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Pushing Forward: A Look into the Environment of South Korean Female Film Directors

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Pushing Forward: A Look into the Environment of South Korean Female Film Directors

The Busan International Film Festival, held in Busan, South Korea, is known as Asia's largest film event, drawing filmmakers and movie stars from all over the world. The 2017 festival witnessed a notable feat in which for the first time, the festival was bookended by films directed by women (Brasor). Though the filmmakers themselves argued that the lineup of their films was unintentional, nonetheless the event shows that female directors were gaining notice at the festival—an uncommon trend globally and in South Korea. Though conditions are improving, female film directors face unique social and economic challenges in South Korea, a society traditionally rooted in Confucian ideals and recovering from a violent recent history.

To understand the unspoken dogma enduring toward women and specifically female film directors, one must first understand the historical cultural norms, particularly the Confucian culture that forms a large part of South Korea's foundation. The establishment of the Chosŏn dynasty brought about the use of a Confucian ethical and political system for more than five hundred years, from 1392 until the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 (Im). Though it is not possible to fully explain Confucianism in a single paragraph, in short summary, Confucianist texts addressed the religious and ethical structuring of society through a political and ideological lens, striving to achieve peace. The family, as charged by Confucianism, was the backbone of society, and loyalty and filial piety formed the underpinnings of the family ("Patriarchy" 73). "Those who wish to rule a country, first rule their family well", as the saying went—implying

the leadership position of men over his family and society in general ("Patriarchy" 78). While home was a place of reprieve and informality in Western culture, Confucian culture viewed the home as where social ideals were exemplified, thus the home became a place where formality, piety and duty were most displayed ("Patriarchy" 78, 83). Ancient Korea followed these guidelines strictly, and patriarchy came to its height during the Confucian period.

In the Confucian system, particularly in works like *The Three Principles of Virtuous Conduct*, women are referred to in a subordinate role with virtually no independent public identity apart from her family ("Patriarchy" 72). Women in Korean society were in charge of the private affairs of the household, while men were to rule over public affairs, and the separation between the two spheres was strictly emphasized. In fact, the "success" of women was found in their fulfillment of their roles as related to the family and men specifically, first as daughters, then as wives, and then as mothers ("Patriarchy" 71-72). Richard Howson and Dr. Brian Yecies, experienced researchers in sociology and media, call the male-centered tradition a "hegemonic masculinity," in which forms of femininity and masculinity are suppressed in favor of giving authority to a perception of masculinity as named through Confucian ideals (Howson 15). Women, in the hegemony, were to bring honor to their natal families by bringing honor to their husband's family. Important to the culture was the idea of "spatial segregation": females were not allowed to visit their birth homes after marriage, and most of childhood was spent in training as apprentice mothers to be the "moral guardians of the domestic sphere," helped by gender separation at the age of seven (Howson 14, "Patriarchy" 71). Women found power when she became the mother to a son; respect was given to the role of a mother in the home, and she had considerable influence over her sons ("Patriarchy" 73). However, the boundaries on authority were drawn at the borders around the house, for a woman's power only came from having a son.

In fact, failing to birth a male descendent was considered one of the "seven evils" of Confucian culture ("Patriarchy" 72). Because the son's power lay in the patriarchal system, a woman would not challenge the system in favor of keeping what little authority she had ("Patriarchy" 73). In sum, Confucianist ideals were prominent and integral to ancient Korean culture.

Needless to say, the presence of women in the workplace and in public culture was virtually nonexistent at Korea's foundation. Positions in the military, politics, religion, and academia were all held by men ("Patriarchy" 82, 109). Cultural arts were the only areas in which women were included at times. P'ansori—storytelling through song and drumming—provides an example of a unisex cultural practice, in which either a man or woman could be the performer (Im). One of the most ancient theatrical practices was the sandae—masked plays and dances. Villagers around the peninsula formed local troupes, but similar to old English plays, the performers were all male, painting masks to represent all stock characters, including females (Im). With few exceptions, women remained restricted to the affairs of the home, and men to the affairs of the public, for over five hundred years until the twentieth century.

The strict enforcement of patriarchy and Confucianism ended when Japan annexed Korea in 1910, after which began extensive change in a condensed period of time. One of the developments seen in Korea was the beginning of its film industry. Its first "film" was a "kinodrama," in which actors performed live in front of projected images on a backdrop ("A Short"). Though the production of more than 160 features followed from the 1920s until the end of World War II in 1945, all fell under Japanese strict censorship and had to gain approval from the colonial government before they could be screened ("A Short"). In only a century, the country underwent foreign rule; participation in World War II; the Korean War, which led to the split into North and South Korea; United States occupation; massive technological advancement;

and six republics, many times involving corruption, impeachment, public protests, martial law and even a successful military coup (Im). The violence and unsteadiness of South Korea's history, along with direct international influences and rapid globalization and development, contributed to a struggle to determine a national identity and distinctly "Korean" culture ("Patriarchy" 68). Even at present, the influence of Western culture has not been fully accepted, which has led to a tension in keeping clear acceptable social behaviors ("Patriarchy" 68). This tension extends to gender relations, not only for women but also for men. The search for the proper definition of masculinity is shown in Korean films, in how male characters progress from portrayal as, "self-loathing beings who desire to be controlled to subjects who are not only self-sufficient but also capable of destroying others" (Hyun). Korean male and female identities and roles have been challenged by the country's volatile history and globalization.

The present environment of working South Korea still lacks in the presence of women, albeit with some improvements. According to a study conducted by The Economist, South Korea in 2017 had a global glass-ceiling index measurement in the lower twenties, marking it as the worst place to be a working woman among the twenty-nine countries studied. Only two percent of corporate directors were women, and women made up only 10.5 percent of managerial positions, though improvements were beginning to show with the arrival and adoption of the #MeToo movement in 2018—a social media campaign against sexual harassment and assault ("The Best," Data Team). Economically-speaking, working women earned 36.7 percent less than men in the same position in 2017 (Data Team). Of course, this falls into not just a national trend but a global one: men outnumber women as attorneys and judges thirteen to one, as professors sixteen to one, as medical practitioners five to one, and in STEM fields seven to one ("Press"). Internationally, only 13.9 percent of executives and 9.5 percent of high-level politicians are

female ("Press"). Specifically regarding the film industry, the global presence of female workers situates itself in the minority. According to the Geena Davis Study conducted by UN Women, female characters make up only 22.5 percent of film characters in the global industry ("Press"). Only twenty three percent of speaking characters in action and adventure films are female, and sexualization is twice as likely for girls and women than for men ("Press"). Focusing on leadership positions, only seven percent of film directors, 19.7 percent of writers, and 22.7 percent of producers are female ("Press"). As the statistics show, the current presence and influence of women in the workforce comprise a minority both domestically in South Korea and internationally in various industries, including in film.

The statistical unlikelihood of working successfully as a female in the South Korean film industry is not necessarily an outlier when compared to the global average, but it does pose its own unique obstacles and victories. Contradictory to the trend, South Korea does better than the global norm for film actors, with 35.9 percent of speaking roles and 50 percent of leads being female ("Special Focus"). Behind the camera, females, until recently, were scarce. According to Darcy Paquet, longtime researcher of South Korean film and women's involvement, the amount of creative control directors possess in a production depends on their reputation and track record. Women are at a disadvantage of developing both of these requirements because of the stigma, as Paquet argues, that South Korean film production companies do not trust women with big-budget productions ("A (Few) Women"). In distribution, if a woman director produces a box office failure, she is rarely offered a second chance (Howson 18). Nonetheless, increasing numbers of female directors are becoming more prominent in the film industry. Their presence is noted in international film festivals like the Busan International Film Festival, described previously, and the UK Korean International Film Festival ("Special Focus"). Howson and Yecies praise the

South Korean film industry as "one of the most exciting, dynamic and commercially viable national film industries to emerge in the last thirty years anywhere in the world," not only for the work being created and disseminated, but for the steps taken for female writer-directors in a culture with a historical track record of male dominance in content production (Howson 16). One of the helping factors is the presence of females producers, which statistically seems equal in percentage to male producers ("A (Few) Women"). As Paquet points out, among the top five most powerful producers, one can find at least three women ("A (Few) Women"). When there is a woman producing a film, the general trend found is that more females will be hired on as crew, including in the directorial position. Female producers help shield directors from the demands of large production companies and provide support for a creative environment in which the female director can exercise her style ("A (Few) Women"). Female directors are highly active, but still face difficult roads to success in the film industry, both in South Korea and in the distribution of their projects to internationally.

To conclude, the environment for South Korean female film directors is advancing, though there remains a large amount of development needed. Historically, much of the distrust and prejudice against females in the South Korean workplace stems from a centuries-old Confucian foundation upon which present society rests. Violence, revolt, and division in more recent history has brought confusion to everyday interactions between genders. In the workplace, South Korea statistically stands as one of the worst places for women to work. In the film industry particularly, females are beginning to gain traction through the support of female producers and the spotlights of international film festivals. Nonetheless, the road to equality in the filmmaking workplace remains long, and South Korean female directors will continue to push for their work to be made and viewed.

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