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## Film policy and the coming of sound to cinema in Colonial Korea

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1929 년에서 1939 년까지의  
한국 영화정책과 유성영화의 시작  
**Film Policies and the Coming of Sound  
to the Korean Cinema, 1929-1939**

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**Abstract**

During the transition between silent and sound cinema in Korea (1929-1939), Japanese colonial film policies established stringent market barriers for local Hollywood distribution exchanges and simultaneously increased opportunities for domestic Korean and Japanese film productions. The Government-General of Korea enacted regulatory initiatives, including film censorship, as part of Japan's larger imperial agenda aimed at strengthening and expanding its Empire. In turn, the domestic film industry in Korea was invigorated and modernized by a number of Korean film people (younghwa-in) who gained valuable experience and training while travelling back and forth between Korea and Japan. Korean film pioneers innovated local solutions to cost-prohibitive American sound equipment promoted and serviced by Western Electric, the largest company in the world dealing with sound technology. This paper attempts to offer a richer understanding of the coming of sound to the Korean exhibition market by presenting new research on the adaptation of technology, administration of policy and censorship regulations, and the contention between live narrators and recorded sound. The "global" transition to sound was more local than previously thought. Given that Japan occupied Korea between 1910 and 1945, this period of Korean cinema is intertwined with the history of Japanese cinema. Key Japanese industry events and initiatives as well as government regulations had a significant impact on film culture in Korea. The transition to sound in Korea includes (but is not limited to) a detailed discussion of the sound-on-disc failure of *Malmot-hal Sajung* (*Secret Story*, 1931) and the impact of *Chunhyang-jeon* (*The Story of Chunhyang*, 1935) – the "first successful" commercial Korean talkie. All of Korea's cinemas and temporary exhibition venues had been converted to sound by the end of 1939. The transition had been a long process, taking place over more than a decade. However, local attempts to initiate and produce sound film projects in Korea reaffirmed the strength of a

rising national Korean cinema and signalled the beginnings of a promising sound industry – a counterhegemonic space within colonial rule in which Koreans could construct and negotiate spaces for the expression of Korean culture and modernity.

#### Equipped for Sound

The film community in Korea began pondering a permanent switch to commercial sound roughly about the same time as other countries such as Australia, Britain, and France. Permanent commercial sound first came to Seoul, and then spread to Korea's smaller cities. Seoul by far had the largest number of cinemas and total seating capacity as well as the most advanced sound equipment. In this way, Seoul could be seen as one of the "cities of the future" in Japan's total empire, which would have had great appeal to entertainment entrepreneurs (Young, 1998). Seoul was the metropolis – the site of modernity.

In these early days of the transition, sound was still seen as something novel for Japanese and Korean exhibitors and audiences. In retrospect, the coming of sound was off to a very slow start. In September 1930, twenty-five, or less than two per cent of Japanese cinemas, were wired for sound (FDYB 1931, 1041). In comparison, in July 1930, 11,553 or seventy-eight percent of U.S. cinemas had been wired (MPA 1931, 12).<sup>1</sup> The editors of the *Film Daily Year Book* informed the U.S. motion picture industry: "the market for American all-talkie, sound and synchronized motion picture in Japan is not as extended as that of the former silent films" (FDYB 1931, 1041).

During this time, Korean cinemas and other temporary exhibition venues were important targets for international film distributors and their silent and sound products. However, Korea did not initially have the necessary technology to exhibit sound films. At the end of 1930, two (8%) of Korea's cinemas in Seoul were outfitted with silent American projection equipment. All of Korea's other regional and city cinemas predominantly used hand-operated Japanese silent projectors, which consisted of one of five models: Royal, Urban, Mikuni, Waik or Aurban (NARA, 895.4061 Motion Pictures/1, 5-7; Golden 1930, 15).<sup>2</sup> Hence, the wiring of Korean cinemas was much slower than it was in the United States, Australia and Britain. Furthermore, when American sound companies began to promote their equipment in Korea, Japanese firms were able to establish and maintain an early dominance of the market because of cost-prohibitive tariff and import duties on foreign equipment. It was much easier and cheaper for Korean exhibitors to adapt a Japanese sound head to an existing Japanese silent projector. This is precisely what occurred in early 1930 when a Korean production company tried to make the first Korean talkie.

#### Korea's Untold Talkie Story

Most contemporary narratives of the coming of sound to the Korean cinema begin in 1935 when *Chunhyang-jeon* (*The Story of Chunhyang*) brought the depressed Korean film industry vitality by providing a breakthrough during colonial rule. However, in 1930, there was a spark of modernity among the Korean film community, when a group of Korean filmmakers attempted to make *Secret Story*

(*Malmot-hal Sajung*), a sound-on-disc talkie. Figure 1. shows the advertisement of this film, which appeared on the back cover of *Daejoong Younghwa*, a popular Korean film magazine at the time. It claims that *Secret Story* (*Malmot-hal Sajung*) is the “first talkie production in Korea”. The director is Na Un-Kyu, and the cinematographer is Lee Pil-Woo. It is a Won Bang Gak production with the financial backing of Park Jung-Hyun of the Dansong-sa Cinema.<sup>3</sup> Documentary evidence concerning the film, as seen in Figures 2 and 3, tells us that it was a drama about a girl who became a kisaeng (geisha). She tries to keep her job a secret from her brother, who eventually cries when he discovers her situation.

Although *Untold Story* was never completed, its neglected story deserves attention because it points to an important period of activity and attempted media convergence in the Korean cinema. This was a project that initially started with a phonograph recording of the actors playing scripted roles. It was probably one of the entertainment programs the Kyongsong Broadcasting Company – established in 1927 – used for its second all-Korean-language radio station when it was created in May 1931. According to Robinson (1998, 365), Korean radio programs as well as sales of radio receivers to Koreans was on a significant rise at this time. In any case, the phonograph recording of *Secret Story* was in fact made (it still exists today), and Korean filmmakers were trying to make the accompanying film. Unfortunately, it was never completed because of a lack of funds. In 1931, Columbia Records released the recording of *Secret Story*, which was a condensed version of the larger script (Kim Jong-Wook 2002, 778).

Although it failed to be made as a commercial film, the case of *Secret Story* is important because it demonstrates that the pioneers in the Korean cinema were delving into sound as were pioneers in other national cinemas around the world. Korean film people played an important part in the local and global transition to sound, and Lee Pil-Woo was one film pioneer who attempted to put early ideas behind the transition into practice.

#### **A Korean Pioneer: Lee Pil-Woo**

Lee Pil-Woo (1897-1978) was born in Seoul and was a key figure in early Korean cinema as well as throughout the transition to sound. He is one of fifteen Korean cinematographers – born before 1930 – who are documented in Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation’s list of filmmakers from 1920-1985. His is not the only story. However, in retrospect, his case study is representative of the drive and effort the early Korean film community had dedicated to building a national cinema. In this way, Korea’s film pioneers – although much smaller in numbers than Japanese film people – helped create a movement that symbolized a negotiated space for the construction and expression of Korean culture. Cinema, like radio, provided a special outlet for the reflection and representation of Korean culture and an avenue for the expression of traditional Korean values and sentimentalities. Koreans struggled to produce and spread these commonsense views through the mass media. Korean cinema was one of these “other nodes of cultural

construction” which Robinson gestures to. Sound technology, then, was used as a tool by Koreans to help bring cultural modernity to Korean cinema.

As early as 1925, Lee Pil-Woo and many other figures in the Korean film community had begun to think about the use of sound in motion pictures. On 27-28 February 1925, four Phonofilms were screened at the Woomi-gwan cinema in Seoul. These short documentaries and part-talkies were part of a huge range of approximately 1,000 short sound films made by the American De Forest Phonofilms company (Geduld 1975, 96-97). Screenings in Korea included an address of U.S. President Calvin Coolidge on the White House lawn (1924), a violin performance by Marx Roseanne and a political demonstration in Washington Square. These screenings were co-sponsored by *Maeil Shinbo* and *Kyungsong Ilbo*, two of Korea’s metropolitan newspapers (You 1997, 121). Apparently, the films made a huge impression on Lee Pil-Woo which had been in the region since the end of 1924.

Japan was one of seven international markets that Lee de Forest targeted when he began licensing his American sound-on-film patents to foreign representatives. In late 1924, Minagawa Yoshizo imported a De Forest Phonofilms sound-on-film system and organized screenings of sound films at the Universal Pictures exchange in Tokyo and later at the Shinbashi Enbujo theater (Ruot May 1932, 634). The exhibition of De Forest Phonofilms in Japan at this time was a key development, which helped promote the spread of sound in foreign exhibition markets. Individuals representing the various Phonofilms companies overseas then became surrogate promoters of the system and sound technology in general. Hence, the coming of De Forest Phonofilms to the Japanese cinema played a critical role in the advancement and experimentation of motion picture sound technology in Korea and Japan because it gave people like Lee Pil-Woo exposure to sound technology well before the transition began to take place.<sup>4</sup>

In February 1929, Lee Pil-Woo travelled to Shanghai to get a closer look at the Movietone sound-on-film recording system being operated by Fox news crews there. In early 1930, Lee returned to Japan to study sound technology around the time when an ongoing supply of American sound films began arriving in Japan – imported by the American distribution exchanges there (Famous Players Lasky-Paramount, First National, Fox, MGM and Universal Pictures).<sup>5</sup> In February 1930, he visited Minagawa Yoshizô of Minatalkie and began negotiating a contract for the purchase of multiple sound-on-disc recordings. Lee, on behalf of Na Un-Kyu and others in the Korean film community, was eager to capitalize on the talkie fad. Minagawa was willing to provide Lee with a regular supply of discs for ten Won each, but Lee could not gather enough funds to underwrite the deal with Minagawa.<sup>6</sup> This lack of funding is precisely what led to the failure of *Secret Story* around this time.

Lee also spent time with Takeo and Haruo Tsu-chi-ha-shi, musicians who previously worked at the Osaka Shochiku Za, one of the flagship venues of the Shochiku cinema chain. Lee claims that he was able to share his knowledge with the Tsuchihashi brothers who were in the process of perfecting a sound-on-film system. In August 1931, as others have documented, Shochiku released *The Neighbors Wife and Mine*.

This sound film, which became the first "successful" Japanese talkie, was made with the Tsuchihashi system –(Iwamoto 1992, 315; Anderson and Richie 1982, 77). Lee's relationship and collaborations with these brothers would prove valuable when Lee later developed his own PKR sound-on-film recording and projection equipment. Lee Pil-Woo was only one of several active Korean technicians and filmmakers who clearly were motivated to learn as much about commercial sound technology as possible.

Between 1931 and 1935, the Korean film community continued making contributions to Korean cinema with primarily silent pictures. Yet, about two years before the first successful Korean talkie was made, the motion picture industry in Korea was ready for sound. Fox, Warner Bros.-First National, Universal, Paramount, United Artists, MGM and RKO – all controlling members of the Motion Picture Distributors Association of America – had distribution exchange agents located in Seoul. In addition, an UFA exchange in Seoul distributed German films (NARA, 895.4061 Motion Pictures/1, Enclosure 3). Foreign film companies continued to promote and distribute sound films in Korea during this time. For example, in 1931, American sound-on-disc films such as *Paramount On Parade* (1930) had been acquired by distribution agents for general exhibition in Korea (Chosun Ilbo 1/10/31: 5).<sup>7</sup> By March 1934, more than half (56%) of Korea's forty-three permanent cinemas were wired for sound (NARA, 895.4061 Motion Pictures/1, 1). In this way, the adoption and diffusion of sound technology in the Korean exhibition market was perhaps the biggest incentive for the local experimentation and production of sound films.

### *The Story of Chun-hyang* (1935)

The talkie film *Chunhyang-jeon*, is widely acknowledged among Korean film scholars as the first successful Korean talkie. It was produced by the Kyongsong Film Studio, which was an all-Korean staffed studio with Japanese financial backing. It was directed and filmed by Lee Myung-Woo, and the sound was recorded by Lee Pil-Woo and a Japanese co-worker (Korean name Chung Chun). The production of the film began with outdated sound-on-disc recording technology because that was what was affordable for them to build and use. They could not afford to buy the Japanese Tsu-chi-ha-shi sound-on-film recording system, which Lee Pil-Woo helped innovate while he was working in Japan. Instead, Lee eventually developed his own sound-on-film recording system and called the P.K.R. It was based on the design of the Tsu-chi-ha-shi system and *Chunhyang-jeon* was completed with it. The Korean-made P.K.R sound-on-film system, is an example of how the coming of sound was facilitated locally by Korean contributions as much as it was by the dominating American and Japanese film industries.

I would also like to point out that Lee's local sound innovation appeared in response to import tariffs. In 1935, under the Japan Import Tariff laws, general duties levied on imported sound projection equipment were 40%, which was added to the price of the equipment. In August 1937, in order to further protect the Japanese industry from international competition, the Japanese government raised the general tariff duties on imported motion picture equipment and parts to 60% under the "Chosun North China Emergency Tax

Ordinance" (FDYB 1938, 1193). Clearly, it was cheaper to build from scratch a copy or an emulation of sound recording and projection equipment rather than purchasing a new one.

*Chunhyang-jeon* was based on a popular 400-year old novel from the Lee Dynasty, which reflected the intimacies and uniqueness of Korean culture and society. It was a smart choice to adapt the script into a talkie because it was considered a national treasure – a traditional folk tale loved by all Koreans. More importantly, a 1923 silent version of *Chunhyang-jeon* had already proven itself as a box office hit (Lee and Choe 1998, 36).

The success of *Chunhyang-jeon* helped bring new vitality to a depressed Korean film exhibition market. It was evidence that a sound film could be made within an industry that lacked modern facilities and a large collection of engineers and production assistants. For Ahn Seok-Young, a Korean film director and prominent film critic writing for the *Chosun Ilbo*, the film was a "shock" to the Korean film community. It was a shock because no one knew if it could be done.

When the film was released, audiences rushed to see it for its novelty sake, and the film broke box office records. The film became a sign that Korean productions could achieve success and recognition from local audiences. The coming of a successful Korean talkie was seen as a reflection of the future of the Korean film industry and the promise of a profitable local exhibition market. For Park Ki-Chae, another writer for the *Chosun Ilbo*, the mere making of an all-Korean talkie under colonial rule was more significant than any of the film's technical limitations: "it added a new page to the Korean film community" (11/12/35: 4). In his opinion, the Kyongsong film studio had stimulated both the Korean film community and the larger Korean society.

While *Chunhyang-jeon* made a profit with box office returns – as did *The Jazz Singer* (1927) in the United States and *The Neighbors Wife and Mine* in Japan – the acting performances and technical achievements left a lot to be desired. The presentation of the background, costume, and characters remained underdeveloped.

However, the film received high praise from other newspaper critics despite its technical imperfections. According to a film review by Indol, a cultural critic writing for the *Dong-a Ilbo*, Korean audiences loved to watch *Chunhyang-jeon* regardless of the film's quality (11/10/35: 3).

For Indol, it was a cultural triumph to hear Korean spoken from Korean actors on the silver screen. The awkward and clumsy-sounding words were understandable given the early experimental stages of talkies in Korea. After watching the Korean talkie, Indol claimed that he felt like someone "who longs for kimchi because he is fed up with eating too much lamb. Eating kimchi was definitely more favorable." (*Dong-a Ilbo*, 11/10/35: 3)

*Chunhyang-jeon* was exhibited almost 10 years after commercial talkies began to make an impact on American cinema and about six years after coming to Japan. The transition to sound in the Korean cinema

was delayed because of a number of reasons, including a lack of financial capital and general economic hardship during the Depression. However, one of the key reasons that the transition occurred much later than in English speaking countries was because of the byunsa. This is where I would talk about byunsa if I had more time.

### **In conclusion**

Throughout the 1930s, film culture was alive in Korea. Attendance records for 1936 demonstrate that more than 27,000 “movie shows” were exhibited throughout Korea to 8,892,331 people. Total admission fees generated \$1,125,455 USD (FDYB 1938, 1193). Given that the 1936 film regulations set by the Government-General of Korea mandated that one-half of all films screened in Korea had to be of Japanese or Korean origin, the Korean exhibition market potentially would have been a \$562,727 market for U.S. distributors

By the end of 1937, the number of permanent cinemas in Korea grew to fifty-six and sixty-five other venues, including halls and churches, were showing films on a part-time basis (FDYB 1938, 1193). Forty-six or 82% of the permanent cinemas were wired for sound. Half were wired with the American Western Electric or RCA Photophone equipment, and half were wired with Japanese sound projectors. The remaining 18% of Korea’s permanent cinemas screening silent pictures seemed to be less attractive to the American sound companies or at least the last to be wired— as smaller suburban and country venues were in most other countries. By the end of 1939, the number of cinemas and other occasional venues in Korea had increased to 120, and all were reportedly wired for sound (FDYB 1940, 1103-1104).

This paper has attempted to illustrate some of the distinct local responses to the coming of sound to the Korean cinema. It has offered a detailed discussion of the failure of *Malmot-hal Sajung* (*Secret Story*) (1931) and the impact of *The Story of Chun-hyang* (1935) – the “first successful” Korean commercial talkie. It has also incorporated the promotion of sound technology by the American Western Electric firm – one of the dominating forces behind the global transition to sound.

By the end of 1939, the whole Korean exhibition market had been converted for sound. The transition had been a long process, taking place over more than a decade. Significant technical problems and a lack of financial support prevented local efforts from making a larger contribution to the transition. These problems did not occur in isolation in Korea alone. Early Korean sound-on-disc and sound-on-film pictures would have been of a similar quality to the early Japanese and American talkies, causing general dissatisfaction among audiences and industry people alike. There were other more general forms of resistance to sound as well, such as the important role and audience following of byunsa people, which definitely made it more difficult for Hollywood to reach its goal of wiring a significant number of Japanese and Korean cinemas.



While it seems that the coming of sound facilitated Hollywood's dominance over English-speaking countries and Japan's increasing control and expansion of its empire, the change was not without local contribution. The local Korean attempts to initiate and produce their own sound film projects reaffirmed the strength of a rising national Korean cinema and signalled the beginnings of a promising sound industry – a counterhegemonic space within colonial rule in which Koreans could construct and negotiate spaces for the expression of Korean culture and modernity. An attempt to make *Secret Story* in 1930 is an important failure that speaks volumes about the passion to use sound-on-disc technology in order to bring Korean culture, spirit and language to the masses. Yet, it was not until the production and exhibition of *Chunhyang-jeon* (1935), the “first Korean talkie”, that proved Koreans could create their own spaces of cultural expression within the global transition to sound.

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<sup>1</sup> In early January 1929, only three Australian cinemas had been wired for sound (EV 9/1/29: 4). However, by June 1930, 350 out of the estimated 1,250 cinemas in Australia (28% of the market) were wired for sound (EV 11/6/30: 13). By June 1937, *Everyones* estimated that 1,420 (all) Australian cinemas had been wired for sound (EV 16/6/37: 4).

<sup>2</sup> The Urban projector – a French system modified in Japan and sold as a "Japanese -made" silent projector for between 170 and 250 Yen (\$85 and \$125 USD) – had the largest market share because of its attractive low price. Royal was the highest priced projection equipment; it was built in Japan from imported parts and then sold in Seoul for about 1,150 to 1,250 Yen (\$575 to \$625 USD). It was promoted as a self-operating machine with spare parts and additional add-ons available. Royal was expensive because it had the largest network of installation and engineering staff, offering unlimited training and service to help exhibitors maintain their "automatically operated" machines. Mikuni Japanese-made equipment, was sold for 250 Yen (\$125 USD). Waik was sold for 280 Yen (\$140 USD). The sound companies selling Urban and Waik equipment also sold projection motors (one -sixteenth horsepower) for 100 Yen (\$50 USD).

<sup>3</sup> The Dansong-sa opened in 1909 and was the oldest permanent Korean-owned and operated cinema in Korea, which gained authorization from the Japanese police to screen Foreign films (Lee and Choe 1998, 22). Won Bang Gak was a cooperative production company established by Na Un -Kyu, Park Jung-Hyun and Soon Yong-Jin (You Hyun-Mok 1997, 107).

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis of how De Forest Phonofilms operated in international markets, see Yecies 2003.

<sup>5</sup> According to M. Ruot (1932, 634-635), talkies made their debut in Japan with the Fox Movietone shorts *Royal Hawaiian Songs and Dances* and *Marching On* at the Shinjuku Mushashino Kan and Asakusa Denki Kan in Tokyo on 1 May 1929. Three weeks later, the Shochikuza Theatre and Kogakuza Theatre screened Paramount's *Redskin*.

<sup>6</sup> In retrospect, ten Won may have seemed like a bargain. According to an interview with Lee Myung -Woo, Lee Pil-Woo's brother, each song cost about sixty to seventy Won to record for a film ( *Chosun Younghwa* No. 1 (October 1936): 60.

<sup>7</sup> Kishin Yoko, the Japanese distribution agent for P aramount in Seoul, negotiated with its branch office in Japan. The manager of this Korean distribution exchange acquired dozens of sound -on-disc talkies, which were then screened at the Chosun Kukjang cinema. According to this article in the *Chosun Ilbo*, the sound-on-disc system reproduced clear sounds without disturbing background noise.