Seoul's suburban ring. Its impact was immediate: Lee swept the country's major film festivals, won the Dragons and Tigers Award at the Vancouver Film Festival, and earned invitations to around 20 other festivals overseas.

Since then, his record has been the epitome of consistency: every one of his films – *Peppermint Candy* (1999), *Oasis* (2002), *Secret Sunshine* (2007), and *Poetry* (2010) – has earned plaudits at home and abroad. He was also tapped as Korea's Minister of Culture under the administration of president Roh Moo-hyun in 2003, becoming the first film director to take on that post.



*Secret Sunshine* (2007)

Lee's films deal frankly with sensitive issues, touching on the contradictions of Korean society in the process. With *Peppermint Candy*, which travels backward through the changing life of its protagonist amid major episodes in modern Korean history, Lee inveighs against the brutality that collective madness visits on the human being within its historical context. *Secret Sunshine* is a delicate exploration of the internal conflicts of a woman who turns to religion after the abduction and murder of her young son. Lead actress Jeon Do-youn (see p. 56) became the first Korean to win the Best Actress award at Cannes for her performance. *Oasis* addresses the romantic and sexual relationships of the disabled, taking a frank look at the desires of marginalized people in modern Korean

society. (The film won Lee directing honors at the Venice International Film Festival.) And his most recent work, *Poetry*, focuses on the uncertainty faced by an elderly woman who belatedly comes to look at the world through the writing of poetry, only to find herself confronted with an unexpectedly harsh reality. It marks the latest step in Lee's journey into the real lives of Korea's alienated.

### Bong Joon-ho

Bong Joon-ho's first real education in film came when the university graduate entered the Korean Academy of Film Arts. He made his directorial debut in 2000 with *Barking Dogs Never Bite*. The wild comedy about the disappearance of a dog drew praise for its imaginative, cartoonish style, but flopped with audiences. The news wasn't all bad, though: it was invited to prominent film festivals like Slamdance and Locarno, earning rave reviews from overseas critics and viewers alike.



## BONG's Filmography

*Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000)  
*Memories of Murder* (2003)  
*The Host* (2006)  
*Mother* (2009)



His real mark as a director came with his next movie, *Memories of Murder* (2003). Based on a real-life unsolved string of murders that took place in the rural Korean community of Hwaseong in the 1980s, the film transcended the bounds of genre by presenting the incident as an allegory for the decade as a whole and zeroing in on some very sore spots in the country's modern history. Korean critics were collectively blown away, and the film was a smash with audiences.

*The Host* (2006) was an even bigger sensation. The blockbuster monster movie, which pits a working class family against a bizarre beast from Seoul's Han River, became the biggest box office hit in Korean film history, racking up no fewer than 13 million ticket sales.

Bong Joon-ho's films don't so much explore any one genre as borrow the language of multiple genres while digging into the reality within them.

*Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000)



*Memories of Murder* (2003)

His gift lies in combining heterogeneous elements in the most seamless of ways. This is what led *Cahiers du Cinéma* to pronounce him the second most noteworthy Korean director (after Hong Sang-soo), lauding him as “Asia’s version of Woody Allen.” The same journal also ranked *The Host* fourth on its list of the best movies of the 2000s. Like Hong, Bong is beloved by the French, with both *The Host* and his follow-up, *Mother* (2009), invited for screening at Cannes.

As of this writing, Bong is at work in the Czech Republic filming *Snowpiercer*, an adaptation of a French graphic novel of the same name. The much-anticipated international co-production features *Memories* and *Host* star Song Kang-ho (see p. 55) alongside Britain’s Ewen Bremner, Tilda Swinton, and Jamie Bell.

## Other Notable Directors

The directors mentioned in the text are just a few of the many filmmakers whose outstanding work is helping give Korea such a strong national cinema. Here are a few more names worthy of attention:



**Kim Jee-woon** seems to tackle a new genre with every film he does: black comedy in his debut *Quiet Family* (1998), straight comedy in *The Foul King*, horror in *A Tale of Two Sisters*, noir in *A Bittersweet Life*, action in *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird*, and suspense thriller in *I Saw the Devil*. And every transformation has been a commercial and artistic success. Instead of rehashing tired tropes, he builds on the genre with his own twists and spins. The *New York Times* used the term “kimchi western” to describe *The Good*, which, as its title suggests, is an homage to the Sergio Leone’s spaghetti western *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Now, Kim is broadening his horizons into Hollywood,

where he is currently in postproduction on the Arnold Schwarzenegger action comeback vehicle *The Last Stand*. Set to open in 2013, it could be his ticket to a successful directing career in the United States.

**Im Sang-soo** is an incorrigible provocateur whose films have consistently taken on controversial topics. Perhaps no other director leaves audiences so deeply divided. His debut, *Girls’ Night Out* (1998), shocked with its frank discourse on female sexuality, while follow-up *Tears* (2001) disturbed as it quietly followed its delinquent youth protagonists in their rebellious behavior. *The President’s Last Bang* (2004) was a thinly veiled revisiting of the assassination of South Korean President Park Chung-hee. More recently, Im looked inside the practices of Korea’s all-powerful *chaebol* corporations in *The*



Kim Jee-woon, Im Sang-soo, Byun Young-jo, and Choi Dong-hoon

*Taste of Money* (2012). Rather than exploring genre or experimenting artistically as other contemporary directors do, Im prefers to take a scalpel to the sorest spots on Korea’s body politic.

**Choi Dong-hoon** is a born storyteller with a knack for directing high-octane action/crime movies featuring vivid characterization: *The Big Swindle* (2004), *Tazza: The High Rollers* (2006), and most recently *The Thieves* (2012). His films revolve around criminal rings whose members are crooks, gamblers, and thieves by trade, presenting their lives with a realistic touch that is founded in a gift for observation and painstaking research.

After wowing audiences with his grasp of popular storytelling technique in *Paradise Murdered* (2007), **Kim Han-min** became one of the top box office draws around with his third film, 2011’s *War of the Arrows*, an action-packed period piece that sold 7.4 million tickets. The film ushered in a new area of archery action with its stunning use of the zingy natural pace of the traditional Korean bow and arrow. Between his work and Choi’s, the Korean action film has been evolving by leaps and bounds in recent years.

On the distaff side, the year 2012 brought a rediscovery of the work of **Byun Young-jo**. Byun first made a name for herself as an independent filmmaker with her *The Murmuring* series, which examined the lives of the so-called “comfort women” drafted from Korea to serve as sex slaves to the



Japanese military in the colonial era. She made her commercial film debut with the 2002 melodrama *Ardor*, starring Kim Yun-jin of *Lost* fame. But her follow-up, 2004's *Flying Boys*, did poorly, and it would be another eight years before she made a successful comeback with the 2012 mystery *Helpless*. That film combined gripping genre elements with a finely grained look into the lives of marginalized women, presented with the characteristic warmth that has been part of Byun's work since her documentaries on the aging comfort women survivors. This representative Korean female director looks set to do more outstanding work in the future.



*Helpless* (2012)

Who are the next-generation filmmakers waiting in the wings to take Korean cinema to new heights? One of them may be **Na Hong-jin**, who became a star director overnight with his hugely successful feature debut, the serial killer thriller *The Chaser* (2008), which drew 5 million Koreans to the theaters. His follow-up, a conspiracy movie about a hired killer called *The Yellow Sea*, was invited for showing in the Un Certain Regard category at Cannes. With this film, Na showed his innate gift for the masculine genre of the action thriller.



Another name to remember is **Yang Ik-june**, who has done a superior job of charting the inner human landscape while incorporating strongly masculine elements of harsh language and violence into his work. More prolific as an actor than a director, Yang made his directing table with *Breathless*, in which he also starred. Detailing



Na Hong-jin, Yang Ik-june, Yun Seong-hyeon and Yeon Sang-ho

the conflicted relationship between a hired thug and a high school girl, it was a big hit for an indie, selling more than 120,000 tickets. It also won its maker a raft of awards at the world's leading film festivals, including a Tiger Award at the Rotterdam International Film Festival. The film drew renewed attention recently when *Harry Potter* star Emma Watson named it as her favorite Korean film.

**Yun Seong-hyeon** came to public notice when his first film, *Bleak Night* (2010), took the New Currents award at the Busan International Film Festival. He had been recognized in the past for shorts like *Boys* (2008) and *Drink and Confess* (2009) earning invites to festivals at home and abroad. Structured as a mystery, *Bleak Night* explores the power structure among students at a boys' high school. Its cast of unknowns delivers powerful performances that contribute to an unremitting sense of tension.

**Yeon Sang-ho** also made a dazzling debut at BIFF, where his animated feature *King of Pigs* pulled off a hat trick. An intense thriller that also looks at power battles in a school setting (this time among middle school students), the film was screened during the 2012 Directors' Fortnight at Cannes, where it was touted as Korea's first feature-length animated film to receive that honor.





*The President's Barber* (2004)

## K-Movie Stars

### Song Kang-ho

Korea's actor par excellence, Song Kang-ho is in great demand with the country's most famous directors. He has been instrumental in helping such internationally recognized figures as Lee Chang-dong, Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, and Kim Jee-woon achieve their unique artistic visions. Appearing in everything from art films to big-budget blockbusters, he has been a formidable presence in the Korean cinema of the 21st century, undergoing a radical transformation with every new character he presents.

The theater veteran started out in film with a small role in Hong Sang-soo's 1996 film *The Day a Pig Fell into a Well*. He followed this up in 1997 with piquant comic turns in Lee Chang-dong's *Green Fish* and Song Neung-han's *NO. 3* that made a major impression on audiences. Next in line were supporting roles in the box office hits *The Quiet Family* and *Shiri*. His first lead finally came in the role as an office worker and wannabe wrestler in Kim Jee-woon's 2000 comedy *The Foul King*.

Around the time he was making a name for himself as a comic actor, he tackled a new challenge with a dramatic role as a North Korean soldier in Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* (2000). He went on to leave behind his image as a bankable actor for a series of committed performances where he went to great efforts to present fully realized characters. Acclaimed turns in Park's *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *Thirst*, Bong's *Memories of Murder* and *The Host*, and Lee's *Secret Sunshine* had him undergoing striking transformations. It was an ongoing career peak that saw him snapping up film festival acting honors right and left. As of this writing, he is working on yet another transformation, acting alongside established international stars in Bong's *Snowpiercer*.

## Jeon Do-youn

Jeon Do-youn's first taste of recognition came with her performance in the 1992 TV miniseries *Urideurui Cheonguk* (*Our Paradise*). She had a tremendous talent that ensured she would always be in demand for various roles. Her breakthrough came in 1997, when she made her film debut in the melodrama *The Contact*. A critical and commercial success, this movie showed a new side of Jeon with her role as a heartbroken young woman. Her next film, *A Promise* (1998), had her playing a doctor who gives everything for her love. She followed this up with contrasting turns in 1999: a fresh-faced 18-year-old country girl in *The Harmonium in My Memory*, and a libidinous adulteress who abandons her child in *Happy End*, a film that drew some notoriety for its explicit sex scenes. After that, she took her intense, unsparing acting style into new genre territory with the action film *No Blood, No Tears* (2002).

Jeon's films are worth watching simply for her performances. It says something about the high regard she is held in that so many up-and-coming Korean actresses are described as the "next Jeon Do-youn." And recognition has come from beyond the peninsula's shores: in 2007, she became the first Korean to win acting honors at Cannes, claiming the Best Actress award for her role in Lee Chang-dong's *Secret Sunshine* (2007).

Jeon is not one to rest on her laurels, though. She came calling at Cannes once again in 2010 with Im Sang-soo's remake of *The Housemaid*. Indeed, perhaps her greatest strength as a performer is her desire to keep working – to always be acting.



*The Housemaid* (2010)

## Sul Kyoung-gu

Sul Kyoung-gu projects a “familiar” image that has made him a mainstay of Korean cinema in an eclectic assortment of everyman roles. He doesn't look much like an actor, but Lee Chang-dong, for one, saw the limitless potential in that ordinary face. Having seen Sul's turns in *A Petal*, *Phantom*, *the Submarine*, and *Rainbow Trout*, the director decided to cast him as the lead in *Peppermint Candy* (1999). A terrifyingly glimpse at a character who carries within him the painful experiences of Korea's modern history, this film propelled Sul to a virtual clean sweep of Korean film awards. He worked with Lee again on *Oasis*, snagging Best Actor honors at the Seattle International Film Festival for his performance as a man who falls in love with a woman suffering from cerebral palsy. He also starred in director Kang Woo-suk's *Public Enemy* trilogy (*Public Enemy* (2002), *Another Public Enemy* (2005), and *Public Enemy Returns* (2008)), building up a rap

*A Peppermint Candy* (1999)



sheet as an incorruptible working-class detective (and later prosecutor). He showed his action star bona fides with physically demanding turns in *Silmido* (2003) and the tidal wave blockbuster *Haeundae* (2009), both of which not only scored with critics but also sold upwards of 10 million tickets.

## Lee Byung-hun

Scouted for the KBS network in 1991, Lee Byung-hun started out playing a lot of leading man roles in TV miniseries. (Indeed, it was one of these series, *All In* (2003), that would later mint him as the second most popular Hallyu star in Japan, after Bae Yong-jun.) His screen debut, *Who Makes Me Crazy* (1995), marked the beginning of a fairly prolific film acting career, with performances in *Runaway* (1995), *Kill the Love* (1996), and *Lament* (1997).

*A Bittersweet Life* (2005)



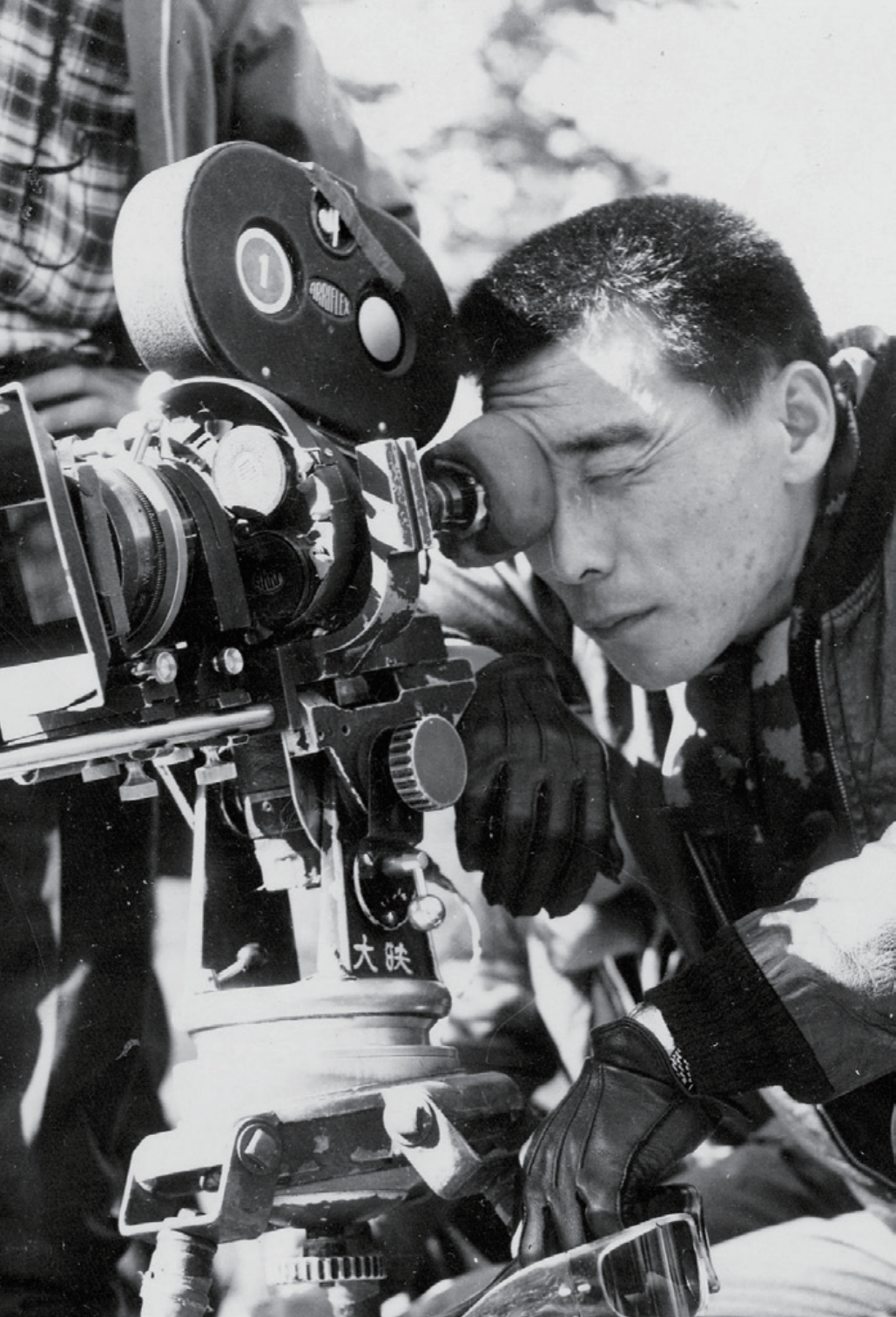
But it was Park Chan-wook's *Joint Security Area* that really got him noticed. His role as a South Korean soldier on the border with North Korea required him to run the gamut of emotions from comical to intensely dramatic. He followed this up with romantic leads as devoted boyfriends in *Bungee Jumping of Their Own* (2001) and *Addiction* (2002), as well as swaggering action turns in *A Bittersweet Life* (2005) and *The Good, the Bad, and the Weird* (2008). The following year saw his successful Hollywood debut as Storm Shadow in director Stephen Sommers' *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*, cementing his reputation as one of Asia's foremost action stars. He also appeared in the sequel, *G.I. Joe 2: Retaliation* (2012), and is set to co-star in *Red 2* (2012), which once again pairs him with Hollywood stars.

### Jun Ji-hyun (Gianna Jun)

Jun Ji-hyun emerged at a star in her early twenties, when Kwak Jae-yong's *My Sassy Girl* (2001) catapulted her to fame not just in Korea but among Chinese audiences and elsewhere in Asia. The role showcased her unique charisma to devastating effect, presenting her as the kind of female lead that had never before been seen in Korean film. Her next few films – *Windstruck* (2004) and *Daisy* (2005) – did poorly in Korea, but Jun bounced back to score overseas roles by dint of her name recognition. And with this popularity came a broader range of performances, mainly in international projects (for which she adopted the Italianate name “Gianna Jun”). Perhaps her biggest standout role was her starring turn as in the vampire action fantasy *Blood: The Last Vampire* (2009), a Japanese-Hong Kong-French-Argentine co-production. Playing the daughter of a human father and vampire mother, Jun skillfully pulled off a demanding action performance. Up next was the title role in the 2011 American-Chinese co-

production *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (as Snow Flower, not the fan), which had her teaming with Australian star Hugh Jackman and Chinese star Li Bingbing under the direction of world-renowned Wayne Wang. Set during the Qing Dynasty in 19th century, it tells the story of a lifelong friendship between two women. The film opened to a worldwide release in China and some forty other countries. In recent years, Jun has returned to Korean screens, starring in Choi Dong-hoon's *The Thieves* (2012) and Ryoo Seung-wan's *Berlin* (2012).





## Chapter Three

# HOW KOREAN FILM GOT HERE

### The Early Years (1920–1939)

Cinema's arrival in Korea is believed to date back to 1903. That year, a cinema of sorts was set up at a Hansung Electric Company machinery storehouse in Seoul's Dongdaemun neighborhood, where people paid admission to watch moving pictures of scenery from Korea and abroad. It took until 1919, however, for the first Korean-made film to appear: a "kino drama" called *Fight for Justice*. The first full theatrical feature was Yun Baek-nam's *The Vow Made below the Moon*, released in 1923.

The Korean silent film went on to reach its zenith over the next few years: more productions, better technique, star actors, and a new movie-watching culture. The major catalyst for this was the 1926 film *Arirang* – directed by, written by, and starring Na Un-kyoo. Having grown accustomed to Hollywood westerns and the epics of D. W. Griffith, Korean audiences had begun to turn away from homegrown works in the mid-1920s. *Arirang*





(Top) *Arirang* (1926), (Bottom) *Dansungsa*, which opened in 1907, was the first movie theater in Korea.

was an attempt to provide an entertaining spectacle along the same lines, if not quite at their monumental scale, and audiences were enthused – enough so, that is, to break down the door of its theater, the *Dansungsa*, forcing police to rush to the scene. In addition to its pure entertainment value, the film also alluded metaphorically to resistance against the day’s Japanese occupiers.

Perhaps the biggest name among silent-era directors was Lee Gyu-hwan, whose debut came in 1932 with *A Ferry Boat That Has No Owner*. This was another film that gave voice to the Korean people’s resentment over colonial rule, and audiences responded fervently.

Silent films soon gave way to talkies, the first of them a 1935 version of the Korean perennial *Story of Chun-hyang*. Later sound films of the decade included *A Story of Hong Gil-dong*, *Story of Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon*, and *Sweet Dream* (all 1936). Greater amounts of funding and technical ability helped hasten the shift from silent to sound.

## Golden Age: The 1960s and the ‘Literary Film’

The Korean War ended in 1953, and the following year saw a swell in the number of Korean film productions. The boom was touched off by Lee Gyu-hwan’s long-running box office success with another version of the *Story of Chun-hyang* (1955). Indeed, the decade witnessed a spate of movies drawing on sources from Korean history and legend. In 1956, period pieces accounted for no fewer than 16 of the 30 films produced (including *The Tragedy of King Dan Jong*, *The Life of Sim-Cheong*, and *Prince Ho-Dong and Princess Nak-Rang*).

Audiences inevitably grew weary of the genre, so when Han Hyung-mo satirized contemporary Korean mores with his 1956 film *Madame Freedom*, the response was enthusiastic. The movie’s success led to a wave of more modern pieces that captured the spirit of the postwar period.



(Top) *Story of Chun-hyang* (1955)  
(Bottom) *The Wedding Day* (1956)

There were more films, and more varied films, branching into genres like melodrama, anti-communist thriller (a reflection of the ongoing conflict with North Korea), comedy, and detective movies. The country got its first international festival prizewinner in 1957, when Lee Byung-il's 1956 release *The Wedding Day* took a special comedy award at the 4th Asian Film Festival. (The film was also invited for screening that year at the Berlin International Film Festival).



(Left) *Mist* (1967), (Right) *Mother and a Guest* (1961)

By the end of the decade, film production was in the triple digits for the first time ever, with 111 movies made in 1959. The film industry was certainly growing in scale: a greater variety in genres and subgenres, more international prestige, more moviegoers. But its production system hadn't really kept pace.



When the Park Chung-hee administration arrived in office in the 1960s, it pushed a program of state-led industrialization and economic development in every area of society, and cinema was no exception. Its vision for the film industry involved ushering in a more stable, rational system through corporation-style production companies. This meant merging minor outfits and, in 1962, instituting the country's first-ever Film Act. Rigorous standards were enforced for film company registration; by

1963, just four were left standing: Kuk Dong, Hanyang, Korea Film, and Shin Films.

The 1960s were called the "Golden Age" of Korean film, and with good reason: companies were cranking out films at a fierce clip. No fewer than 200 were released in 1968 alone, spanning a wide variety of genres. Audience numbers were up sharply, too, doubling from 58 million in 1961 to 100 million just three years later. By 1969, they were at a historic high of 173 million.

One particularly notable trend during this time was a boom in what were called "literary movies," which were adapted from acclaimed works of fiction. It was natural that directors would turn to novels, as supply struggled to meet the booming industry's demand for scripts. And the results helped establish some major directors: Yu Hyun-mok with *Aimless Bullet* (1961), *Kim's Daughters* (1963), and *Descendants of Cain*

(1968); Shin Sang-ok with *Mother and a Guest* (1961), *Kinship* (1963), *Affection* (1966), *A Water Mill* (1966), and *Potato* (1968); and Kim Soo-yong with *Sound of Magpies* and *Mist* (1967). For these filmmakers, the literary movie was a platform to let their idiosyncrasies and aesthetic experimentation shine. The genre helped turn Yu, Shin, Kim, and Lee Man-hee into some of the foremost directors of the 1960s.

### Out of the Quicksand (1970–1989)

After hitting new heights of viewership in 1969, Korean film spent the next few years on a continued slide. By 1974, the numbers had dropped back below 100 million. Just 122 movies were made in 1972, down from 229 three years earlier. Local movies were now just a means of importing



Winter Woman (1977)

foreign product: the government had instituted a quota system, guaranteeing one foreign film for every three Korean ones made. To meet the quotas, producers came up with a steady stream of shoddy productions, along with so-called “policy movies” and “morality films” tailored to the authoritarian government’s specifications. Audiences were having none of it.

It was a breath of fresh air, then, when a crop of young directors emerged to give viewers what they wanted. And what they wanted, evidently, was sex: the



Whale Hunting (1984)

early 1970s saw the emergence of the “hostess melodrama,” a new genre that combined eroticism with a frank portrait of contemporary mores. The hostesses in question were lost young women reduced to working in bars, drinking with strangers. The movies were immensely popular, with titles like Lee Jang-ho’s *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (1974) and Kim Ho-sun’s *Yeong-Ja’s Heydays* (1975) and *Winter Woman* (1977) setting off a veritable craze.

Things got even more explicit in the 1980s, which brought a spate of soft core movies. The success of 1982’s *The Ae-ma Woman* (315,000 tickets sold) spawned a host of imitators putting more lusty wives in compromising positions. Within a few years, the soft core film and the period piece melded into a new genre, “folk erotica,” which gave free rein to filmmakers’ erotic imagination. It ended up becoming perhaps the genre of 1980s Korean film, with works like *The Hut*, *Spinning the Tales*



(Left) *Deep Blue Night* (1985), (Right) *Chil-su and Man-su* (1988)

of *Cruelty Towards Women*, and *The Surrogate Woman* drawing notice at international film festivals, while *Mulberry*, *Eoh Wu-dong*, and *Byun Kang-soi* became smash hits at home.

Not everything was raunch, though. Audiences also flocked to melodramas that incorporated Hollywood-style filmmaking techniques. Among the hits from this genre were *The Flower at the Equator* (1983), *Whale Hunting* (1984), *The Winter That Year Was Warm* (1984), *Deep Blue Night* (1985), *Our Joyful Young Days* (1987), *Winter Wanderer* (1986), and *A Sketch of a Rainy Day* (1989).

Soft core may have been all the rage, but another current was taking shape around the same time. Movies from the so-called “Korean New Wave” emerged in the late 1980s with subject matter that commented on the contemporary political and social situation. Directors like Jang

Sun-woo, Park Kwang-su, and Lee Myung-se had lived through the political tumult of 1980, when pro-democracy demonstrations had been ruthlessly quashed, and their films filtered the reality of the times through an auteurist frame. In 1988, each of them rang in the new era with his own release: Jang with *The Age of Success*, Park with *Chil-su and Man-su* and Lee with *Gagman*. Their output remained prodigious until the mid-1990s, laying the groundwork for Korean cinema’s great revival.

## Renaissance: ‘Planned Movies’ and Government Support (1990 to today)

The early 1990s ushered in a new period of direct distribution of Hollywood films. Imports boomed, and the film companies of the day were focused more on bringing these movies in than on making their own. The market share of Korean films plummeted.

It took a team of relief pitchers to turn things around. The “planned movie” made its first appearance in the late 1980s, amid a wave of production liberalization. These producers led the way in establishing a new paradigm for the film industry, seeking corporate bankrolling for original blueprints that were devised to answer market demands.

The trend started in 1992 with *The Marriage Life*, produced by Shincine Communication and directed by Kim Eui-sik. The company is said to have



*The Marriage Life* (1992)

heightened the realism of this slightly gritty romantic comedy about working newlyweds by incorporating material from interviews conducted with a dozen or so real-life married couples. The result was a box office bonanza, with an especially strong reception from younger viewers. It was followed in short order by other polished commercial movies tailored to audience predilections. Korean viewers began to feel that their country's cinema was as worth watching as anything Hollywood was coming up with.

And the films themselves were getting more ambitious. With his 1996 film *The Ginkgo Bed*, director Kang Je-kyu tackled the previously unexplored genre of fantasy. Filmmakers began offering storylines that met audience tastes, combined with the technical know-how needed to bring them to life. Kang, in particular, was instrumental in the Korean-style blockbuster assuming pride of place in the industry, following up on his success with the even bigger *Shiri* (1998) and *Taegukgi* (2004).

Meanwhile, a diverse crop of productions in the late 1990s was heralding the arrival of the next decade's "well-made" films. Chang Yoon-hyun's *The Contact* (1997) and *Tell Me Something* (1999), Park Ki-hyung's *Whispering Corridors* (1998), Hur Jin-ho's *Christmas in August* (1998), Lee Jeong-hyang's *Art Museum by the Zoo* (1998), and Im Sang-soo's *Girls' Night Out* (1998) all met with strong critical and commercial responses during this time.



(Left) *The Contact* (1997), (Right) *Christmas in August* (1998)

The new environment offered opportunities for some venerable veterans, too. The 1990s saw Im Kwon-taek emerge as the so-called the “nation’s director.” His 1990 film *The General’s Son* brought 670,000 viewers to theaters, while his 1993 work *Sopyonje* (an adaptation of Lee Chung-joon’s novel about the indigenous Korean musical style of *pansori*) became the first Korean film to sell a million tickets, triggering a string of the “nation’s movies” on specifically Korean themes. (The following decade, Im released his 100th movie, *Beyond the Years*, becoming the first Korean film director ever to reach that milestone. In 2011, he followed it up with a 101st, *Hanji*, for which the country’s three major investors and distributors – CJ, Lotte, and Show Box – collaborated as a tip of the hat to the master.)

*Sopyonje* (1993)



The 21st century brought robust infrastructure development to the industry, with support from the national government. In 2000, under President Kim Dae-jung, the Korean Film Council was given a bigger role in policy research, and a support system was set up to encourage Korean filmmaking and help find overseas viewers. By mid-decade, Korean cinema was reaching new heights of quality and competitiveness. This was the backdrop for the Roh Moo-hyun administration’s decision on March 7, 2006, to amend an enforcement decree to the Motion Pictures Industry Promotion Act, slashing the screen quota. The move prompted an outcry from cinema figures, who worried that diversity would be killed by the flood of Hollywood products. But the new rules were put into effect anyway, and on July 1 of that year the quota was halved from 146 days a year to 73. At the same time, the government pledged to make available roughly \$35 million in film development funds over the next seven years, and provide support for film infrastructure and film professional training to help Korean films increase their presence overseas.

# Hollywood Remakes



With hundreds of films being made every year, Hollywood is always looking for new subject matter, and Korea has been a particularly attractive market for remake rights. Impressed by the novel ideas on display, more and more producers are buying the rights to remake them. The examples, which span a wide range of genres, include *Tell Me Something* (1999), *Il Mare* (2000), *My Sassy Girl* (2001), *No. 815* (2002), *Addiction* (2002), *Marrying the Mafia* (2002), *Teacher Kim Bong-du* (2003), *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), *Oldboy* (2003), *Into the Mirror* (2003), *7 Days* (2007), *The Chaser* (2008), *Speed Scandal* (2008), *Hello Ghost* (2010), and *The Man from Nowhere* (2010). Some of the remakes that

have made their way to theaters are *The Lake House* (2006), a Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves starrer based on *Il Mare*; *My Sassy Girl* (2008), with Elisha Cuthbert replacing Jun Ji-hyun in title role; *Possession* (2008), an adaptation of *Addicted* starring Sarah Michelle Gellar; *Mirrors* (2008), a Kiefer Sutherland vehicle based on *Into the Mirror*; and *The Uninvited* (2009), a new version of *A Tale of Two Sisters* starring Elizabeth Banks. *The Lake House* and *The Uninvited* were particularly well received by audiences.

## Il Mare vs. The Lake House

*Il Mare* is a science fiction melodrama that tells a love story with a twist: newcomer voice actress Eun-ju (Jun Ji-hyun) and architect Seong-hyeon (Lee Jung-jae) are living two years apart from each other, carrying out their romance through the mailbox of a seaside house named Il Mare. Director Lee Hyeon-seong had previously shown a flair for well-crafted melodramas with gorgeous mise-en-scène in films like *Blue in You* (1992) and *Sunset into the Neon Lights* (1995). *Il Mare* had viewers lauding his artisan-like touch.



So it was a matter of some interest among cinephiles while the film was slotted for Hollywood remake treatment. Helmed by Argentinian director Alejandro Agresti, *The Lake House* starred two of the biggest performers around in Keanu Reeves and Sandra Bullock, which only added to the anticipation. The basic storyline is the same, although the house is now set on a lake rather than the seaside (hence the title), and the female lead is a doctor rather than a voice actress. The results were somewhat disappointing, however. While *Il Mare* focused more on the beauty of negative space rather than dialogue in expressing its time-traveling romantic premise, *The Lake House* adds more padding with chance meetings and dialogue across space-time, which critics said made it all a bit cloying.



## A Tale of Two Sisters vs. The Uninvited

Kim Jee-woon's original is considered a modern horror classic by many, with its arresting visual aesthetic. Loosely based on the traditional Korean folktale of Jang-hwa and Hong-ryeon (the film's original Korean title), it focuses on the bizarre incidents that unfold in a quiet country cabin where two sisters live with their father and new stepmother. Everything builds to a shocking final-act twist. Layering on wistful emotions as it keeps the tension mounting, *A Tale of Two Sisters* shows that a horror film can be a thing of beauty. Helmed by Charles and Thomas Guard, *The Uninvited* is more direct and conventional in its approach to horror, and tweaks the conclusion of Kim's film to supply another unexpected turn. The result is a creative reinterpretation that jettisons almost everything but the characters from the original.



Busan Cinema Center, the main venue of BIFF, opened on Sept. 2011 and has become a symbol of the festival itself.

## Chapter Four

# FILM FESTIVALS

### Busan International Film Festival (BIFF)

By far Korea's premier cinema event, BIFF held every year since September 1996, is the country's first and biggest film festival: most recently, it celebrated a successful 16th installment. The 2011 occasion was especially meaningful because it saw the opening of the new Busan Cinema Center, an exclusive festival screening facility offering four screens and an outdoor theater. These facilities were designed to ensure a more solid footing for future events – none but a select handful of major overseas festivals has its own exclusive theater. The same year saw the screening of 307 films from 70 countries, global productions accounting for 135 of them. More than 200,000 viewers came out, making the BIFF the biggest film festival in Asia and the eighth biggest in the world.





## Jeonju International Film Festival (JIFF)

The first edition of the Jeonju International Film Festival came in 2000 with an event organized around the theme “Digital, Alternative, Independent.” Since then, JIFF has adopted a unique focus on uncovering creative and adventurous works that depart from the mainstream. Regular programs include “Three Directors, Three Colors,” featuring three internationally recognized directors with signature film aesthetics; “Short! Short! Short!,” a Korean digital short film project; “Cinemascope,” which provides visitors

with a snapshot of the world’s film trends; and “Retrospective,” which offers a chance to explore the world of great masters’ film. The “Three Directors” program in particular has helped the event achieve worldwide recognition, with participants to date having included such illustrious names as Cannes Golden Palm-winning Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Japan’s Tsukamoto Shinya, Bong Joon-ho, Singapore’s Eric Khoo, Portugal’s Pedro Costa, Germany’s Harun Farocki, and Sri Lanka’s Vimukthi Jayasundara. Many films have premiered here before going on to earn invitations to other events around the world.





*Excision* (2012) director Richard Bates Jr. (Right)

## Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival (PIFAN)

Since making its debut in 1997, the Puchon International Film Festival has sought to set itself apart with a focus on fantastic genre work. “Fantastic” here encompasses not just sci-fi, horror, and fantasy, but anything else that conjures up that descriptor in the minds of viewers. It also represents Asia as the continent’s first member of the European Film Festivals Federation (EFFF). Its format marks a departure from the traditional film festival focuses on genre film, B-movies, and cult movies. PIFAN tries to provide a setting where fantastic films can reach a wider audience by embracing everything with a cultish sensibility and mass appeal.

## International Women’s Film Festival in Seoul (WFFIS)

A fixture since 1997, the International Women’s Film Festival in Seoul was launched with the goal of showing movies that deal with different aspects of life from a woman’s perspective. It has gone on to become the world’s biggest women’s film festival, with the 2011 event boasting 115 films from 30 countries. In addition to presenting the latest currents in women’s film the world over, WFFIS has also served to promote interaction among women filmmakers, building a strong network with similar events throughout Asia. In recent years, it has moved to focus more on the way women live in the diversifying global village of the mobile era. After the event is over, the organizers provide local screenings of some of the more talked-about works, helping these films to serve a public function and reach a wider audience.



The 14th WFFIS was held under the slogan “See the World through Women’s Eyes.”



JIMFF's outdoor theater alongside Cheongpung Lake

## Jecheon International Music & Film Festival (JIMFF)

Launched in August 2005, the Jecheon International Music & Film Festival has been working to diversify film festival offerings by expanding the scope of cinematic genre in Korea and overseas to include the musical film. The midsummer event also presents itself as a “leisure festival,” offering not just music-themed cinema but also performances by renowned Korean bands on stage and street. The 2011 festival showed around 100 films as well as 30 musical performances.

Included among the international array of musically oriented films at JIMFF are the competitors in the “World Music Film Today” program and the features in “Cinema Concert,” a program showing both cinema and live performances.

## Other Festivals

A lot of other events have been organized to promote the development of Korean cinema by providing settings for independent filmmakers to show their skill and for talented newcomers to find their footing. Events like Indie Forum, Cinema Digital Seoul, the Seoul Independent Film Festival, the Mise-en-Scène Short Film Festival, the Indie Docu Festival, Asiana International Short Film Festival, and Seoul International Youth Film Festival have alerted audiences to new possibilities for the industry with a steady stream of independent works. They pride themselves on their devoted audiences, who come to enjoy the films and show enthusiastic support for their makers.

# Korean Theaters

Korean viewers have been crucial in supporting the development of national cinema. Almost nowhere else in the world will you find homegrown films pulling fully one-fifth the country's population to theaters – a testament to the avid interest and affection Korean audiences hold for their country's movies. It is a phenomenon that stems in large part from a unique theater culture.



The introduction of the multiplex theater system in the 2000s brought a dramatic overnight change to the environments where Koreans watched their movies. Huge theaters like CGV, Megabox, and Lotte Cinema drew big crowds with their convenience and accessibility. These multiplexes didn't just show films; they also offered restaurants, cafés, game rooms, and other amenities. More recently, they have introduced state-of-the-art viewing environments for 3-D and 4-D films.

The megaplexes are more or less all about the blockbuster hits, but there is no shortage of venues for more artistic fare. The capital city of Seoul boasts

the widest variety of art film theaters, including the Seoul Art Cinema, CineCube, KT&G Cinema Sangsangmadang, and Sponge House, but other parts of the country also guarantee an eclectic assortment of viewing opportunities with art cinemas in Busan (most notably the Busan Cinema Center), Daegu, Daejeon, Gwangju, Jeonju, and Gangneung. For those wishing to see classics of Korean cinema, Seoul's Cinematheque KOFA (run by the Korean Film Archive) provides free screenings of older and independent films.



A screening of *Turning Point of the Youngsters* (1934), Korea's oldest existing film at Cinematheque KOFA

Theaters also hold social significance, as places where diverse groups come together: dating couples, friends and family, co-workers on group outings. A trip to the movies isn't just a way to see the latest blockbuster offering, but a popular leisure and friendship-building activity in its own right.

Tickets at multiplexes generally run about 8,000 won (roughly \$7) at ordinary weekday hours and 9,000 won (\$8) on weekends. Other theaters typically charge between 6,000 and 8,000 won.





## Chapter Five

# TEN KOREAN FILMS WITH OVERSEAS FOLLOWINGS

### The Housemaid Kim Ki-young, 1960

Dong-sik (Kim Jin-kyu), a composer and music teacher at a textile factory, is a devoted father and happy husband to his wife (Ju Jeung-ryu). One day, he lets himself be seduced by the family maid (Lee Eun-sim). The two of them make love, and she becomes pregnant. Enraged when he forces her to have an abortion, the maid plots her revenge. She will do whatever it takes to destroy the family.

An intense depiction of a middle-class family's collapse and terrorization at the hands of their maid, this film is a nerve-racking, horrifying experience for the





viewer, who is left shuddering by the grotesque mise-en-scène of its two-story home and the discordant notes on its soundtrack. It also offers devastatingly pointed portrayals of city and country, surplus sexuality and the desire for reproduction, young women with dreams of class advancement, bourgeois families terrified by a disruption to that class system, and male fears of women with economic power.

The director, Kim Ki-young, was known for his deft touch in delving insistently into basic instincts and human lust. *The Housemaid* marked the point where he truly earned his reputation for being “diabolical,” with an idiosyncratic mixture of grotesquerie and sadism. It would take until the 1990s for his films to receive a worldwide reappraisal, earning him new recognition as a Korean filmmaker with a unique style. Eventually, *The Housemaid* was restored by the Korean Film Archive with support

from Martin Scorsese’s World Cinema Foundation and shown at Cannes Classics in 2008. It was remade in 2010 with Jeon Do-youn in the title role and Im Sang-soo in the director’s chair. The remake entered the Cannes competition that same year.

### The Coachman Kang Dae-jin, 1961

Chun-sam (Kim Seung-ho) is a widowed cart driver. His oldest son, a civil service exam candidate, has married, and Chun-sam lives with his three other children: a mute oldest daughter who has fallen victim to domestic violence, a second son who keeps getting into fights, and a younger daughter who dreams of escaping poverty and moving up in the world. Supporting him on the sidelines is his lovelorn housekeeper (Hwang Jung-seun), who nurses a crush on him. They all have their own problems: the oldest son keeps flunking his test, the oldest daughter attempts suicide by jumping into the Han River after being abused by her husband one too many times, and the younger daughter falls prey to a con man. Things get worse when Chun-sam is struck by a car, injuring his leg. Then his employer’s family decides to sell his horse, which has become a kind of his alter ego. Unbeknownst to him, his housekeeper buys the horse, planning to give it back to him.





Awarded a special Silver Bear at the 11th Berlin International Film Festival, *The Coachman* is often cited as a superior example of the Korean family melodrama. It provides an outstandingly detailed portrait of the agonies and frustrations of a working class family at a time when the country was making the transition from premodern to modern. The film seeks to transcend this conflict – not through generational friction but through reconciliation. The father prevails over his transitional dilemma when his son finally passes his test; his crumbling authority over the family is restored. The film recalls the cinema of naturalism with its street landscapes, which deliver an exquisitely limned picture of a society and culture where the modern coexists with premodern, as witnessed in the changing modes of transportation and locations in Seoul. Actor Kim Seung-ho's strong performance helped instill him in the public consciousness as the archetypal “father” of '60s Korean cinema.

### Heavenly Homecoming to Stars Lee Jang-ho, 1974

Still scarred from being dumped by her first love, Gyeong-a (An In-suk) tries to make a new life for herself as the second wife of middle-aged Man-jun (Yoon Il-bong). But their romance comes to an end when he learns about her past pregnancy. She takes to the bottle and eventually becomes a “hostess,” entertaining strange men by drinking with them at the bar. One day, she meets artist Mun-ho (Shin Seong-il). The two fall in love and move in together. But the severely alcoholic Mun-ho realizes he can't even love himself and goes away, leaving Gyeong-a behind. A year later, her body is found in the winter snow.

The debut of director Lee Jang-ho, *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* is based on a serialized novel of the same name by a close friend, the writer Choe In-ho. It was, for a time, the biggest hit in Korean film history, selling 465,000 tickets and making Lee one of the most popular directors around. What resonated most with viewers of the day was the way it used the melodrama genre to capture the historical context of '70s-era industrialization and modernization, where many women came to the city



and ended up having to work as bar hostesses. *Homecoming* also delivers a scathing critique of the way young women of the time were threatened with abuse by men and suffered under the prevailing patriarchal mind-set.

### The Surrogate Woman Im Kwon-taek, 1986

Ok-nyeo (Kang Soo-yeon) is a 17-year-old girl living in Joseon-era Korea. She has been brought into a distinguished household to serve as a surrogate mother, bearing a son to carry on the family line as custom dictates. But when the child is taken away from her, she is driven to take her own life.

*The Surrogate Woman* explores the resentments of a woman whose life is rent asunder by patriarchal violence. This was a common theme in Korean period pieces of the 1980s: the way the male-dominated order of



the feudal era oppressed women and drove them to their death. The film is especially interesting in its use of the sacrificial ritual where the dead and living communicate, and its exploration of a world where the living are dominated by the dead. It forgoes any dramatic narrative of maternal instincts or romance for a vivid, ethnohistorical perspective on the customs of the times, including the use of surrogate mothers (in Korean, *ssibaji* – literally, “seed receptacles”) and various other practices that were supposed to bring a male child. The film was shown at the 44th Venice International Film Festival, where Kang Soo-yeon won Best Actress honors for her performance as Ok-nyeo – making this the first Korean film since 1961’s *The Coachman* to win an award at one of the world’s three biggest festivals. It also helped establish Im Kwon-taek as a director of international renown, while marking the first instance where Western film festivals really began taking note of the way Korean films represented their country’s traditions and culture.



### Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?

Bae Yong-kyoon, 1989

Two monks live in an old Buddhist temple deep in the mountains, an old one named Hye-gok (Lee Pan-yong) and a young one named Hae-jin (Hwang Hae-jin). Hye-gok is visited by Gi-bong (Sin Won-sop), who wants to sever all ties with the world and become a buddha. Conflict ensues as



Gi-bong practices, communing spiritually with the older monk (who is facing his own imminent death) but failing to escape completely from the delusions of the world. Meanwhile, the orphaned Hae-jin kills a bird, an act that brings him face to face with the duality of life and death for the first time. He finds himself asking questions about the fundamental suffering of existence.

The debut work of director Bae Yong-kyoon, *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* won the Golden Leopard award at the 1989 Locarno International Film Festival. It was from overseas, then, that he saw his first real recognition for the unique cinematic vision he had developed outside Seoul's Chungmuro studio system. The film itself took eight years to plan and four years to make, with Bae taking on the responsibilities of screenwriter, director, producer, cinematographer, lighting director, art director, and editor. It poses a Buddhist-style *kōan* to the viewer with the Zen meditation of its three monks, while providing a detailed depiction of the changing seasons that shows the phenomena of the universe nestled in nature.



### **My Sassy Girl** Kwak Jae-yong, 2001

Gyeon-u (Cha Tae-hyun) sees a drunk young woman (Jun Ji-hyun) staggering in the subway. Sick to her stomach, she ends up vomiting on a passenger's head. Instantly, the subway car is in pandemonium. She then turns to Gyeon-u, calls him "honey," and collapses in his arms. From that moment, they are inseparable, and romance blossoms. But her antics are far from over.

Adapted from an online story ostensibly based on a true story, this romantic comedy was a box office sensation not just in Korea but throughout Asia. Different cultures tend to have very different standards for "funny," but the seemingly very Korean humor of *My Sassy Girl* translated surprisingly well with other audiences. It also made a bona fide Hallyu star of its female lead, Jun Ji-hyun – some said she commanded a multimillion-dollar brand with her "sassy girl" character. The film was eventually given the American remake treatment in 2008 by director Yann Samuell, with Elisha Cuthbert doing her best sassy in the lead.





### **Oldboy** Park Chan-wook, 2003

Oh Dae-su (Choi Min-sik) is a typical salary man. One evening, he is abducted and locked up in a room for reasons unknown to him. His only food is a regular delivery of Chinese dumplings; his only news of the outside world comes via television. Fifteen years pass before he is eventually freed. He meets Mi-do (Kang Hye-jung), a cook at a Japanese restaurant, and the two of them fall in love. He also discovers the identity of the man who imprisoned him: one Lee Woo-jin (Yoo Ji-tae). Dae-su plots his revenge, but he has no idea of the shock awaiting him.

*Oldboy* was nothing if not an attention-getter when it came out, with its mixture of provocative subject matter and unusual cinematic style.

But its Grand Jury Prize honors at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival was the real impetus that sent it on the rounds to overseas film festivals, where it inspired numerous other directors. Eli Roth admitted that his *Hostel* (2007) was directly influenced in its style by *Oldboy*. And when Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* came out in 2008, some US media noted distinct aesthetic similarities. The film is currently slotted for a Hollywood remake by Spike Lee.

### **Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. . . and Spring** Kim Ki-duk, 2003

A temple floats in the middle of a lake. A boy captures a forest frog, a snake, and a fish and tortures them by tying a stone to them. An old monk sees him and ties a stone to the sleeping boy's back. The boy wakes up



and tearfully complains of the pain. The old monk tells him he will spend his life with the karma if he does not undo his misdeed. The boy grows to age 17. A young girl of the same age arrives at the temple to recuperate. The two fall in love. The old monk notices. The girl leaves. The boy is unable to let go of his deepening attachment and leaves the temple. Ten years pass. The boy, now an adult, arrives at the temple, fleeing the authorities after slaying his adulterous wife. The anger and pain are too much for him, and he attempts suicide in front of a statue of the Buddha.

Set against the changing of the seasons, this film expresses Buddhist ideas through a minimum of dialogue and restrained performances. The lakebound temple in particular is like a beautiful painting. With this film, director Kim Ki-duk takes a step away from the violent, instinctually driven characters of his previous works to show a Zen meditator repenting of his worldly misdeeds. The film resulted in a successful transformation of the director's image and earned him a strong following not just at home but overseas.

### The Host Bong Joon-ho, 2006

Gang-du (Song Kang-ho) runs a snack stall on the Han riverside with his father (Byun Hee-bong). He has a daughter, Hyeon-seo (Ko A-sung), whom he loves deeply, but he is also somewhat slow and unreliable. One day, a mysterious creature comes up out of the river and starts attacking people. Gang-du tries to take Hyeon-seo



and escape the beast, but he accidentally lets go of her hand, and she is spirited away to parts unknown. He and his family are quarantined in the hospital as authorities try to figure out whether they were infected by the beast. But when they learn that Hyeon-seo is still alive somewhere along the river's banks, they break out of the hospital and prepare to battle the monster.

The third film by director Bong Joon-ho (see p. 47), *The Host* was Korea's first-ever monster blockbuster, and it was a box office monster, too, selling 13 million tickets. It was a labor of love, with fully 16 months spent working out the film's beast. Unusually for a monster movie, it was invited to the Cannes Directors' Fortnight, where it met with rapturous praise. With this film, Bong offers a vivid picture of contemporary Seoul – much like his carefully crafted portrait of a 1980s-era farming community in his previous film, the thriller *Memories of Murder* – while at the same time lending a

certain plausibility to his monster. His films don't just offer genre thrills, but a host (so to speak) of other pleasures for those who get the historical, cultural, and geographical references.

## Poetry Lee Chang-dong, 2010



The Chicago Tribune selected *Poetry* as its Best Movie of 2011.

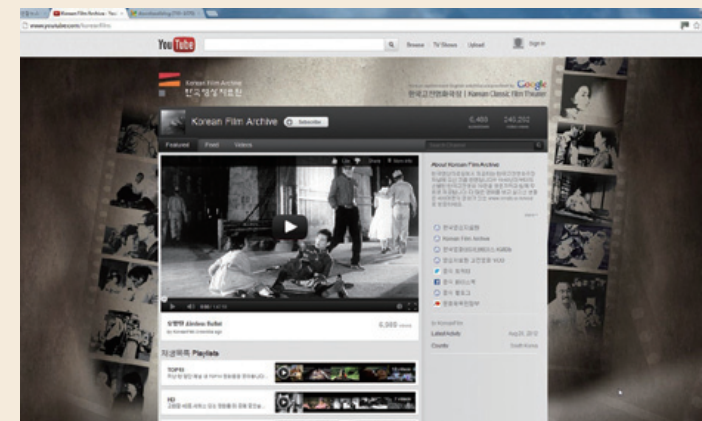
Elderly Mi-ja (Yoon Joon-hee) lives in a decrepit apartment with her middle schooler grandson. She enjoys dressing up in a flower-bedecked hat and nice clothes, and she has a curiosity that belies her age. One day, she begins taking poetry classes at her neighborhood cultural center. She becomes an avid poet, looking closely at the things around her for inspiration. She gains a new perspective on familiar things, an experience that leaves her giddy. But an ugly reality intrudes as her grandson is implicated in a female classmate's suicide. Mi-ja tries to tune it out, but at what cost?

*Poetry* is a film about the pain of others and a film about beauty. It offers a portrait of a person torn at the moment where poetry (something assumed to be beautiful) meets an immoral desire to ignore people's suffering. The winner of a screenplay award at Cannes, *Poetry* was

embraced by audiences when it opened in France, becoming the most successful of director Lee Chang-dong's films there.

## Korean Classics on YouTube

In May 2010, the Korean Film Archive set up its own YouTube channel ([www.youtube.com/koreanfilm](http://www.youtube.com/koreanfilm)), where it uploads classics of Korean cinema for free viewing. Seventy films from between 1940 and 1990 can be viewed there with English subtitles. Seven are available in high definition, including *Aimless Bullet* by Yu Hyun-mok, *The Barefooted Youth* by Kim Ki-duk (not to be confused with the contemporary filmmaker of the same name), and *The Housemaid* by Kim Ki-young. Subtitles are also available in other languages via Google Translate, helping to make especially outstanding Korean classics accessible to people all over the world. You can also view over 300 Korean films for free through a video on demand service at the KFA website ([www.koreanfilm.or.kr](http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr)).



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Korean Movie Database (KMDB)	<a href="http://www.kmdb.or.kr">www.kmdb.or.kr</a>
Korean Films VOD	<a href="http://www.kmdb.or.kr/vod">www.kmdb.or.kr/vod</a>
Korean Film Archive (KOFA)	<a href="http://www.koreafilm.or.kr">www.koreafilm.or.kr</a>
Korean Film Biz Zone (KOBIZ)	<a href="http://www.koreanfilm.or.kr">www.koreanfilm.or.kr</a>
Darcy Parquet's 'Korean Film'	<a href="http://www.koreanfilm.org">www.koreanfilm.org</a>

### Film Festivals in Korea

Busan International Film Festival	<a href="http://www.biff.kr">www.biff.kr</a>
Jeonju International Film Festival	<a href="http://www.jiff.or.kr">www.jiff.or.kr</a>
Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival	<a href="http://www.pifan.com">www.pifan.com</a>
Women's Film Festival in Seoul	<a href="http://www.wffis.or.kr">www.wffis.or.kr</a>
Jechon International Music& Film Festival	<a href="http://www.jimff.org">www.jimff.org</a>
Indi Forum	<a href="http://www.indieforum.co.kr">www.indieforum.co.kr</a>
Cinema Digital Seoul Film Festival	<a href="http://www.cindi.or.kr">www.cindi.or.kr</a>
Seoul Independent Film Festival	<a href="http://www.siff.or.kr">www.siff.or.kr</a>
Seoul Independent Documentary Film & Video Festival	<a href="http://www.sidof.org">www.sidof.org</a>
Asiana International Short Film Festival	<a href="http://www.aisff.org">www.aisff.org</a>
Seoul International Youth Film Festival	<a href="http://www.siyff.com">www.siyff.com</a>

# Award-winning Korean Films at Overseas Festivals

## 1960~1989

- 1961 *The Coachman* (by Kang Dae-jin)  
Berlin International Film Festival: Silver Bear (Special Prize)
- 1987 *The Surrogate Woman* (by Im Kwon-taek)  
Venice Film Festival: Best Actress (Kang Soo-yeon)
- 1988 *Adada* (by Im Kwon-taek)  
Montreal World Film Festival: Best Actress (Shin Hye-soo)
- 1989 *Aje Aje Bara Aje* (by Im Kwon-taek)  
Moscow International Film Festival: Best Actress (Kang Soo-yeon)
- 1989 *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East?* (by Bae Yong-kyoon)  
Locarno International Film Festival: Golden Leopard (Best Film), Prize of the Ecumenical Jury

## 1990~1999

- 1991 *Silver Stallion* (by Jang Gil-su)  
Montreal World Film Festival: Best Actress (Lee Hye-sook), Best Screenplay (Jang Kil-su, Cho Jai-hong)
- 1992 *White Badge* (by Chung Ji-young)  
Tokyo International Film Festival: Tokyo Grand Prix, Best Director Award
- 1993 *I Will survive* (by Yoon Sam-yook)  
Moscow International Film Festival: Silver St. George (Best Actor, Lee Deok-hwa)
- 1994 *The Avatamska Sutra* (by Jang Sun-woo)  
Berlin International Film Festival: Alfred Bauer Award
- 1996 *Farewell My Darling* (by Park Chul-soo)  
Montreal World Film Festival: Best Artistic Contribution

- 1996-7 *The Day a Pig Fell into the Well* (by Hong Sang-soo)  
Vancouver International Film Festival: Dragons and Tigers Award (1996)  
Rotterdam International Film Festival: Tiger Award (1997)
- 1997 *Green Fish* (by Lee Chang-dong)  
Vancouver International Film Festival: Dragons and Tigers Award
- 1998 *Spring in My Hometown* (by Lee Gwang-mo)  
Tokyo International Film Festival: Gold Award
- 1999 *The Picnic* (by Song Il-gon)  
Cannes Film Festival: Grand Prize of the Jury, Best Short Film
- 1999 *The Uprising* (by Park Kwang-su)  
Locarno International Film Festival: Youth Jury Award, Third Prize: New Cinema
- 1999 *Rainbow Trout* (by Park Chong-won)  
Tokyo International Film Festival: Special Jury Prize

## 2000~2009

- 2000 *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (by Hong Sang-soo)  
Tokyo International Film Festival: Special Jury Prize
- 2000 *Nowhere to Hide* (by Lee Myung-se)  
Deauville Asian Film Festival: Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor (Park Joon-hoon), Best Cinematography (Jeong Kwang-seok, Song Haeng-ki)
- 2001 *One Fine Spring Day* (by Hur Jin-ho)  
Tokyo International Film Festival: Best Artistic Contribution Award
- 2001 *Joint Security Area* (by Park Chan-wook)  
Deauville Asian Film Festival: Best Film, Best Actor (Song Kang-ho), Audience Award
- 2001 *Flower Island* (by Song Il-gon)  
Venice Film Festival: 'CinemAvvenire' Award (Best First Film)
- 2002 *Painted Fire* (by Im Kwon-taek)  
Cannes Film Festival: Best Director
- 2002 *My Beautiful Girl, Mari* (by Lee Sung-gang)  
Annecy International Animated Film Festival: Grand Prix (Best Animated Feature Film)

- 2002 *Oasis* (by Lee Chang-dong)  
Venice Film Festival: Special Director's Award, FIPRESCI Prize (Competition), Marcello Mastroianni Award (Moon So-ri), SIGNIS Award  
Vancouver International Film Festival: Chief Dan George Humanitarian Award
- 2002 *Failan* (by Song Hae-sung)  
Deauville Asian Film Festival: Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor (Choi Min-sik), Audience Award
- 2002 *Bad Guy* (by Kim Ki-duk)  
Berlin International Film Festival: Golden Bear / Fukuoka Asian Film Festival: Grand Prix
- 2003 *Save The Green Planet!* (by Jang Joon-hwan)  
Moscow International Film Festival: Silver St. George (Best Director)
- 2003 *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (by Im Sang-soo)  
Stockholm Film Festival: Best Actress (Moon So-ri), Best Cinematography (Kim Woo-hyung)  
Deauville Asian Film Festival: Best Film
- 2003 *YMCA Baseball Team* (by Kim Hyun-seok)  
Fukuoka Asian Film Festival: Grand Prix
- 2003-4 *Memories of Murder* (by Bong Joon-ho)  
Torino International Festival of Young Cinema: Holden Award for the Best Script, Audience Award (2003) / Tokyo International Film Festival: Asian Film Award (2004)
- 2004 *Samaria* (by Kim Ki-duk)  
Berlin International Film Festival: Silver Bear (Best Director)
- 2004 *Repatriation* (by Kim Dong-won)  
Sundance Film Festival: Freedom of Expression Award
- 2004 *Oldboy* (by Park Chan-wook)  
Cannes Film Festival: Grand Prize of the Jury
- 2004 *3-Iron* (by Kim Ki-duk)  
Venice Film Festival: Special Director's Award, FIPRESCI Prize (Competition), Little Golden Lion, SIGNIS Award - Honorable Mention
- 2005 *This Charming Girl* (by Lee Yoon-ki)  
Berlin International Film Festival: Netpac Award / Deauville Asian Film Festival: Jury Prize
- 2006 *The Peter Pan Formula* (by Cho Chang-ho)  
Deauville Asian Film Festival: Jury Prize

- 2007 *I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK* (by Park Chan-wook)  
Berlin International Film Festival: Alfred Bauer Award
- 2007 *The King and the Clown* (by Lee Joon-ik)  
Deauville Asian Film Festival: Jury Prize
- 2007 *Secret Sunshine* (by Lee Chang-dong)  
Cannes Film Festival: Best Actress (Jeon Do-yeon)
- 2009 *Thirst* (by Park Chan-wook)  
Cannes Film Festival: Jury Prize
- 2009 *Breathless* (by Yang Ik-joon)  
Deauville Asian Film Festival: Grand Prix, Critic's Prize  
Rotterdam International Film Festival: Tiger Award

## 2010~

- 2010 *Poetry* (by Lee Chang-dong)  
Cannes Film Festival: Best Screenplay, Prize of the Ecumenical Jury - Special Mention
- 2010 *Hahaha* (by Hong Sang-soo)  
Cannes Film Festival: Un Certain Regard Award
- 2011 *Arirang* (by Kim Ki-duk)  
Cannes Film Festival: Un Certain Regard Award
- 2011 *Oki's Movie* (by Hong Sang-soo)  
Rotterdam International Film Festival: Return of the Tiger Award
- 2011 *The Journals of Musan* (by Park Jung-bum)  
Deauville Asian Film Festival: Jury Prize  
Rotterdam International Film Festival: FIPRESCI Prize, Tiger Award
- 2012 *Pieta* (by Kim Ki-duk)  
Venice Film Festival: Golden Lion

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### **Kim Kyung-tae**

Film critic. After graduating from Hankuk University of Foreign Studies' Department of French, Kim acquired a masters in Film Studies from Chung-Ang University's Graduate School of Advanced Imaging Science, Multimedia & Film, where he also completed a doctoral course. He is a visiting scholar at the International Promotion Center of the Korean Film Council, where he is researching Kobiz Content. He also contributes film columns for general consumption to various publications, including *Munhwa Journal*.

He has also written on Korean and overseas film news for the online film portal site "Cinetizen," was an audience critic at the Jeonju International Film Festival, and served as a coordinator for the Green Film Festival in Seoul. His essays include "Queerness of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's 'Blissfully Yours' and 'Tropical Malady'."



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