

To Democratize Cinema

Filmmakers, Critics, and Bootleggers in the US Occupation

In late February 1946, a group of Korean filmmakers and critics organized a film screening in celebration of the upcoming anniversary of the March First Movement of 1919, one of the largest anti-imperial movements during the Japanese rule (1910–45). Meant to quench the Korean thirst for coverage of the shifting geopolitical circumstances during another foreign occupation, this time by the US and USSR, this screening offered several films from not only the two rival countries but also their allies. Its impressive turnout convinced the organizers to extend it to the ensuing week. However, their plan was suddenly interrupted when the American military government confiscated three Soviet newsreels about the victory of the allied powers. Rescinding its initial approval for public exhibition, the government seized these films right before the event.¹ Soon Koreans faced a complete ban on Soviet films in the American occupied zone, below the 38th parallel of the peninsula. The order forbidding Soviet films, once leaked to the public, fueled a growing Korean suspicion of the nature of the US occupier, which was claiming to “demilitarize” and “democratize” the peninsula.²

Shortly after the banning of Soviet films, another event confirmed the public suspicion of the purported goal of US rule. This time, Koreans faced the launch of Hollywood’s East Asian output, the Central Motion Picture Exchange (CMPE), in Seoul. Serving its parent organization, the Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) in Hollywood, the CMPE had the exclusive right to distribute American films in Japan and Korea.³ While welcoming the reentrance of Hollywood cinema that had been banned during the late colonial period, Korean film workers, especially distributors and exhibitors, felt threatened by the CMPE’s installment in the American Military Government building. They suspected that the new Hollywood office worked exclusively for the occupation authority, despite what it

officially proclaimed to be its goal of “providing more entertainment to Koreans and helping nurture Korean culture.”⁴ Their suspicions proved valid; the CMPE soon mandated ninety-day rentals of Hollywood features that required those films to be shown on at least fifty-two days in Korean theaters. This condition meant, in reality, that the CMPE’s selected films could dominate Korean screens in the US occupation zone, even if some of their films were not popular enough to repay the rental fees.

To Korean film workers, these events stood in opposition to what Americans had boasted about their democracy. Upon his arrival in Seoul, John Hodge, the governor of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), presented his country as a democratic and benevolent one that extended its arms to Korea, an “unhappy nation.”⁵ In his first political leaflet, widely disseminated in English, Japanese, and Korean, he strongly urged Koreans to cooperate with American governance to ensure “happy living under democracy.” Hodge’s message was indicative of the USAMGIK’s tendency to preach democracy as abstractly as possible as a promise of happiness to Koreans who, in his view, had earned their freedom simply through the United States’ victory against Japan. Many film workers found themselves at odds with Hodge’s vague notion of democracy and the US’s unfair actions regarding film. Immediately after the CMPE’s implementation of the import requirement, an anonymous Korean critic condemned the US film policy in Korea as “more oppressive” than that of the Japanese. “Contrary to the USAMGIK official statement,” the writer argues, its policy has strangled Korean films in the face of a flood of Hollywood imports and strictly regulated what can be seen in theaters.⁶ This commentary represents Koreans’ palpable frustration not simply with the unjust policy on Korean film culture but also with the chasm between the ideal and the reality of “democracy” under US hegemony.

Korean film workers’ responses to the American occupation have been studied primarily through the lens of anti-imperial nationalism. Generations of (South) Korean writers—whether they had firsthand experience of colonial rule or not—have weighed in the oppositional discourse of the terms “nationalist” versus “anti-nationalist” and “capitalist” (“rightist”) versus “socialist” (“leftist”).⁷ Their work prioritizes a rearticulation of Korean cinema (“Hang’uk yŏnghwa”) that excludes both the purportedly “pro-Japanese” tradition and the traces of artists who went to the north during the first three years of partition. Despite their rigorous documentation of the multifaceted struggle of Korean filmmakers facing abrupt “liberation” from Japan and national division, the binary frame runs deeply across their construction of an ethnonationalist film history. Since the mid-2000s, this frame has been challenged by other inquiries into the gray areas in the colonial experience of filmmakers invigorated by their newly gained access to late colonial-era films and other relevant materials.⁸ Anchored in a critical reflection on the long-held equation of nation and cinema in historiography, recent discussions of the shifting boundaries of Korean cinema have also brought insight into a relatively

understudied topic: the film culture of early postcolonial Korea. By investigating new archival materials or reinterpreting the available films and other relevant texts, scholars have encouraged perspectives on the “end” of colonial rule as something other than a clean state for Korean culture. This effort to decentralize nationalist historiography presents a productive way to see early postcolonial Korea. As Ted Hughes stresses, new understanding of this era can only emerge when August 15, 1945—the “liberation” day—is no longer flattened as either a definitive historical rupture or a marker of continuous foreign domination.⁹

I join a growing group of scholars who have begun to disentangle the history of Korean cinema in the early postcolonial era. My discussion takes a cue from a critical yet underused lens through which we can look at this juncture: democracy. The immediate liberation era was filled with Korean discourse about democracy not only as an institution but also as a set of Korean aspirations.¹⁰ The local discourse of democracy emerged out of a peculiar condition of the occupation; American expansion, which had been to an important extent inspired by the desire to expand democracy to Koreans as part of the “free world,” continued to deny them sovereignty and freedom. The USAMGIK’s control of cinema might have set one example, but it pressed many film workers to envisage democracy on their own terms, not those of Americans. Rather than subscribe to a notion of American democracy defined substantially as an antonym to “communism,” they conceived of democracy in its absence. In particular, they reckoned with a critical gap between American democracy as a projected ideal and their experience under the occupation. It was in this gap that Koreans imagined a different configuration of cinema that would break from both US domination and Japanese colonial influence.

In this chapter, I explore the Korean aspiration to democratize cinema against the normative configuration of cinema as a singular apparatus in the service of the ruling power. Korean filmmakers, critics, and bootleggers challenged this construction of cinema as the state’s weapon while grasping other possible protocols and practices that would serve their goals. I pay close attention to two distinct ways Koreans negated the working of the US film policy and program under the guise of what Americans called democracy. First, I show how a sizable number of filmmakers and critics reckoned with their experience of the US rule through the lens of colonialism. As it developed into a discourse of film colony (“yŏnghwa sigminji”), their criticism highlighted how USAMGIK deliberately animated, rather than eliminated, the Japanese imperial norm of cinema and the rules that maintained this norm. Although short-lived due to the USAMGIK’s suppression of outspoken film workers, this discourse helps us understand how they called into question the denial of their autonomy and the enlistment of cinema as a tool of imperialism. Second, I consider how Korean bootleggers, tapping into their local knowledge, interrupted the operation of the US film program through piratical activities. Although these activities were documented as stealing by US officials,

I reinterpret the bootleggers' unauthorized use and sale of US films in relation to the exploitation and other inequality issues of the US film program. The Koreans' criticism and piratical activities might not qualify as full-blown resistance, but these two idiosyncratic responses set in motion celluloid democracy. Through the possibility of thinking and dreaming otherwise, filmmakers, critics, and pirates envisioned a more equitable and just film ecology, even in the stifling presence of the norms established by the US occupying force.

RUNNING FILM FOR "DEMOCRACY"

The end of World War II sparked a rapid reconfiguration of the United States as a democratic country among American policy makers. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki caused both US and foreign citizens to doubt that the US was the democratic agent that so many had promoted as the key to wartime morale. In response, various American information agencies started to develop a carefully strategized maneuver to distinguish the US from other colonial powers.¹¹ In particular, the people in the new US-occupied territories—Germany, Austria, Japan, and Korea—added urgency to the need to develop an effective information program. Because these people believed that America was a "rich, tawdry, jazz-loving, unscrupulous lot" due to the "Axis propagandists," Loy Henderson, the director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs, anticipated that information activities would correct these stereotypes by showing America's "truth."¹² American policy makers also saw a pressing need to "bring somewhat into balance [the] picture of [the] USA available" to people in Germany and Korea, which they co-occupied with the Russians.¹³ Aware of the influence of Soviet propaganda, which highlighted only the negative aspects of America, they contended that a deliberately designed information program would be more than "essential" to "help" these people obtain "accurate" information about the US and democracy.¹⁴

These complex rationales for public information informed the US film program for the occupied areas. Based on the successful mobilization of cinema during wartime, American leaders had no doubt about the ability of film to teach people democracy in these territories, which had been "cut off from the democratic world for more than a decade."¹⁵ The Civil Affairs Division's Motion Picture Section (MPS) undertook the mission of mobilizing cinema for this purpose, focusing on conveying "the ways in which democracy actually functions" to the occupied. With a significant emphasis on cinema's "visual factors," they expected films to be "more directly and immediately effective" than any other media in convincing the audience of "the democratic processes at work." As Jennifer Fay reveals in her study of the film program in US-occupied Germany, this conviction provided a basis for the American approach to democratization; that is, a successful film programming and screening would

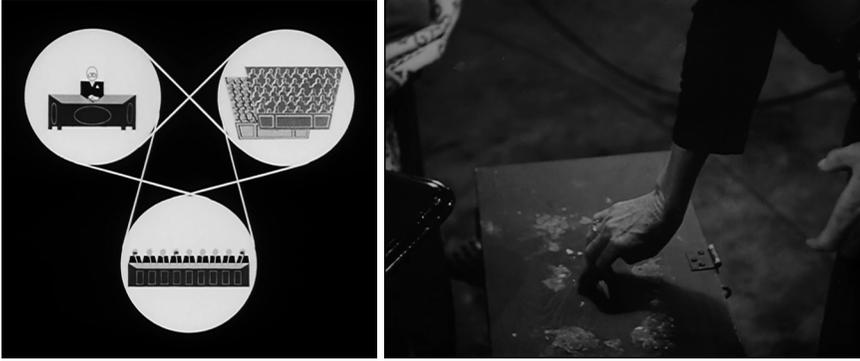


FIGURE 1. *Tuesday in November* (1945) not only uses found footage from Election Day but also includes an animation segment showing the voting process in detail. Credit: US Office of War Information.

permit the occupied to learn democracy through “mechanistic repetition of the body’s hardwired response to the state” rather than through a conceptual understanding.¹⁶ Underpinning the assumed “foreignness” of democracy to peoples of “totalitarian states,” the MPS purported to help “prepare the occupied peoples to use the tools of democracy in government, national life, and in their relations with all peoples.”¹⁷

It is not surprising, then, that these goals of US foreign policy and its agencies thoroughly structured the film program for Korea. When it came to film selection, the dominant themes among the imports, which had mostly been produced before and during World War II, served the US authority’s goal of projecting a positive image of America as diverse, egalitarian, and most importantly democratic.¹⁸ While the earliest batches of nonfiction films highlighted the American victory over Japan and its ascendancy as a global power, the MPS added more and more films on democracy that featured so-called average American citizens and their lives. For instance, the series *The City* features the modern, rational, and even happy lives of Americans everywhere, broadcasting the “great” virtue of democracy, defined as liberty and equality, to Koreans.¹⁹ Meanwhile, *Tuesday in November* (1945) draws on a dramatization of the voting process and archival footage of the 1944 presidential race to show how Americans made democracy work. Although the film details democracy as an institution, its emphasis is on energetic and hardworking people who decide their destinies. Another film, *Freedom of the Press* (1947), shows how a free and uncensored press functions in the US and emphasizes that it is concerned with “accurate reporting, instead of propaganda or slanted selection of news stories.”²⁰ As part of a broader international strategy of using films to rally foreign support for US economic and political plans abroad, this filmic propaganda blitz was meant to reinforce the image of the US as a champion of democracy in the postwar world order.²¹

Meanwhile, the MPS's choice of Hollywood features appears to have been less coherent than its selection of nonfiction films in terms of the content and message. In fact, the MPS never specified why certain features were chosen and sent to Korea. Sueyoung Park-Primiano suspects that the limited information about the selection reflects MPS's perception of these features as mere "bait" to draw audiences to see the government-produced nonfiction films.²² This factor alone, however, should not discourage us from seeing these features in relation to the US goal of projecting its ideal image. CMPE and USAMGIK often privileged features that were perceived as congruent with the US mission of reorientation. For instance, among the first fifteen imports, the American authorities chose *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940) to be the first Korean-subtitled film.²³ Among the batch, this film stands out as one that directly addresses American democracy, tracing the life of Abraham Lincoln from his departure from Kentucky until his election as president. The desire to project America as an epitome of democracy is palpable in this highly promoted film. It emphasizes the importance of representative polity for uniting the nation and achieving progress, and its inclusion of a series of historical debates with Stephan Douglas, Lincoln's opponent, highlights the power of open debate as a backbone of the country's freedom and plurality. But what is more deliberately stressed throughout the film is an idea of America as a land of such equal opportunity that any citizen may run for public office. From the beginning, the film features a particular image of Lincoln as a righteous and confident man from humble origins. In one scene, a young Abe, who has just arrived in New Salem, takes on a town bully without fear. For several minutes, the camera follows their fistfight, which leads Abe to be recognized for his courage and fair play, not simply his victory. Embraced as a "new champion" by the villagers, he soon emerges as a sensible leader of the town.

I am not suggesting that the Korean viewers received American films like *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* as expected by the occupation authority. In fact, it is almost impossible to reconstruct how Koreans understood the authority's public and symbolic goals via the Hollywood imports. One reason is that unlike in German and Japan, the primary theaters of reorientation, the US occupation force did not commission wide surveys of film audiences in Korea.²⁴ While reports about the Korean viewership in general were occasionally sent to Washington, they included little detail about how productive Hollywood cinema had been in reorientation work. Another reason is that most Korean print media sources related to film published under the US occupation were short-lived and addressed Korean cinema exclusively; the response to Hollywood cinema is far from comprehensive.²⁵

Despite these challenges in studying the Korean reception, a few extant periodicals give us a glimpse of how Korean viewers perceived the projected ideals of America in Hollywood cinema. For instance, *New Land (Shinchŏnji)*, a popular monthly magazine on culture, published a useful survey of fifteen viewers as part of its special issue on American cinema.²⁶ Notwithstanding the small number

of respondents, the survey conveys a sense of how Korean viewers—both professional and nonprofessional critics—viewed the Hollywood imports and their projection of American ideals onto Koreans. The survey results are riddled with general criticism of “low-quality” imports without proper Korean subtitles, but what also stands out is that Hollywood features did not seem to work in the way Americans had expected. Specifically, responses to two of the least favored films demonstrate that these films brought to Korea proved ineffective at teaching what American leaders aimed to impart.

One of the films that received a poor response was *No Time for Love* (1943), a romantic comedy directed by Mitchell Leisen. It traces the cross-class relationship of Katherine, a successful female photographer (Claudette Colbert), and Jim, a working-class man (Fred MacMurray). Leisen tweaks the typical dynamic of romance—bringing together a brainy girl and a brawny boy—while skillfully representing the disparity between the two protagonists. The film shows how a competent woman can win both a career and love, but more importantly for the present discussion, it depicts America as an egalitarian and classless society. In a scene in which Katherine and Jim dine at a fancy restaurant with Katherine’s colleague, Jim misunderstands the nuances of decorum and establishes a connection to the server rather than the colleague. He is not, however, portrayed as an underdog, but rather as an unpretentious and confident man who stays true to himself. The film shows the difference in Jim and Katherine’s social status but only in a way that alludes to its message, that is, that such difference means nothing in a democratic and pluralistic society. This message, however, held little appeal for the Korean viewers. Almost every commentator, except one who briefly mentioned the “sensational” aspect of the cross-class romance, condemned its “frivolous” love story “without any depth.”²⁷ The same qualities that caused the film to be acclaimed as “thoroughly ingratiating” in the *New York Times* rendered it a “failure” and a “reckless attempt to force American idealism” in the eyes of its Korean viewers.²⁸

Hold That Ghost (1941) was the other film that the Korean respondents most disliked. One of the popular prewar films featuring the comic duo Abbott and Costello, it is full of gags and dialogues performed by a bumbling pair of friends who inherit a gangster’s haunted house. Many scenes are peppered with classic bits of Chuck (Abbott) and Ferdie (Costello) dialogue. In one scene, while giving Ferdie suggestions on table etiquette, Chuck asks him, “You have got a tongue, haven’t you?” “Yes, but I can reach much farther with my hands.” Costello’s silent acting is perfectly paired with the lines of a brilliant female comic, Joan Davis. Tasting the soup, Camille, performed by Davis, declares, “Just like Mother used to make. It *stinks*.” The harmonious ensemble of these comics led to great market success in the US, where it was acclaimed as “a laugh-creator and audience-pleaser.”²⁹ This success was not replicated in Korea. As some respondents complained about the “awful translation” of the dialogue, we can assume that the language barrier played

a certain part in its failure.³⁰ But the bigger issue came from the film's excessive emphasis on the fight for the common good. Korean viewers saw it as too "awkward" and "poorly justified" to follow; they were particularly distracted by the ending of the film, in which the team dispatches the gangsters returning for the money hidden inside the house and then transforms the house into a health resort, thanks to the then-revealed therapeutic effects of its undrinkable water. Far from covering up organized crime in American society, *Hold That Ghost* seems to show that even ordinary people can fight for the common good, contributing to making society more livable. However, the Korean survey, alongside the film reviews, indicates that this message was not delivered. In one representative commenter's words, it was a "hodgepodge" of "pun play and slapstick" that "lack[ed]" depth.

Korean viewers, or at least the viewers represented in the survey, can hardly be said to have responded to the assumed capacity of Hollywood cinema to promote America's democratic images. The features, in their portrayal of the glamorous, wealthy, and pluralist aspects of the US, might have elicited curiosity among Koreans about the country, but the viewers selectively created their own image of America, rendering the calculated effect of the filmic projection unsuccessful. Imports were frequently criticized on the basis of their "shallowness" or "emptiness," and this often raised the question of why such films had been allocated for Korea. When Korean viewers occasionally saw contemporary American film magazines, Hollywood was portrayed as a powerhouse of many "good" films. "Then, why [are] the American films sent to Korea are all frivolous?" one anonymized commentator asked.³¹ Possibly ignorant of such criticism, a USAMGIK adviser interpreted the Korean perception of American imports quite differently. He doubted that most American films could successfully communicate with Koreans, who were "totally unacquainted with the most basic concepts of democracy."³² To him, the Koreans disliked or misinterpreted the films because of their lack of sophistication in matters of democracy. What appears to be a one-sided judgment led to his recommendation to import American films that would deal "simply and directly with the fundamentals of democracy" to educate the population.

As the Korean viewers in the survey show, however, the issue was not the audience's alleged ignorance of democratic principles. Rather, it was the failure of the ineffectively designed film program that catered only to the US perspective. At least to Korean respondents, the Hollywood imports lacked both critical perspectives on American society and an understanding of local situations. Quite literally, these films did not represent them or what they wanted to see. America, as the land of opportunity portrayed in these films, may have provided one model of life, but not for those whose experience of the occupation years hardly resonated with Hollywood films.

THE CONDITIONS OF THE “FILM COLONY”

The American propagation of democracy in Korea through cinema did not win the “hearts and minds” of the occupied. Rather, it planted more confusion about the meaning of “liberation.” From the first months of the US occupation, most Koreans perceived their circumstances under US rule to be similar to the colonial experiences that were in many cases a recent memory. For film workers, the resonance between the two foreign rules, particularly in their instrumentalization of cinema, was striking; both Japanese and American approaches to cinema dictated a heavy emphasis on the medium’s ability to teach and mobilize the population for specific political goals. From their perspective, the end of Japanese rule would allow a new configuration of cinema that would be untethered from such instrumentalization. Notwithstanding the degrees of their collaboration with the Japanese imperial power and its wartime mobilization of film, there was at least a desire for cinema—as at once a medium, an industry, and a theater—that was not dominated by the state. But their aspiration suffered as they parsed the legal and cultural position imposed by the US-led Cold War order, which not only denied their sovereignty but also dictated the active maintenance of most of the Japanese colonial system.

Consequently, spreading concerns about US control of cinema in southern Korea gave rise to a particular discourse that critiqued animation of colonial violence in the form of strict regulation of cinema. Crystallized most distinctively in the notion of film colony, this criticism was expressed most fiercely by left-leaning filmmakers and critics who prioritized fundamental economic and social reforms that would prevent the monopoly of the film industry and other resources by the ruling power.³³ Yet even those with a neutral stance on these reforms viewed the revival of many aspects of the prewar colonial system with extreme caution. For those who naïvely envisioned a clean state, the USAMGIK’s regulation of cinema was a source of what Albert Memmi, their contemporary in a different former colony, calls a “great disillusion” with national independence.³⁴

The earliest articulation of film-colony discourse emerged out of the immediate material conditions regarding the redistribution of extant infrastructure, property, and other resources (“chöksan”). Korean film workers believed that land and other infrastructure such as theaters and film studios should be handed over to Korea in compensation for the decades of colonial rule. The American government viewed Japanese properties in Korea as the external assets of a defeated enemy, pushing the decision to the inter-allied settlement on postwar reparations that was yet to come.³⁵ When the USAMGIK worked to place all vested entertainment under government management, Koreans expected that Americans would soon repatriate previously Japanese-owned properties, as the Russians had done; those in the US-occupation zone had already heard of the effective nationalization of theaters and film studios in the Soviet-occupation zone that had started even earlier in 1946.³⁶

This expectation was dashed with the USAMGIK-run search for interim Korean managers for theaters, meaning that no redistribution of what Koreans perceived as “national” or “public” resources was to be carried out as it had north of the 38th parallel. The limited transparency of the hiring process for managers confirmed their suspicion. The USAMGIK required applicants to provide three letters of recommendation, which permitted the procedures to be dictated by the personal connections of property-custody personnel and vested theaters.³⁷ As many Koreans suspected, in almost every case, the current employees were designated as the first state-hired managers; using their networks, they managed to get letters from senior officials and influencers to make their applications more competitive, and it was not rare for an assigned manager to be identified as a Japanese collaborator or profiteer with no previous experience in the film industry.³⁸ Seen as “dangerous” and “ineffective” at eliminating the “deep-rooted evil” of colonial systems, the hiring process warned Koreans that an American style of disposition would benefit only the “profit-seeking capitalists.”³⁹ For film workers, the whole process eroded the meaning of “liberation” in the south, preventing them from changing material conditions of cinema that had been determined predominantly by those in power.⁴⁰

The USAMGIK’s subsequent decision to maintain prewar censorship again forced Korean film workers to recognize themselves as colonized in what they had believed to be a “liberated” world.⁴¹ The first legal measure enacted under the USAMGIK’s control, Ordinance No. 68 required all motion pictures—both domestic and imported—to be reviewed prior to exhibition. This ordinance granted the American government the sole authority to issue a license after censorship, which ranged from alteration to complete elimination of the film. Another measure, Ordinance No. 115, mandated Korean producers to submit translations of all titling and sound dialogue in English to be considered for a certificate of approval. With the implementation of both codes, local films were policed during all phases of filmmaking, from preproduction to exhibition, as they had been under Japanese rule.

What felt like the “revival” of colonial-style censorship outraged Korean artists and writers, leading them to publish a joint statement in 1946 criticizing the American “colonial policy” that not only repressed “freedom of expression” but also forced the translation requirement. On top of the labor and costs of translation, this demand appeared to be a clear sign of linguistic imperialism that took the language of the occupier as a norm.⁴² The critic Kim Namchŏn, in a separate statement, further accused the USAMGIK’s official endorsement of “freedom” as a mere gesture.⁴³ Its deliberate actions to oppress the “fundamental condition of democracy” took place not only through censorship but more importantly through the increased suppression of the right to assembly. Pointing to the Seoul Metropolitan Police Department’s emergency decree that granted them the power to regulate any anti-government protests in public spaces, he describes how this new

regulation disturbingly brought back the prewar surveillance system in which police attended every film screening in theaters. With this new measure, police attended rehearsals and performances to try to put themselves in the position of spectators and intercept any disorder, whether initiated by the viewers or the filmmakers in a coded way.⁴⁴ Witnessing these reinforced measures being put into place, Kim condemned the “colonial cultural policy” for turning Koreans into “slaves” in the ironically “liberated” land.⁴⁵

The USAMGIK’s regulation of cinema served the broader goal of building what Bruce Cumings calls “a containment bulwark” in the south. Using the police as the “primary weapon for pacifying the south” from the first months of occupation, Hodge and his advisers actively suppressed Koreans who challenged their policies, all the while building an alliance with the rightists.⁴⁶ Although these political actions certainly influenced the rhetoric of colonization among Korean film workers, their disarticulation of the “containment bulwark” took place most acutely in the face of Hollywood’s invasive domination of the Korean film market. It should be noted here that from the outset, Hollywood, in cooperation with Washington, had been attempting to seize formerly closed markets under the aegis of Axis power.⁴⁷ Despite the Korean market’s relatively small size at the time, Hollywood leaders were interested in investing in it with the hope of making it an outlet for more Hollywood content. Their cartel, the MPEA, installed the CMPE to negotiate distribution agreements for the release of pictures in Korea. American films were given exceptional preference in the Korean market under the CMPE’s operation in support of the occupation force. For instance, the CMPE was exempt from paying import duties on its films due to exchange restrictions, while all other foreign films required payment of a ten percent ad valorem tax.⁴⁸

This comparative advantage given to Hollywood imports turned out to be the tip of the iceberg. Soon Korean film workers found that America’s invasive domination of the Korean film market far outstripped the Japanese project. Relying on its bargaining power as the sole handler of American products, the CMPE imposed higher rental costs on local exhibitors and theaters. Traditionally, the rental fee of a Hollywood movie was fifteen to twenty-five percent of its box office return at the local market. However, the CMPE mandated a blanket fifty percent rental fee for all exhibitors—a rate that in the US was set only for special road-show screenings for prestige films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939). On top of these unreasonable rental fees, the CMPE sold packages of twenty-six or fifty-two films without granting Korean exhibitors the right to choose the titles. This action made it possible for the CMPE to dump old Hollywood features in Korea as a way to help Hollywood studios eliminate the post-1945 debt they carried from the maximized mobilization of wartime cinema.⁴⁹ Although Hollywood’s old movies were gobbling up both the Japanese and Korean markets through a singular protocol, it was predominantly the Korean theaters that received interwar features.⁵⁰ With only a handful of exceptions released later in 1948, almost every feature sent to Korea was

from the 1930s or early 1940s, and most of the film prints were noted as overused and “rainy” (industry jargon for badly scratched due to overuse).⁵¹

The CMPE’s aggressive and monopolistic actions to accumulate profits agitated Korean film workers across the political spectrum, resulting in a few collective pushes against it during the first year of the US occupation. One move was a boycott of Hollywood films from the CMPE by three major theaters in Seoul in February 1947.⁵² Charles Meyer, the CMPE’s manager at the Japanese headquarters, came to Seoul to ease the tensions. But his visit proved to be a mere gesture, as confirmed by the lack of changes to the policy either then or during the rest of its operations until 1949. Up to this point, the USAMGIK had officially denied its alliance with the CMPE, but it was soon leaked to the public that the American officers called on the managers of theaters in protest, “intimidating” them into ceasing to oppose the government policy.⁵³ Under the American manipulation of local film business in this way, Korean theater owners and distributors had no choice but to sign the unfair contract, which mandated the screening of costly Hollywood imports that they had not selected for at least twenty-one to twenty-six days per month.

This strict control of the Korean market distressed even those who were less active in vocalizing the film-colony discourse. These were primarily the generation of film-makers and critics who had started their careers in the mid-to-late 1930s, when the Japanese colonial government reduced and eventually banned Hollywood imports. Although the government’s regulation aimed at enlarging the pie of Japanese exports and promoting Korean-language films that supported imperialization, in practice it protected Korean films from popular American imports, enabling more productions by Koreans.⁵⁴ The filmmaker An Chölyöng, who belonged to this generation, expressed his frustration at the USAMGIK’s film policy in a published travelogue on the US. In the midst of presenting a glorified image of Hollywood as a global powerhouse, he points to the unreasonable difficulty of rebuilding a Korean film industry in the face of the USAMGIK’s “serious lack of interest” in local culture.⁵⁵ His contemporary An Sökyöng similarly condemned the US monopoly of film resources and markets that “paralyzed” virtually all film industries, including the Korean one. Referencing the Soviets’ support of Korean filmmakers in building a national film studio, he called on US authorities to implement a “fair” import and distribution of raw films for new local production.⁵⁶

The USAMGIK’s regulation of cinema and resources and its domination of the local market, which were not in sync with the American gospel of democracy, exacerbated Koreans’ ambivalent perception of America. The USAMGIK’s actions affirmed, and in some cases exaggerated, a spreading sense of incomplete liberation, which in turn evoked a range of resistant reactions such as rallies and protests. In response, Governor Hodge published a statement that reaffirmed that the goal of the US occupation was “supporting a small and fragile country” rather than imposing an economic monopoly and exploiting Korea for the United States’ benefit.⁵⁷ Baffled at Hodge’s claim, the critic Ch’ae Jönggün sarcastically responded:



FIGURE 2. John Hodge’s statement on the front page of *Donga Ilbo* with the headline “The US has no interest in exploiting Korea,” September 1, 1946. Credit: *Donga Ilbo*.

“The USAMGIK extends extreme generosity to American companies by using their air force to bring film prints, while not allowing Koreans to import film equipment for Korean cinema. This must be what they call ‘liberal corporatism’! They claim no enforced trade between Korean theater managers and the CMPE. This could exemplify their spirit of ‘freedom of treaty’!”⁵⁸

Using the US’s own informational diplomacy language, he publicly denounced the hypocrisy of the US rule in the name of democracy. Ch’ae was not alone in voicing this criticism. Other writers and film workers, despite their varied rhetoric and tones, felt the lack of democracy in action and noted its contrast to what they had initially been promised: happiness. This promise became unthinkable as Koreans found they still held little to no power in deciding what could be shown in theaters and what resources could be distributed to whom. In this recognition that they dwelled in a film colony, they seemed to be left with few options: hanging onto the dream of establishing an “independent” government, moving to the north to continue their practice in what seemed to be a more autonomous ecology, or hijacking the system to ensure their survival.

PIRACY AS AN EFFECT OF INJUSTICE

The Korean criticism of the US film policy did little to influence American policy makers at home and abroad. Rather, it affirmed their dedication to information activity that would change Korean perceptions of the US and democracy. Motion pictures were still heavily enlisted in the project of containing the occupied, especially those in rural provinces that were inaccessible by rail.⁵⁹ In the middle of Korean theaters’ boycott of American imports, the MPS, the primary designer of the film program abroad, purchased hundreds of 16mm projectors as well as accessories and spare parts for mobile projection in Korea, followed by the shipping of five million feet of 16mm print, ten times more than the amount of 35mm film.⁶⁰ Compared to a conventional 35mm format, 16mm gauge had an advantage due to its affordability and transportability; it was also relatively easy to learn to use, which meant that American officials could save time and effort in instructing local practitioners and amateurs.

The very features of 16mm that Americans saw as advantageous at home, however, made it “dangerous” to at least some authorities abroad.⁶¹ As early as May 1947, the USAMGIK noticed a significant loss of American films due to “mishandling.” Alerted by an increased number of instances of bootlegging, an American adviser worried that this “violation” could lead to a termination of imports. They identified the “damage and loss” that were occurring due to the “carelessness of messengers in leaving film in unattended and unguarded vehicles.”⁶² A few months later, Hodge followed up on this report by writing to Washington. In this letter, he worried that the continued loss of film would lead Hollywood and MPS to curtail the number of films it sent to Korea and, in turn, “jeopardize” the entire film program operation.⁶³ Extremely distressed about the Koreans’ piratical activities, Hodge echoed the earlier report on the cause of the losses: due to the “carelessness” of distributors and exhibitors, films had gone missing “during the time [films were] picked up, run through the projector and returned to the designated source.” Seeing the “pecuniary value of these [American] prints,” he sought to order theater officers and others in the distribution and exhibition network to immediately “remedy this situation” by “guarding” and “securing” the prints more carefully.⁶⁴

These Americans considered piracy to be “theft,” a particular frame that has long been encouraged by the notion of copyright in the Western capitalist system. Even today, when an influx of freely exchanged information has created a wide gamut of creative media practices, mainstream discourse about piracy is still obsessed with the issue of copyright. According to Bhaskar Sarkar and Kavita Philip, this obsession is not uncommon even in a critical assessment of the conventional discourse.⁶⁵ For instance, in his influential study on piracy, Lawrence Lessing characterizes “good” piracy as “transformative uses of creative work,” in contrast to “bad” piracy, which involves “nothing but tak[ing] other people’s copyrighted content, copy[ing] it and sell[ing] it.”⁶⁶ This binarism has worked to define piracy in the Global South “as annoying and inconvenient for western business, but [a matter] that will inevitably be cleaned up with the coming of full-fledged modernity to backward nations.”⁶⁷ Decentering the Western-centric discourse of piracy, more recent discussions have articulated different ways to understand piracy as a cultural phenomenon, as “locally specific modes of medial production, consumption and distribution . . . within highly heterogeneous frameworks of ‘porous legalities.’”⁶⁸ Scholars such as Ravi Sundaram have reconceptualized piracy in a postcolonial context as an effect that undermines the dominant corporate media system while simultaneously diversifying media access for the dispossessed.⁶⁹ In responding to Sundaram’s interpretation with caution, Lars Eckstein and Anja Schwarz remind their readers that not all piratical practices in the Global South have aimed at a fundamental reconstruction of the media landscape.⁷⁰ Although this reminder is valuable, what is more relevant, at least in the context of occupied Korea, is the specific material conditions in which piracy is born, grows, and even thrives

despite legal and other constraints. If piracy is an effect that is irreducible to the notion of “theft,” can it be seen as a critical symptom of or even a response to the constraints set by the USAMGIK? Was it a mere coincidence that piracy’s emergence and recurrence happened in tandem with the USAMGIK’s failure to ensure at least a bare minimum of economic justice for film workers?

I am asking these questions neither to romanticize the actions of bootleggers nor to assume any ulterior motive behind them. Instead, I am writing to recognize their actions as an expression of agency, a choice of their own that appropriated the system of which they were a part. Although there is little evidence that all pirates were film workers by profession, it is obvious that they were quite familiar with motion pictures and their distribution system. The fact that none of them got caught by the police suggests that they were savvy. For instance, they knew that, compared to projectors that were not only heavier but also registered with the government, film strips and canisters were easier to transport and reuse. They might have wanted to fool the guardians of the film prints, which were, in the end, American property, but not to the extent of incurring serious consequences. These pirates were well-informed about what materials would be of use to them. They could simply destroy any film to reclaim the value that lay in the materials and chemicals the celluloid contained, a method dating back to the silent era. They could meet the practical needs of filmmakers, who were rarely given access to raw films other than for government-commissioned projects.⁷¹ Filmmakers, often using flyers to spread the word, desperately sought out pirates who could sell them new 16mm stock or reduction from 35mm prints on the underground market; pirates then could work as an unofficial channel through which filmmakers could secure raw stock.⁷² Theater owners and exhibitors could also benefit from pirated prints; in a situation in which they faced extreme difficulty in acquiring new films to run and were subject to the CMPE’s unfair rental fees and procedures, purchasing or borrowing older films from bootleggers was one way to fill dark hours with alternative programming.⁷³

Whether or not the piratical activities emerged as a survival mechanism for Koreans struggling in the extremely precarious economy, at least one thing seems clear: we would not have Hodge’s report at hand had pirates not disturbed the system and attracted official attention. Although they left no access to their own voices in the US archive that identified their action only as “illegal,” pirates made their way into the archive. They alarmed power holders to such an extent that American officials, including the governor himself, felt compelled to write about them. Otherwise, why would the authority have bothered about them?

It should be noted here that Hodge’s reaction to piracy arose from the troubled alliance between Hollywood and the occupation power at the time. Initially, Hollywood studios agreed to absorb the cost of prints, subtitling, and dubbing for the occupied territories in return for unregulated access to the occupied markets. Yet in reality they faced difficulty in collecting revenue from the occupied areas, where

the income from the rental of features and short subjects was held back by the occupation power.⁷⁴ When Hollywood studios finally filed a petition to recoup the revenue in late 1947, the Supreme Commander Allied Powers (SCAP) was determined to secure the profits from Hollywood imports for its reorientation program in Japan and Korea, a decision that led Hollywood studios to stop the shipment of new film prints and raw stock in June 1948.⁷⁵ This action impelled Washington to intervene, but the tension was not resolved until the occupation authority promised to return at least some portion of the profits from Hollywood imports.⁷⁶ Given this ongoing tension, Hodge viewed bootlegging as a threat that would exacerbate the crisis of corporatism between Hollywood and Washington, even though the damages inflicted by Korean pirates would be minimal.

Hodge did not mandate an immediate enforcement of the ban on piracy, but he clearly dictated its “illegal” violation of the contracts with various American agencies, ordering the Korean workers to be on guard against bootlegging.⁷⁷ Although no documents in police or trial records indicate any legal action against pirates, the act of bootlegging itself certainly carried the risk of punishment. In other words, piratical activities embodied a decision to take the risk of penalty: on the grounds of not complying with the USAMGIK mission of protecting US property and mobilizing cinema in accordance with rules and protocols, pirates could have been criminalized. Yet bootlegging did not disappear even after Americans officials took action. At first, it would have been convenient for them to blame the clumsiness of the individuals involved in the film distribution and exhibition. Such temporary convenience, however, did not prevent what they identified as the “danger” in the consistency of piratical activities.⁷⁸

Here the recurrence of piracy alludes to a possibility of interpreting it as more than a mere technical error by several workers. For instance, the inherent problem in the network of film distribution and exhibition that ran the US film program could warrant the inadequate protection of American property. In theory, the USAMGIK oversaw their network that single-handedly controlled films from various American channels, including the MPS, the CMPE and the Office of Civil Information (OCI) of United States Armed Forces in Korea (USAFIK).⁷⁹ Yet it was practically impossible to trace the whereabouts of *all* films. Motion pictures were shown in a wide variety of settings, including US information centers, libraries, civic clubs, and other locations whose primary purpose was not film exhibition. This was particularly the case in small- and mid-size towns and in the countryside, where mobile film units were the only source of films. Even in large cities with more electrical and other facilities, the USAMGIK-sponsored exhibition of nonfiction films expanded through various public places such as schools, hospitals, and churches. The local branches of the US information agencies were often used as a regional clearinghouse from which registered distributors and exhibitors could borrow film prints.⁸⁰ Instead of relying on formal contracts, shipping, and a well-maintained tracking system, staff at these agencies worked within loosely

established local networks of face-to-face contracts and disorganized loan processes. Moreover, many of them traveled alone and operated under pressure to meet the USAMGIK's demand that they add ever more screenings in their assigned area, a condition that made it almost impossible for them to keep their eyes on property in every screening site.

The persistent appearance of pirates alludes to a structural problem that the USAMGIK had not addressed in any way since its ruling. Whether the very heart of this problem lay in the working conditions within the film network or in the unfavorable market for Koreans, pirates never ceased to speak for themselves.⁸¹ They took advantage of the elusive network based on their local knowledge for their own benefit. Their actions—of breaking protocol and taking the film prints—were not necessarily aimed at systemic, *de jure* change. As Bhaskar Sarkar reminds us, they “would rather have a stable welfare state providing them with the basic affordances that citizens expect. The act of exit, of rebellion, happens by default, as disenfranchised groups seek simply to survive, to make do, to improvise a way of living in spite of all the official strictures that block them.”⁸² Korean bootleggers lacked the power to completely deconstruct the government's film program or the network that maintained the program. Nonetheless, pirates took the risk of withdrawing from complete compliance with the USAMGIK's rules and conventions that had sustained its instrumentalization of cinema below the 38th parallel. The effect of their actions—not their intention—destabilized the political power's instrumentalization of film insofar as these actions troubled and slowed down the optimal operation of the US film program. Precisely through this effect of troublemaking and slowing down, pirates intervened at least temporarily in the normative configuration of cinema as it was conscripted for the USAMGIK's political goals. Rather than waiting for the authority to reform the system, those who were involved in piratical activities acted based on their own recognition of unrealized economic justice, pushing through the film network that had not been built for them.

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Koreans' encounter with the cinematic medium informed the way they parsed the contradictory norms of “democracy” in the structures enabled by the US occupying force. As their discourse of the “film colony” and piratical activities demonstrate, they attested to the contradictions in the American notion of democracy by calling into question both the insufficient reform of the local film industry and Hollywood films' domination of Korean screens. It was in their critical evaluation of the US as a colonial and monopolistic power, not through the USAMGIK's democratic mission, that Koreans shaped their sense of democracy. They denounced the authority that decided what could be shown in theaters and what resources were distributed and how, and ultimately whose interests this authority represented. Their criticism might not have involved a permanent change to the topographies of power,

but this fact should not obscure the very real successes that, in turn, came to signify the failure of the USAMGIK and its mission. Despite the US authority's effort to change the Korean perception of America, its faux promise that democracy equaled happiness ultimately delivered nothing but American exceptionalism. The filmmakers, critics, and pirates discussed in this chapter at least refused to give full assistance to those who failed to deliver political and economic justice under the occupation.

Toward the end of the US occupation, Korean criticism of American hegemony became visibly marginalized by the USAMGIK's anti-communist suppression and its enforcement of a separate election below the 38th parallel. As Ted Hughes illuminates, this marginalization of critical voices—speaking not only about American power but also about colonialism as a whole—fundamentally restructured the cultural field. With the departure of many vocal critics to the north and the erasure of their traces in the years to come, the decolonial imagination of cinema lost most of its force.⁸³ Moreover, the rhetoric about democracy, which had previously stressed the task of undoing inequality and injustice, pivoted to the hegemonic discourse of anti-communism and national security. This move was crystallized in the essentially ultranationalist slogan of Syngman Rhee, soon-to-be leader of the First Republic (1948–60): “United we live, divided we die.” Notwithstanding its emphasis on an absolute “equality” of all, the country's new guiding principle, the One People Doctrine (“Ilminjuui”), placed national unity above all other values.⁸⁴ Despite the regime's ostensible support of “democracy,” the One People Doctrine justified the undemocratic suppression of any dissident ideas and activities that were deemed an existential threat to the nation. In this shifting political landscape, the imperative of democratizing film culture came to be diluted by a more nationalistic notion of development and zeal for the modernization of the film industry. Yet this does not necessarily mean that Koreans stopped shaping democracy according to their own visions. The next chapter turns to a periphery of 1950s film culture from which we can see individual and collective actions against this development-oriented configuration of cinema.