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## Sounds of Celluloid Dreams: Coming of the Talkies to Cinema in Colonial Korea

Brian Yecies

### Abstract

*Conventional reports often hint at how Koreans gained film industry experience and training in Korea and Japan during the 1920s and early 1930s under Cultural Policy reforms. Yet, few studies consider the full range of influences that motivated their contributions to a local vibrant popular entertainment industry and to the global transition to sound. This article attempts to recast the story of cinema in colonial Korea by offering new insights into the productive and destructive characteristics of colonial modernity. The exhibition of talkies from Japan and the West (primarily the United States)—as early as in 1925 and more regularly after 1930—inspired Korean filmmakers and technicians to experiment with sound technology in a way similar to others around the world. Producing a small number of talkies on “locally-made” equipment enabled them to reach out to millions of cinemagoers and to contribute to a “golden-age” of cinema—rather than simply “collaborating” with the Japanese. In the process, they constructed new spaces for the expression of Korean language and culture within and despite the political and cultural boundaries of colonialism. Colonialism involved entangled degrees of entrepreneurialism, nationalism, and modernity—particularly for those who dreamt of bringing modernity to Korea and sought the type of cosmopolitan lifestyle found in a film production center such as Seoul, Tokyo, Kyoto, Shanghai, Los Angeles, as well as Harbin and Darien in Manchuria.*

**Keywords:** Korean cinema, colonial Korea, film policy, Hollywood, motion pictures, talkies, colonial modernity

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### Introduction

Between the mid-1920s and late 1930s, national film industries underwent phenomenal changes in the production, distribution, and exhibition of sound films. During this global transformation, enormous capital was wagered on the development and adoption of “modern” technology. Hundreds of new cinemas were built; thousands were wired with sound equipment—that is, speakers, amplifiers, and electric motors—and some were ruined during the Great Depression. The silent period began fading, and although somewhat chaotic and uneven, engaging in sound production became a symbol of adventure and progress.<sup>1</sup> Fundamental, but not uniform change in all countries and languages was principally driven by a Western, namely, U.S. and European cartel.<sup>2</sup> Yet, hundreds of local sound recording and projection innovations flourished around the world. Often labelled as underdogs in film trade magazines in a kind of “talkie war,” these alternative systems helped to wire thousands of cinemas in suburban locations that the big electric firms either could not reach or simply had no interest in reaching.<sup>3</sup> Developments in Korea (and Japan to a greater extent) were similar, although they took place much later than in the United States and Europe. They also gave rise to local responses to these global trends, in fact, much

1. “Sound production” meant recording on either phonograph discs (sound-on-disc) or on the same filmstrip as the visual images (sound-on-film). “Sound films” included a variety of forms: all-talkie, part-talkie, sound-effects, asynchronous music, and synchronous music.

2. Between June 19 and July 22, 1930, the German Tobis-Klangfilm and American Western Electric-ERPI and RCA Photophone companies assembled at the Paris Picture Sound Conference. Through the “Paris Agreement,” signed on the last day of this gathering, they divided the world into an exclusive German, an exclusive U.S., and a “neutral” sales territory, which included Japan and its colonial regions. Detailed conference minutes are held in the Academy of the Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Library Archives (hereafter cited as AMPAS) in the MPAA General Correspondence Files, MF Roll #1, 1929-30. Nowell-Smith and Ricci (1998) and Higson and Maltby (1999) also offer extensive discussions of this U.S. and European cartel.

3. Yecies (2005a, 2007).

earlier than previously believed. However, in Korea, the exploration of new possibilities in sound production emerged from within a complex colonial environment.

This article argues that the advent of the talkies in colonial Korea helped Korean filmmakers and technicians create a fertile ground for the surprising success of domestic sound films. Instead of maintaining a simplified nationalistic argument in which the cinema is seen as a Japanese-dominated, modern institution, this article shows how Korean pioneers of sound-cinema endured a difficult political, cultural, and economic climate with a number of mixed motives, as well as internal and external influences. While the crux of the film industry was firmly controlled at the center, the history of cinema in colonial Korea is more dynamic than a tale of "good" Korean films and filmmakers versus propaganda films made by "collaborative traitors." Sound cinema, and film production in general, became a node of cultural construction—similar to that of radio—in which Korean filmmakers simultaneously contributed to both a national and a supranational cinema as they actively negotiated, challenged, and reaffirmed Korean culture and later Japanese or "imperial" culture through film.<sup>4</sup> The all-Korean, and part-Korean/part-Japanese films that they made infused a significant productive energy into the formation of a modern popular culture in Korea within and despite the political and cultural boundaries of colonialism.

Primary documents and oral history reports from this period demonstrate that most filmmakers were aware of the cinema's significant ability to affect audiences, which were abounding at home as well as across the Japanese Empire. In 1932 alone, annual cinemagoers in Korea reached heights of 6,500,000, that is, an average of about one in every three people.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the percentage of

4. The phrase "node of cultural construction" comes from Robinson (1998).

5. One of the few comprehensive reports into the film industry in Korea in English can be found in Langdon (1934). In the early 1930s, William R. Langdon was the American Consul-General in Seoul. He regularly reported on film industry developments for the U.S. Department of State, which then relayed this information to Hollywood studio executives and trade publications such as *Variety*, *Film Daily*

actual meters of foreign films (primarily U.S. films) exhibited in Korea in 1932—amounting to 63 percent—overwhelmingly exceeded the total length of Japanese and Korean films exhibited in Korea. The inverse was true in Japan, where about 70 percent of all films screened were domestic and 30 percent foreign.<sup>6</sup> The Government-General's eventual desire to overturn the imbalance of foreign versus "domestic" films had an enormous impact on the local film industry in Korea, precipitating a film boom. By 1937, the artistic value of Korean films such as Na Un-gyu, Yi Gyu-hwan, and Yi Myeong-u's *Omongnyeo* (1937), An Seok-yeong, Yi Gi-se, and Yi Myung-u's *Simcheongjeon* (The Tale of Sim Cheong, 1937) and especially Yi Gyu-hwan's *Nageune* (The Wanderer, 1937)—which was made by the Korean Sung Bong Film Co. and "supervised" by the Japanese Shinkō Studio's Suzuki Shigeyoshi—had begun to attract the attention of audiences in Japan and Manchuria. Based on its commercial success, and the fact that it was considered by the Japanese film industry as the "first outstanding work from Korea," Shinkō had planned to export *Nageune* to Europe and the United States.<sup>7</sup>

A number of domestic sound, as well as silent, productions made during this period were "national films," including *sinpa* (excessively sentimental) melodramas based on popular novels and romantic stories, involving the wealthy and the misfortunes of the poor.<sup>8</sup> These films seemed to appeal to an intense sense of Korean nationalism

*Year Book of Motion Pictures* and Nathan D. Golden's film market reports for the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce.

6. *Film Daily Year Book* 1937 (1938, 1230).

7. Ōta (1938, 49-50); Iwasaki (1939, 64). Both Ōta and Iwasaki were well-known Japanese film critics and members of the International Cinema Association of Japan. Iwasaki was also one of the editors of the *Cinema Year Book of Japan* and, according to Anderson and Richie (1982, 76), a pioneer in the use of film subtitles.

8. Films produced by the socialist Korean Artist Proletarian Federation (KAPF) are archetypal films in the sense that they were "Korean" films made by Korean filmmakers and all-Korean crews. They were "nationalistic" films stimulated by the appearance of *Arirang* (1926), the most famous silent and nationalistic resistance Korean film. Well-known KAPF films include: *Wandering* (*Yurang*, 1928); *Street of Darkness* (*Honga*, 1929); *The Dark Road* (*Amno*, 1929); *Underground Village* (*Jihachon*, 1931); and *Wheel of Fire* (1931).

because they could be read as a subversive metaphor for the struggle against Japanese colonialism.<sup>9</sup> No matter how these films are read today, and their state of colonial subjugation at the time, Korean filmmakers and technicians sought and received collegial assistance from Japanese filmmakers and film companies. They gained formative experience by working with all-Korean production crews and Japanese filmmakers in Korea, in addition to training (apprenticing) with big film studios in Japan. In 1930, three out of twelve feature films were "co-productions," employing either a Japanese film editor or a cinematographer along with a Korean cast and crew. In 1931, the number of co-productions increased to five (out of fifteen feature films made) with some employing Japanese directors, actors, and screenwriters alongside Korean casts and crews.<sup>10</sup> While detailed economic data concerning film production in colonial Korea is difficult to obtain, it seems the only way to survive was to follow Japanese investors who controlled a significant percentage of the overall film business. Hence, Koreans gained invaluable experience working on a combination of their own and Japanese films—all while living according to the Joseon Governor-General's assimilationist catchphrase of "ninety million fellow countrymen."<sup>11</sup>

In the larger picture, industry and commerce in general were on the rise at this time.<sup>12</sup> Governor-General Saitō was charged with altering the image of the Japanese Empire after the March First independence movement in 1919. He aimed to relax (or at least give the appearance of relaxing) Japanese administrative control over Korean cultural and artistic activities.<sup>13</sup> Writers, actors, filmmakers, and the-

9. Lee (2000); and Min, Joo, and Kwak (2003).

10. Kim J. (2002).

11. This slogan appears in a speech given by Governor-General Ugaki at the Conference of Imperial Middle School Principals in Seoul on September 11, 1934. See Ugaki (1934).

12. For a discussion of the rise and development of commerce in Korea, see Cumings (1997).

13. For more insight on the impact of Saitō's Cultural Policy reforms, see Eckert et al. (1990, 276-304).

ater entrepreneurs took advantage of this new prospect and began developing and negotiating spaces for the expression of Korean culture. Studying filmmaking, producing silent films, and experimenting with sound films formed a major part of their activities. According to queries made on the Korean Movie Database maintained by the Korean Film Archive (KOFA), between 150 and 160 feature films were produced in Korea and forty-five Koreans were formally registered as directors during the colonial period. Saitō's well-calculated "gift" to Korea was the creation of a hopeful time for Korean intellectuals and artists. As this study shows, Korean filmmakers embarked on a project of modernism that incorporated a variety of old and new cultural and artistic customs as well as technological innovations.

With this in mind, the development of the film industry in Korea contributed to the overall industrialization of Japan's film industry by serving as an expanding market—especially in the face of the "Western" modernity flowing out of Hollywood's sheer domination of the quantity and quality of feature films on the world's screens.<sup>14</sup> Film production undoubtedly played a central role in the Japanese government's long-term aims of diffusing Japanese language and cultural values. Yet, there was something far more interesting going on during this period than a preexisting Korean nationalism, or even a Japanese imperial ideology, for that matter, merely waiting to be "awakened" by sound. Korean contributions to sound cinema constructed new cultural spaces and presented Korean art forms that made deep connections to Koreans at home and abroad.

### The Novelty of Modern Sound

Korean-language studies provide little sustained discussion about the coming of the talkies to colonial Korea, opting instead to focus on the

14. Hollywood's domination extended beyond feature films to include film recording and projection/exhibition technology, raw film stock, and exploitation/promotional strategies produced in the United States and distributed across the globe.

ritualistic repetition of legends about the making of *Chunhyangjeon* (The Tale of Chunhyang, 1935)—the “first successful” sound film.<sup>15</sup> Even recent flourishing scholarship, which addresses the cinemas of both North and South Korea, collectively brushes over the pursuit of sound and its integral links to Korea’s larger cinematic history.<sup>16</sup> While a small number of Japanese film industry trade materials from this period touch upon films and filmmakers in Korea, a majority of English-language studies by experts in Japanese cinema history rarely include colonial Korea in their central studies.<sup>17</sup> Time and time again conventional studies simply point to 1935 as the year when talkies in Korea seemingly emerged out of the ethereal.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, archive documents and industry trade reports tell a different story about when and how the talkies came to Korea. The motion picture industry in Korea (and Japan) began pondering a switch to commercial sound in the mid-1920s, as was the case in other countries such as the United States, Australia, Britain, France, and Germany. Demonstrations of De Forest Phonofilms (sound-on-film), which took place in Japan in 1924 and Korea in 1925, had planted the seeds of the then-novel transition. In late February 1925, as a one-time-only event, four Phonofilms were screened at the Umigwan cinema in Seoul. These documentaries and part-talkies belonged to a huge range of approximately 1,000 short sound films produced by the American De Forest Phonofilms Company. These screenings, which were co-sponsored by the major newspapers *Maeil Sinbo* (Daily

15. See, for example, Yi Hyo-in (1992); Ho (2000); Jo (2002b); and Kim Mee-hyun et al. (2002).

16. See, for example, Lee (2000); James and Kim (2002); Min, Joo and Kwak (2003); Kim (2004); McHugh and Abelmann (2005); and Shin and Stringer (2005). Most historical accounts of Korea’s modern history also suffer from this oversight, as even Cumings (1997) lacks a discussion of the nation’s encounter with film and media culture.

17. See, for example, Richie (1971); Mellen (1975); Anderson and Richie (1982); Satō (1987); Richie (1990); Nolletti and Desser (1992); and Bernardi (2001).

18. The thorough and important discussion of the *byeonsa* or live film narrator in colonial Korea in Maliangkay (2007), for instance, is seduced into replicating this simplification.

Report) and the *Gyeongseong Ilbo* (Gyeongseong Daily), included *President Coolidge, Taken on the White House Grounds* (1924), a violin performance, and a political demonstration in Washington Square.<sup>19</sup> It seems that the political nature and expressive power of these early sound films—particularly the first U.S. presidential film recorded with sound—made an impression on Korean film pioneers, whose experiments are discussed shortly.

Intellectual debates about so-called modern sound technology began appearing in Korean newspapers shortly after sales engineers from both the German Tobis-Klangfilm and U.S. Western Electric-ERPI companies gave equipment demonstrations in the region in 1929 and 1930. Clearly few exhibitors could afford to lease or buy one of these high-end Western systems.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, discussions about the impact of sound on society and the art of filmmaking continued, with a particular emphasis on other countries’ trials and tribulations in the coming of the talkies. One typical article in the *Chosun Ilbo* in 1931 discussed how the U.S.S.R. and Germany had been researching and developing sound film technology since 1926. The entire Soviet film industry was reportedly converting to sound due to the overwhelming popularity of talkies.<sup>21</sup> Other recurring series of articles published under the columns “Modern Knowledge” (*hyeondae jisik*) and “Film Knowledge” (*yeonghwa sangsik*) presented historical overviews of talkies in the United States and Japan, citing specific examples of how sound effects were being used. Critic Yi Chang-yong appreciated the novelty of hearing (and seeing) a cat meow and a door slamming, but believed the expression of the spo-

19. Yu (1997).

20. In mid-1929 Shōchiku Studio—the largest of the “big five” production and distribution companies in Japan—had ordered multiple Western Electric sound recording and projection systems. Shortly thereafter, the Western Electric Company Orient Ltd. opened regional offices in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Fukuoka, Sapporo, and Harbin and Darien (both in Manchuria), and in Seoul. Western Electric equipment, which included import duties and a compulsory ten-year service contract, cost theatre owners and exhibitors up to approximately \$55,000.

21. “Sobieteu yeonbang-ui balseong yeonghwa-wa geu baljeon” (The Development of Talkies in the U.S.S.R.). *Chosun Ilbo*, October 18, 1931.

ken word to still be a problem (at least at time of his writing in 1931). He found the overt disavowal of talkies by Charles Chaplin—whose films were extremely popular in Korea—as a telling sign of the questionable future of talking in motion pictures.<sup>22</sup> These types of articles reminded readers about the technology's then-limited abilities to reproduce and amplify sound in ways that human ears were used to hearing. Despite having been a popular fad at the time, the quality of early motion picture sound was generally poor. Low admission prices barely seemed to compensate for this nascent technology. Hence, it took more than a few talkie demonstrations in the mid-1920s to introduce the idea of sound films to the public.

By the end of 1928, fewer than 10% of an estimated 15,000 U.S. cinemas had been converted to sound, and just over 75% of U.S. cinemas had been wired for sound by the mid-1930s. By this time, equipment costs had begun to come down and public opinion regarding sound films had begun to change after the quality of amplification improved. It looked as if sound was becoming an irreversible change in the American and European film industries. From the start, this adoption of sound by film industries around the world seemed to intrigue members of the Korean film community. For Yi Chang-yong, the thought of producing sound films was completely out of reach for the Korean film community, which could not even dream about obtaining, let alone using, imported sound equipment. Nonetheless, Yi Chang-yong looked forward to savoring American and European talkies at the earliest possible opportunity; he was generally excited by their spectacle.<sup>23</sup> Other Korean filmmakers/critics questioned the idea of converting from a silent to a sound cinema and had contradictory feelings about the changeover.

In the early 1930s, Yi Gyu-hwan was working as Suzuki Shige-yoshi's assistant director at Shinkō's studios in Kyoto when it released the smash sound-on-disc hit *What Made Her Do It?* (*Nani ga kanojo o sō saseta ka?*).<sup>24</sup> During this time, Yi Gyu-hwan wrote a

22. Yi C. (1931).

23. Yi C. (1931).

24. See Kim and Kim (2003b).

series of newspaper articles about sound technology that considered the talkies as potentially modernizing and as a step for industrial evolution for filmic expression. He seemed enamored with how Hollywood directors and studios were engaging with the coming of sound. His articles attempted to show how novel and popular talkies were in Japan while pointing to their infancy across the empire. Although Yi was writing from Japan, the level of detail about sound technology in this series of articles made him appear to be an expert on the topic. It was a clever strategy to ingratiate himself with the whole of the Korean film community in advance of his return to Korea and possibly open new opportunities for studying directing in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

His newspaper articles more than likely proved invaluable in 1932, when he made *The Boat Without the Boatman*—a silent film that is considered a quintessential nationalistic film for its portrayal of the difficulties that Korean farmers experienced under Japanese colonialism.<sup>26</sup> Although it no longer exists, the fact that *The Boat Without the Boatman* was made without sound speaks volumes about the accessibility to and viability of sound recording technology in Korea at the time.<sup>27</sup> Though Yi praised and advocated sound technology and the talkies in his articles before his return to Korea, he could not in fact afford to make his debut film with sound. This was the gap he experienced between reality and the theory behind the pursuit of sound. Nevertheless, Yi Gyu-hwan's contribution to the coming of sound was not in vain because the knowledge and ideas he introduced inspired other practitioners such as Yi Pil-u and his brother Yi Myeong-u to gain more industry experience and training. Although Yi

25. According to Lee and Choe (1998, 60), Yi Gyu-hwan had begun dreaming of studying directing in Hollywood after seeing Na Un-gyu's *Arirang*.

26. Lee (2000).

27. It seems new films from the colonial period are being discovered all the time. In mid-2007, nine reels of An Jong-hwa's *Cheongchun-ui sipjaro* (Crossroads of Youth, 1934) were discovered in Korea. After eight months of being restored, a preview of this black-and-white silent movie was exhibited at the Korean Film Archive in March 2008. At the time of writing, *Cheongchun-ui sipjaro* is the oldest known Korean film in existence, predating the currently present 1936 melodrama *Mimong* (Sweet Dream) by two years.

Gyu-hwan did not begin his career as a director of talkies he remained at the cusp of new film industry trends. Yi Gyu-hwan's long career stands out with his landmark 1955 version of *Chunhyangjeon*, which kick-started the 1950s/1960s "golden age" of Korean cinema.<sup>28</sup>

For Yi Chang-yong and Yi Gyu-hwan, as well as many others at the time, sound recording and projection technology were incredibly modern. Even so, talkies had a long way to go before reaching the level of high-quality art that silent films had attained. Both Yi and Yi doubted whether the Korean film community had the ability to experiment with sound because of its severely limited access to only silent cameras and other equipment. According to these articles, exhibitors from smaller cities wished for the talkies to go away even as other exhibitors began to import talkies, instigating a kind of battle between silent and sound films. Sound may have been sweeping over the U.S. film industry, but it experienced a very slow start in Korea.

As one might expect, talkies first appeared in the capital, Seoul, and then spread to smaller cities. Seoul by far had the largest number of cinemas and total seating capacity as well as the most advanced American and Japanese sound equipment, not to mention the country's most modern roads, railroads, post-offices, telegraph and telephone exchanges, banks, electric-power plants, hospitals, hotels, restaurants, and schools. Seoul was evolving into a city of the future and a city of opportunity in the Japanese Empire. Seoul was the metropolis—the site of change and urban modernity—particularly in the realm of entertainment and popular culture. Six out of eleven of Seoul's most prestigious cinemas—which catered to Japanese audiences with Japanese features, shorts and animated cartoons from the Nikkatsu, Shōchiku, Shinkō and Taitō studios—were wired with the Nippon Sound System (manufactured by Japan Wireless Telegraph

28. According to the KOFA database, Yi Gyu-hwan's career traverses four decades. During this time he directed 22 films, wrote 16 screenplays, adaptations, and novels, edited 12 films and produced/planned six productions. Given that he outlived the colonial era and civil war, it is easy to see why scholars such as Ho Hyun-Chan (2000), Lee Young-il and Choe Young-cheol (1998) consider Yi Gyu-hwan to be one of Korea's finest master filmmakers.

and Telephone Co.).<sup>29</sup> Seoul's other five flagship cinemas, mostly frequented by Koreans, principally screened foreign (American, British, French, German, and Russian) and Korean films on American sound projection equipment. Hollywood, with its own films, controlled as much as 63 percent of the market—because it could.<sup>30</sup> Film policy in Korea, which facilitated Hollywood's dominance, took longer to catch up with the more restrictive policy in place of Japan proper. Busan, Pyeongyang, Daegu, Wonsan, and Incheon also had multiple cinemas, but only one in each city, where mostly Korean audiences watched foreign films on U.S. sound equipment. Admission prices differed across Korea at this time. Tickets for general cinema seating in Seoul cost from 40 to 60 sen (approximately 11 to 17 U.S. cents). Small discounts were given to students and larger discounts (up to 50%) were given to children, thus enticing youth not only into the realm of Korea's popular entertainment industry but also into that of documentary and cultural films (i.e. Army and Navy, Tourist, Educational, Sports, Manners and Customs, Sanitation, Science, Art, Politics, Music), flowing out of Japan.<sup>31</sup>

Between 1926 and 1936, or what has been called the first golden age of American cinema in Korea, Hollywood films overwhelmingly dominated the Korean market with its silent films and talkies.<sup>32</sup> A regular supply of American films, which were imported first to Japan, accompanied the gradual but persistent spread of U.S. sound technology.<sup>33</sup> During this time, Fox, Famous Players Lasky-Paramount,

29. The average price of a Japanese sound projector such as the Nippon Sound System cost from 3,000 to 5,500 yen (approximately US\$860 to 1,570).

30. Langdon (1934); and Golden (1938).

31. Annual statistics for these specific genres appear, for instance, in the *Cinema Year Book of Japan 1936-1937* (1937, 109) and *Cinema Year Book of Japan 1938* (1938, 63-64). It is interesting to note that these types of films were classified as "documentary films" in 1937 and "cultural films" after 1938.

32. Yecies (2005b).

33. For instance, in late 1931, the Seoul-based distributor Gisin Yanghaeng acquired from Paramount's branch office in Japan dozens of sound-on-disc films for general exhibition, including: *Paramount On Parade* (1930), *Charley's Aunt* (1930), *His Woman* (1931), *Rich Man's Folly* (1931), and *Newly Rich* (1931).

Warner Bros.—First National, Universal Pictures, independent agent J. H. Morris and others representing Columbia, MGM, RKO, and United Artists—all controlling members of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPPDAA)—had distribution offices and agents operating in Seoul. During this decade, more than 6,700 American feature and non-feature films were submitted to the Government-General of Joseon's film censorship apparatus. Musicals and gangster films were two of the most prolific genres. As early as 1930, an ongoing supply of American sound films began arriving first in Japan and then Korea—imported by the local MPPDAA offices mentioned above. Colonial Korea was unquestionably a key territory for Hollywood (and a smaller number of European distributors)—all of which were agents for Western modernity as a set of cultural attitudes closely linked to advanced technology. This plethora of foreign films (as well as a small number of Japanese films) more than likely inspired Korean filmmakers to make and exhibit sound (and silent) films of their own. This is precisely what occurred in the early 1930s, when a Korean production company tried to make the first Korean talkie.

#### Korea's Untold Talkie Story: the Modernization of Tradition

Conventional wisdom tells us that sound began in 1935 with *Chunhyangjeon*—a film that brought a moment of vitality to a depressed local film industry by providing a breakthrough during the colonial period. *Chunhyangjeon* is remembered as “Korea's first successful talkie” in the same way that *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* (1931) is considered “Japan's first successful talkie.”<sup>34</sup> However, in 1930, there was a spark of modernity among Korean filmmakers when Yi Pil-u—who was born in Seoul in 1897—and Na Un-gyu—the best-known director, actor, and star from Korea's silent cinema industry—radical-

34. Anderson and Richie (1982); and Iwamoto (1992).

ly confronted change by producing the film *Secret Story*.<sup>35</sup> The project was launched four years after the release of *Arirang* (1926), Korea's most famous nationalistic film.<sup>36</sup> Na Un-gyu, who had come to enjoy huge star appeal and popularity from *Arirang*, was the director and the cinematographer Yi Pil-u. The primary idea was to simultaneously play (synchronize) a prerecorded phonograph disc with a silent film—in the same way that others across the world had successfully done. It is important to remember that the Warner Bros. film *The Jazz Singer* (1927) was a sound-on-disc film. In this way, *Secret Story* aimed to modernize Korean tradition by emulating changing Western production and exhibition practices.

In February 1930, Yi launched this talkie project by visiting Japanese entertainment entrepreneur Minagawa Yoshizō and his Minatalkie Company in Japan, negotiating a contract for the purchase of multiple sound-on-disc recordings. Minagawa was willing to provide Yi with a continual supply of discs for ten Korean won each, but Yi could not gather enough funds to underwrite the deal. In retrospect, ten won was probably a bargain because the average cost of a phonograph record was from 1.35 to 2.5 won.<sup>37</sup> According to a newspaper interview with Yi Pil-u's brother, Yi Myeong-u, film songs at the time cost about sixty to seventy won to record.<sup>38</sup> This financial expense was from two and a half to three times that of a simple phonograph player, which only wealthy Koreans could afford.<sup>39</sup> Had

35. Documentary evidence describes the film as involving a girl who becomes a *gisaeng*. She tries to keep her job a secret from her brother, who cries when he discovers her situation. See *Malthoal sajeong*, Catalogue entry #40205 (A-1, A-4) Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) Sound Archive, Seoul.

36. Lee (2000) and Kim Kyung Hyun (2002) point to the complex historical discourse surrounding Na Un-gyu. His achievements are fraught with a tension between nationalism and collaboration with the Japanese colonial authorities because of the pro-Japanese films he made before he died in 1937. Most of this tension revolves around Na Un-gyu's collegial links and working relationships with Japanese directors, writers, cinematographers, and investors, as well as the Japanese film company, Nikkatsu.

37. Maliangkay (2007, 57).

38. *Joseon yeonghwa 1* (October 1936, 60).

39. Maliangkay (2007, 57).



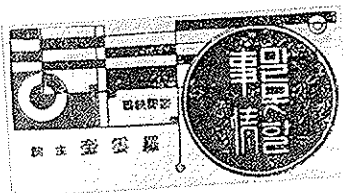
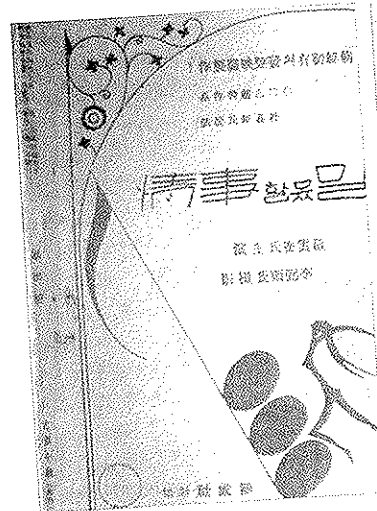


Fig. 1. *Malthal sajeong*. Advertisement. *Daejung yeonghwa* 4 (July 1930). Courtesy of Jo Hui-mun, Sangmyung University, Seoul.

Fig. 2. *Malthal sajeong*. Advertisement. *Chosun Ilbo*. August 9-11, 1930.

the deal been successful, Minagawa would have helped Yi with a favor, while at the same time getting rid of his unwanted discs. Yi kept the project alive by creating an ambitious media campaign in order to generate interest in sound technology in general and to attract the crucial financial backing required for the film's completion. One of the earliest-known advertisements for the film appeared in July 1930, covering the full back page of the *Daejung yeonghwa*, a popular Korean film magazine. Figure 1 indicates *Secret Story* aimed to be the "first talkie production in Korea" with plans to be screened at the well-known Dansungsa Cinema. This Won Bang Gak production had the financial backing of Bak Jeong-hyeon, the Korean owner and manager of the Dansungsa Cinema, which was one of the oldest permanent cinema houses with authorization from the Japanese police to screen foreign films. As seen in Figure 2, newspaper advertisements exploited Na Un-gyu's name as the director and promoted the film as a *fait accompli* talkie scheduled for release in August 1930 in the *Chosun Ilbo*.

On behalf of the Korean film community, Na Un-gyu and Yi were eager to capitalize on the talkie fad and use the production to herald the coming of modernity for Korea and Korean culture. Despite this enthusiasm, funding problems persisted and the making of *Secret Story* failed.<sup>40</sup> Yi Pil-u and Na Un-gyu eventually had a falling out. Although Na Un-gyu died before he could make another talkie film as famous as his silent *Arirang*, he did write and direct another sound film called *Arirang Part 3* (1936) while working for the Korean Hanyang Film Studio.<sup>41</sup> Both Yi Pil-u and Na Un-gyu were convinced of the timely opportunity (in terms of training, experience, expertise, and funding) for Koreans to make their own talkies—no matter how popular they might or might not be.<sup>42</sup> They must have felt the end of the silent era to be near.

The exact order of Yi Pil-u's next activities prior to the making of the famous *Chunhyangjeon* in 1935 is somewhat cloudy. However, in 1931, it seems Yi Pil-u kept the talkie dream alive by traveling to Shanghai to observe the exhibition of sound films and to acquire as much knowledge as possible. Commercial sound and talking films had been exhibited in Shanghai since February 1929. Yi probably desired to see and learn about the U.S. Movietone sound-on-film recording system, which Fox news crews were operating there.<sup>43</sup> Shanghai was a major center for film production and distribution in

40. More attention to the attempted making of *Secret Story* is needed elsewhere. Suffice it to say that at best, *Secret Story* was proof of the concept of generating new sources of Korean entertainment programs for the Gyeongseong Broadcasting Company (KBC), which was established in 1927. According to Robinson (1998), sales of radio receivers to Koreans were on a significant rise at this time. This also involved a strong link to the popularity of phonograph records. According to Mallangkay (2007) phonograph sales also experienced steady growth during the colonial period. The phonograph recording of *Secret Story* was in fact made and still exists today as part of a compilation of Korean songs on a commercial CD.
41. Although Na Un-gyu made only a small number of sound films, many of the titles of the silent feature films in which he directed and/or starred resonated sound: *Sam-ryong the Mute* (1929); *Song for My Home Town* (1932); *Carmen* (1933); and *Sound of the Bullets* (1933).
42. See Na Un-gyu (September 1933).
43. Way (1930, 5).

China and one of the best places for Yi to learn how to resolve some of the technical obstacles he was facing. After his return from China, Yi stayed in Japan at his own expense to further study sound production, at which time he made considerable contact with the Tsuchihashi brothers, who were innovating a sound film recording system (based on RCA equipment developed in the United States) for Shōchiku.<sup>44</sup> The Tsuchihashi system was made famous at the time because of the commercial success of Shōchiku's talkie *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* (1931). Yi Pil-u's valuable contacts in the Japanese film industry enabled him to negotiate a "technical cooperation contract" with one of the Tsuchihashi brothers.<sup>45</sup> Most likely this involved: 1) the sharing of numerous publications (readily available in Japanese and English) that contained detailed descriptions and schematics of various sound systems; 2) the acquisition of new and old spare parts; and 3) general advice about constructing sound recording and projection equipment. However, knowledge and technical know-how were only part of the equation for success. Desperate for funding, Yi imported Fritz Lang's first talkie *M* from Japan for exhibition in Seoul. His fascination with film noir, coupled with the critical acclaim *M* has received over the years, further suggests that Yi was ahead of his time by focusing on this selection. According to his own testimony, Yi rebuilt a projector for the sound projection of *M*, but the film failed because it was not commercial enough, in addition to the difficulty Korean audiences had in understanding the German dialogue.<sup>46</sup> There is no record of Yi using a live film narrator to make the film more accessible to audiences in Seoul. Apparently, Yi's modified projector had proven to be useless as well.

Throughout the early 1930s, Yi Pil-u worked among some of the best of Japan's film people, who were at the cusp of the technological conversion to sound. He brought back to Korea new skills and ideas as well as his thirst to understand the cinema's phenomenal

44. Anderson and Richie (1982, 77); Kim and Kim (2003a).

45. Kim (2007, 73).

46. Yi P. (1930).

changes.<sup>47</sup> It is unclear whether Yi Pil-u returned to Korea for patriotic reasons, if he reached a plateau with training in Japan, or if he was able to secure new funding opportunities in Korea. However, his overseas experiences fed his passion to contribute to global motion picture trends. He became obsessed with sound and used every chance to ingratiate himself with like-minded people. He followed paths that enabled him to gain experience in Osaka, working for two major Japanese film production companies—Nikkatsu and Shōchiku—where he befriended film production technicians and amateur radio enthusiasts. His connections and experiences would become valuable when returning to sound production in Korea with the making of *Chunhyangjeon* in 1935. Yi Pil-u's life story, as told through interviews, suggests he was modern in terms of a cultural hybridity in that he followed new, that is to say, "Western" trends in dress and music. At the same time, he actively constructed a local face or specifically-Korean contribution to a new and modern type of cinema that lie within the constraints of colonial domination. In this way, his personal lifestyle was related to the modern technology he engaged with.

Between 1931 and 1935, the Korean film community continued to contribute to Korean cinema by making silent films. While there are no other Korean sound films known to have been made during this time, the American distribution exchanges continued promoting and distributing both sound-on-disc and sound-on-film films. Approximately twenty-one percent of the films exhibited in 1933 were talkies. In 1934, the number of talkies nearly doubled to forty percent of the total number of films screened, and in 1935, more than doubled again to eighty-five percent of the market.<sup>48</sup> Some of the exhibited talkies included: Warner Bros.-First National's (Vitaphone) *On with the Show* (1929) and *Top Speed* (1931), Universal's *Outside the Law* (1930) and *Dracula* (1931), United Artists' all-talking documentary *Around the World in 80 Minutes with Douglas Fairbanks* (1931),

47. Yi Pil-u's oral history interviews are cited in Lee and Choe (1998); and Kim and Kim (2003a).

48. Yi J. (1996, 61).

Fox's (Movietone) Oscar-winning *Bad Girl* (1931) and *Young as You Feel* (1931), as well as other Chinese talkies produced in Shanghai. William R. Langdon, the American Consul-General in Seoul, closely followed developments in the film industry. He was pessimistic about the likely longevity and stamina of talkies in Korea, even though the exhibition market was experiencing the transition to sound in a recognizable way. As far as one can tell, the majority of imported films were older and damaged from overuse, projectors were substandard compared with those used in the United States, and speaker volumes (while muffled in the best of cases) were lowered to create a more favorable environment for the *byeonsa* or live narrator's performance during film screenings. Hence, one could say that Korea was an important dumping ground for second-run Hollywood films.

The *byeonsa* was an important Korean art form and method of cultural expression, which delayed the zenith of sound films in Korea (and Japan). When performing before American, European and Japanese films, *byeonsa* explained narratives and changed their voices for each character, offering emotional and sentimental interpretations of foreign dialogue. Top *byeonsa* performers attracted fan clubs and regular followers. Hence, popular *byeonsa* competed with foreign talkies being screened in Korea's largest cities. Yet, in some ways, *byeonsa* were simultaneously beneficial for both American distributors and Korean audiences, because the presence of the live narrator elided the need for subtitles. This practice made it possible for distributors of Hollywood films to diffuse their products so widely throughout Korea for so long. The popularity of Hollywood films in Korea owed a great debt to the *byeonsa* tradition. Spoken language was easier to follow than written Korean or Japanese. After the talkies came, *byeonsa* had to ask for the sound volume to be turned down in order to better project their voices. Talkies also competed with other sources of live sounds such as musical accompaniment—as they did in most countries—which offered background music for the *byeonsa* performances. Because *byeonsa* and the talkies vied for audience attention, sound films were not initially as popular in Korea (or Japan) as they were in English-speaking countries. In short, Kore-

ans, like the Japanese, had a proclivity toward live film narrators who made the talkies seem less impressive, less important, and possibly less necessary, especially since recorded, mechanical dialogue was a long way from being projected as loudly and clearly, and as entertainingly as live voice.

For filmmaker and critic Yi Gyu-hwan, importing foreign talkies, screening them in original but foreign language, but then using a Korean *byeonsa* was equivalent to making a tasteless bowl of *bibimbap* (rice with mixed vegetables). According to Yi, Korean filmmakers were not modern enough to engage with sound, even as filmmakers in the United States and other Western countries were. Perhaps ironically, the belated adoption and diffusion of sound technology and the proliferation of American sound films in Korea was one of the biggest incentives for the local experimentation and production of Korean talkies. Screen quota regulations, propagated as early as August 1918 and strengthened significantly on January 1 1937 by the Government-General of Joseon, had begun to call attention to, and to address the dominance of, Hollywood films in the region, thus encouraging the production of more "domestic" films.<sup>49</sup> In the mid-1930s, after Governor-General Ugaki initiated a higher exhibition quota of Korean and Japanese films, which blocked foreign—and primarily American—films, exhibitors with wired cinemas began waiting for more local (Korean and Japanese) sound productions.<sup>50</sup> The time was ripe for the local contribution to sound.

### The Politics of Interpretation: *Chunhyangjeon*

Although the attempted completion of *Secret Story* in 1930 is a significant failure that speaks volumes about the passion to use sound-on-

49. Choe (1996); and Yecies and Shim (2003).

50. According to the 1937-38 *Motion Picture Almanac* (1938, 1173-1175), a key international film trade publication, the Government-General had been planning to raise a "cinema control plan" from 1935, which would ensure the screening ratio of Japanese and Korean films to U.S. films would rise from one-third to more than half.

disc technology, it was not until the production and exhibition of the "first Korean talkie"—*Chunhyangjeon*—in 1935 that proved Koreans could construct their own spaces of cultural expression within colonial rule. The film was more than a sign of nationalistic resistance; it opened up a different pathway that brought together Korean production crews and Japanese financial backing. *Chunhyangjeon* was produced by the Gyeongseong Film studio, which had an all-Korean staff, with funding from a Japanese entertainment entrepreneur. While it is difficult to know if the project's Japanese investor was fully aware of the nationalistic implications for financially supporting *Chunhyangjeon*, it seems that his status as a Japanese national would have eased the film's review before the censorship board. Still eager in 1934 to bring sound to the Korean cinema, Yi Pil-u contacted a Japanese colleague with whom he had worked at the Shōchiku studio and asked him to bring a recording machine to Korea. Yi purchased the recording machine for 1,200 Korean won, used his accumulated skills to modify it, called it the "P.K.R." system and used it to make *Chunhyangjeon*.

The story of *Chunhyangjeon* was a well-known traditional folk tale loved by Koreans and hence was a smart choice to adapt into a talkie. Based on a popular 400-year-old love story (novel) from the Joseon dynasty, it reflected the intimacies and uniqueness of Korean culture and society. The film is a love story between Mongnyong, a noble scholar, who is secretly married to Chunhyang, the daughter of a *gisaeng*, or female entertainer for the court and the aristocratic class in the Joseon period, who were generally considered to be part of the lowest class in Korean society. The story unfolds around a corrupt official and a covert envoy sent by the king to inspect and evaluate regional officials. The heroine of the story keeps her fidelity toward her husband, even though she is forcibly seduced and threatened by Officer Byeon, the corrupt official. Mongnyong later reveals his identity, saves Chunhyang, and punishes Officer Byeon for his maladministration. In 1923, a silent version of *Chunhyangjeon*, which was directed by a Japanese filmmaker, had proven itself a box office hit.<sup>51</sup> Every bit of the 1935 sound version of *Chunhyangjeon* implicated a

sense of nationalism expressed in Korean, which ironically, the Government-General of Joseon and its censorship apparatus had allowed. It and other "national films" made before and after *Chunhyangjeon* provided spectators with glimpses of Korean landscapes, ways of life, and some of the new changes brought about by state-sponsored industrialization. Although the folk tale was several hundred years old, it possibly provided a metaphor for the Korean struggle against colonial and military authority. Under the plot of a love story, the corrupt official and a secret envoy as a savior for Chunhyang and the village people might have been read as a metaphor for Korea, its aggressor, and hope for independence. With this in mind, *Chunhyangjeon* was highly symbolic as the first successful talkie because of the intense nationalistic response it had the potential to inspire among Koreans.

The *Chunhyangjeon* advertisement (as seen in figure 3) announced that the film was released at the Dansungsa Cinema on October 4, 1935. The headline reads: "A Great Story. . . The World Has Been Waiting for This. . . The Premiere of the First Korean Talkie." The cast and crew are also listed. When *Chunhyangjeon* was released, audiences rushed to see it for novelty's sake, which helped it to break box office records. The film became a sign that Korean sound productions could achieve success and recognition from local



Fig. 3. *Chunhyangjeon*. Advertisement. Chosun Ilbo, October 4, 1935.

51. Lee and Choe (1998, 36).

audiences, suggesting promise for future productions and box office takings. The success of *Chunhyangjeon* was evidence that a sound film could be made within an industry that lacked modern facilities and huge numbers of engineers and production assistants.

For An Seok-yeong, a Korean film director and prominent film critic writing for the *Chosun Ilbo*, the film was a "shock" because no one knew if it could be done.<sup>52</sup> He questioned whether or not *Chunhyangjeon*'s success would lead to a rise in production and distribution of Korean films because he was unsure if there were enough sound recording engineers, actors with speaking experience, and editing specialists to build an ongoing sound industry. All the same, An Seok-yeong hoped for a day when more young people would enter the film business, making all Koreans proud of their accomplishments. Yi Myeong-u, the director, initially saw the project as an ambitious plan because of the lack of facilities and underdeveloped technology in Korea at the time.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, he and his bother, Pil-u, wanted to accomplish as much as possible. Although advances in sound technology in Europe and the United States by this time had begun to offer audiences and exhibitors (at least, those who could afford it) a better sound experience, exhibitors in Korea had yet to invest in and employ the new technology on a broad level. After all, Korean filmmakers were still trying to perfect their silent filmmaking skills. For Bak Gi-chae (1935), 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 because it added a new life to the Korean film community and society at large. Even those who did not have the means to see the film probably would have heard about it by word of mouth.

While *Chunhyangjeon* was a box office smash partly due to its novelty appeal—as was true for *The Jazz Singer* (1927) in the United States and *The Neighbor's Wife and Mine* in Japan—the acting performances and technical achievements left a lot to be desired. Produc-

52. An (Part 1-3, 1935).

53. Yi M. (1936).

tion efforts were commendable, but the presentation of the background, costume, and characters remained underdeveloped. In addition, the talkie's subject matter was not as fully-expressed as in the silent version of the same story. Moreover, the pronunciation of the Korean dialogue was not clear. The film may have failed to live up to the high expectations of it as "Korea's first talkie," but Korean audiences were quick to forgive its lack of quality. It was a cultural triumph to hear Korean spoken from Korean actors on the silver screen, which partly legitimized a national identity under colonial rule and the influence of Western media. The awkward and clumsy-sounding words were understandable given the early exploratory stages of talkies in Korea. *Chunhyangjeon* received high praise from other newspaper critics despite its technical imperfections. After watching *Chunhyangjeon*, Indol (a.k.a. Seo Hang-suk), a cultural critic writing for the *Donga Ilbo*, expressed feeling like someone who had finally eaten *kimchi* after being fed up with eating too much lamb. According to reviews by Indol (1935), Korean audiences loved to watch *Chunhyangjeon* regardless of the film's quality. The film's nationalistic appeal was unquestionably reflected in this critical reception.

Still, other Korean critics were pessimistic about making local talkies, choosing to reject the modernization of the arts. According to the well-known novelist Sim Hun, Koreans were not ready in the mid-1930s for the new spectatorial practices required to enjoy talkies. Nor did he feel there was a need to hear Korean language on the screen purely for novelty's sake. He accepted the fact that talkies were popular in Korea, but saw this modern filmmaking tool as part of a technology bubble advancing too rapidly to control. Perhaps he was a perfectionist like Charles Chaplin, who believed sound tainted the beauty and art of silent films; in any case, Sim Hun clearly supported more traditional lines of thinking regarding cultural practices. The coming of sound to Korea looked as if it were skipping key stages in the general development of the technology—that is, the production, distribution, and exhibition of sound-on-disc films—that most other countries had experienced. Moreover, it seems the film industry in Korea had only just begun to perfect the art of silent film-

making. For Sim Hun (1936), making talkies required precise scientific and technical know-how, which he believed Korean screenwriters, cameramen, engineers, and actors lacked. Essentially, he saw the Korean film community as a bunch of young school children having just learned to read aspiring to a childhood fantasy of writing adult books.

Although *Chunhyangjeon* no longer survives, there is a rich legacy of newspaper and magazine articles and editorials, as well as advertisements, still photographs and interviews with members of the production crew. The success of *Chunhyangjeon* led to a continuation of talkie productions as other filmmakers followed in its footsteps. The all Korean-staffed Gyeongseong Film Studio also made *Hong Gil-dong jeon Part II* (The Tale of Hong Gil-dong) in mid-1936. It was a part-talkie backed by a Japanese producer and directed and written by Yi Myeong-u. Yi Pil-u recorded the sound. It was released on June 10, 1936 at Dansungsa Cinema in Seoul.<sup>54</sup> According to Kim Gwan, a critic writing for the *Chosun Ilbo*, *Hong Gil-dong jeon Part II* also was flawed because of its poor audio quality.<sup>55</sup> However, once again, it seems that the Yi brothers were ahead of their time. It can be said that Yi Pil-u's P.K.R. sound-on-film system was still being perfected, showing the Yi brothers' commitment to making more sound films. Other filmmakers/critics such as Song Yeong believed Korean talkies had not yet reached their full potential. They were not as good as they could be because they largely contained Western themes (free romance, capitalism, etc.) with Korean costumes, presenting a superficial level of Korean culture. At the same time, Song (1936) wished his fellow filmmakers had made talkies with iconographic Korean images such as women's silhouettes in doorways, along with sounds such as ironing (laundry) rods, commonly-heard thumping sounds, as well as sad sighs and laughs.

54. Kim (2002, 351-353).

55. See Kim G. (1936). Kim was displeased that foreign music—a symphony by Beethoven—was used (instead of traditional Korean music), which he believed made the story harder for Koreans to follow and relate to.

Sadly, Yi Pil-u did not leave any legacy apart from his testimonial interviews, and none of his films survive. According to the KOFA Korean Movie Database, the oldest-known prints of Korean sound films in existence include: the 1936 melodrama *Mimong* (Sweet Dream)—also produced by Gyeongseong Film Studio and directed by Yang Ju-nam and written by Choe Dok-bung—and An Seok-gyeong's 1937 feature *Sim Cheong jeon* (The Story of Sim Cheong). As far as we know, the P.K.R. system no longer exists, and only one reel (a total of about thirteen minutes) of *Sim Cheong jeon* survives, which makes it difficult to prove Yi Pil-u's claims. However, photographs from Yi's 1936 film *Hong Gil-dong jeon Part II* show the film's production crew. Pictured below, Yi Pil-u is sitting with synchronized sound-recording equipment and wearing a pair of headphones. A boom microphone and two audio assistants are in the shot. The photograph more than likely shows Yi Pil-u's P.K.R. system, which was made by remodelling existing equipment, localizing it and/or adding one's own brand or nameplate—a common practice in many countries throughout the transition to sound, especially as older and



Fig. 4. Yi Pil-u and the film crew on the set of *Hong Gil-dong jeon Part II* (circa 1936). Courtesy of the Korean Film Archive.

unwanted equipment was passed off to those who could not afford the latest models.

### Conclusion

Korean film makers and technicians working under the difficult cultural and financial climate of the colonial period understood the ideas behind industrialization and modernity, despite the fact that some of the ideas were brought by the Japanese and the prominent distribution of thousands of American (and European) silent and sound films. Individual, and at times shared, experiments with sound enabled a diverse group of Koreans to do more than dream about contributing to a modern, popular culture—they did whatever they could to gain production experience and training and to make films—all while responding to the demands of the colonial regime. Permitting Koreans to gain commercial film production training and experience under the Cultural Policy reforms launched by Governor-General Saitō Makoto after 1919—or at least not entirely preventing them from doing so—encouraged the development of a “golden age” of silent Korean cinema.<sup>56</sup> In addition to feature film projects, non-commercial work became available after 1920, when the Government-General established a Motion Picture Corps under its Central Council Investigation Section as part of the administration’s larger aims of promoting the colonial Korean project to Japan and beyond.<sup>57</sup> This

56. Most Korean film scholars agree that a “golden age” of silent films occurred between 1926 and 1934 (Yi 1969; Lee and Choe 1998; Ho 2000; Kim and Chung 2001; and Yi 2002). This period is considered “golden” in terms of the quantity and quality (technical and artistic achievement) of films made and the proliferation of an estimated fifty film production companies. According to Yi Yeong-il (1969, 84), about eighty films were produced between 1926 and 1935. This number was over half of the total estimated productions made before liberation in 1945.

57. Government-General of Joseon (1936, 42). According to flow charts depicting the organization of the Government-General, the Central Council’s Investigation Section (after its Board of Information was merged with the Statistics Section) was an

relatively prosperous and hopeful time for Korean filmmakers began to end after 1937 with the wide-scale oppression of Korean language and culture that came with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>58</sup> One can only guess how local developments in sound technology could have continued without the sudden and inevitable shift toward wartime priorities. Within this atmosphere of repression, all facets of the Korean film industry had little choice but to place their artistic ambitions on hold and to follow Japan’s assimilationist *naisen ittai* (“Japan and Korea as one country”) agenda. Filmmakers helped to make pro-Japanese propaganda feature films, newsreels, and cultural films for distribution throughout the empire.<sup>59</sup>

The case studies of *Secret Story* and *Chunhyangjeon* on the one hand, and Yi Pil-u, Yi Myeong-u, Yi Chang-geon, Yi Gyu-hwan and An Seok-yeong on the other hand, represent the different pathways and types of contributions made to a complex form of national cinema. These individuals were part of a larger active and diverse group of cinematographers, writers, producers, directors, actors, and exhibitors who were trying to modernize the cinema in Korea—whether they were working for or alongside Japanese filmmakers and entre-

affiliated office with the same importance (on the same level) as the Communications Bureau, Railway Bureau, Monopoly Bureau, Customs House, and Law Courts.

58. In October 1939, the enactment of the Joseon Film Ordinance severely clamped down on and controlled the supply of all raw film supplies and productions as part of its military agenda. It also restricted the distribution and exhibition of foreign films (via a screen quota) and forced the mandatory screenings of government-sponsored films upon all exhibitors.

59. In 2004 and 2005, KOFA found some of the best-known colonial-era propaganda or “military” films hidden away in Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Russian archives. The list of films, which attempted to display the spirit of Japan and Korea as one country, includes: Seo Gwang-je’s *Troop Train* (*Gunyong yeolcha*, 1938), *Fisherman’s Fire* (Eohwa, 1939), *Homeless Angel* (*Jibeomneun cheonsa*, 1941), An Seok-yeong’s *Volunteer Soldier* (*Jiwonbyeong*, 1941) and Bak Gi-chae’s *Straits of Joseon* (1943). These were “pro-Japanese” films that contrasted significantly with the “national films” from the late 1920s and early 1930s. In the case of the *Troop Train* and *Volunteer Soldier* co-productions, Korean technicians such as Yi Pil-u, Yi Myeong-u and others played central production roles.

preneurs and/or all-Korean-staffed production crews. Modern sound technology was used as a tool to bring cultural modernity to other Koreans by making films utilizing spoken language—efforts many Korean film historians see as attempts to articulate national feelings against oppression by colonial authority.<sup>60</sup> Yet, on a more pragmatic level, they also may have sought to compete with some of the American talkies that had already been screening for a number of years with American sound projectors.

With the advent of sound, Korean filmmakers and technicians appeared to embark on a journey that involved a number of overlapping mixed motives. From even the most basic revisionist standpoint, the sum total of their reasons reaches far beyond subterranean nationalistic goals. A more dynamic range of reasons behind why filmmakers and technicians worked so hard in such challenging times includes: 1) for fame and greater opportunities to work and train at home, in other parts of the Japanese Empire and possibly in Hollywood; 2) for simple economic gain and/or the larger pursuit of a more comfortable or cosmopolitan lifestyle; 3) for the love of creating film as an art form; 4) to make entertaining commercial films; 5) to reach Shanghai, which may or may not have signified support for the exiled Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea (formed after the 1919 March First movement); 6) to collaborate in a general sense on Japanese co-productions that could lead to better funding opportunities for more Korean films; 7) to find venues of expressions for Korean language, culture, and nationalism (either overtly or subversively); and 8) to escape the confines of the colonial environment in either a literal or figurative sense.

Making *Chunhyangjeon* was a momentous achievement in terms of available technology and limited production facilities. One might even now say that *Chunhyangjeon*'s success surprised the Government-General of Joseon, especially since there is no evidence to suggest the colonial administration helped fund it or many other Korean productions. Earlier attempts in 1930 to make the sound-on-disc

60. Lee and Choe (1998).

talkie *Secret Story* is even more surprising. Although endeavors to generate funds for *Secret Story* may have fallen on deaf ears, the production was an outright attempt to forge a contemporary consciousness, that is, to bring modernity to Korea, and to participate in global trends. Although Na Un-gyu and Yi Pil-u failed to complete *Secret Story*, theirs is a significant case worthy of study because it demonstrates that pioneers in the Korean cinema attempted to catch up with the global transition to sound. They absorbed the state's assets in any way they could—all while conforming to tighter film regulations and pretending to be docile to the Japanese authorities. Ultimately, a national film industry was developed through the spread of modern sound technology, which originated from a combination of telling Korean stories and later cooperating on a small number of propaganda feature films. Korean film pioneers may not have been in total harmony with the state's agenda of modernizing the empire, but they surely knew how to increase their opportunities and express themselves in various ways.

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