

CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF HYBRIDIZATION IN KOREAN CINEMA:

DOES THE LOCAL FILM INDUSTRY
CREATE "THE THIRD SPACE"?

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Abstract

This paper examines the fundamental assumptions of the concept of cultural hybridity in understanding the swift growth of Korean popular culture, especially films. It investigates whether hybridity, as a cultural globalization perspective, has generated new possible cultures, which are free from western dominance, by analyzing the hybridised Korean films. Unlike previous studies emphasising the crucial role of hybridisation in creating the third space, this paper empirically argues that the hybridisation process of the local popular culture is heavily influenced by Western norms and formats, and newly created local cultural products are rather representing Western culture, instead of unique local culture. It finally discusses the reasons why hybridity cannot adequately explain local cultures and identify some issues we have to consider in employing hybridity in interpreting globalisation.

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Introduction

Korean cinema has been considered a very distinctive non-Hollywood cinema in terms of the market share of domestic films, and Korean films are especially projected to have more success ahead as they recently began finding new audiences in other parts of the world. The swift growth of Korean cinema has been identified with several theoretical frameworks, including cultural imperialism and hybridisation. Contemporary cultural theories contain polarised ideas on whether culture is becoming increasingly homogeneous or heterogeneous under the scenario of globalisation, and cultural globalisation and/or hybridity, which emphasises either power to challenge and break the dominant culture of Western countries or power to sustain and develop local identities, has become a crucial and appealing theory.

Hybridity is often used in defining today's globalisation due to the interactions of the local with the global (Wang 2008). Several media scholars (Wang and Yeh 2005; Shim 2006; Ryoo 2009) believe that hybridisation has occurred in Korea as local cultural players interact and negotiate with global firms, using them as resources through which local people construct their own cultural spaces.¹ Through this, globalisation, especially in the realm of popular culture, breeds a creative form of hybridisation that works towards sustaining local identities in the global context. Some theoreticians have argued that in the current global media environment, which is characterised by a plurality of actors and media flows, it is no longer possible to sustain the notion of Western cultural imperialism emphasising hegemonic westernisation and homogenisation of local culture (Chadha and Kavoori 2000; Sonwalkar 2001). However, as Kraidy (2002, 323) points out, some scholars use the concept of hybridity without rigorous theoretical grounding:

[S]uch superficial uses will tend to be descriptive rather than analytical, utilitarian rather than critical. Since instances of cultural mixture abound in intercultural relations, a merely descriptive use of hybridity is especially threatening because it leads to uncritical claims that "all cultures are hybrid" and evacuates hybridity of any heuristic value.

In line of Kraidy's analysis, this paper critically examines the fundamental assumptions of the concept of cultural hybridity in understanding the swift growth of Korean popular culture, especially films. It investigates whether hybridity, as a cultural globalisation perspective, has generated new possible cultures, which are free from western dominance, by analyzing hybridised Korean films. Unlike previous studies emphasising the crucial role of hybridisation in creating the third space, such a form of in-between space, where the power of hegemonic Western culture can be disrupted by reflecting local identities and cultures, this paper empirically argues that the hybridisation process of local popular culture is heavily influenced by Western norms and formats, and newly created local cultural products are rather representing Western culture, instead of unique local culture. Finally, it discusses the reasons why hybridity cannot adequately explain local cultures and identifies some issues we have to consider in employing hybridity in interpreting globalisation.

Hybridity and Global Culture

As a reflection of its complexity, different thinkers have taken almost completely opposite views about globalisation (Robertson 1992; Giddens 1999; Shome and Hedge 2002; Winseck and Pike 2007). For some, globalisation is a single homogeneous system that is characterised by convergence and the presence of the universal (Wallerstein 1990), representing cultural imperialism theory. On the other hand, globalisation is a matter of long-distance interconnectedness, and meddling with other people's environments (Hannerz 1996, 17), which symbolises cultural globalisation or hybridity theory. The concept of hybridity has become a new facet of the debate about global culture with the rise of post-colonialism, yet opinions are divided over the nature of cultural globalisation (Wang and Yeh 2005).

The term hybridity can be used to describe mixed cultures or the process of mixing genres within a culture (Turow 2008). Some people use hybridity to describe the local reception of global culture as a site of cultural mixture. For them, hybridity primarily means the physical fusion of two different styles and forms, or identities, which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries. A few previous studies have indeed employed hybridity to describe mixed genres and identities (Tuftte 1995; Kolar-Panov 1996; Fung 2006). What they primarily emphasised is the nature of hybridity as the physical mix of two different cultures; however, what they did not focus on is whether the fusion of two cultures truly avoids a homogeneous culture heavily influenced by Western countries.

Hybridisation is not merely the mixing, blending and synthesising of different elements that ultimately forms a culturally faceless whole. In the course of hybridisation, cultures often generate new forms and make new connections with one another (Wang and Yeh 2005; Ryoo 2009). As Bhabha (1994) points out, hybridity opens up "a third space" within which elements encounter and transform each other as signifying the "in-between," incommensurable (that is, inaccessible by majoritarian discourses) location where minority discourses intervene to preserve their strengths and particularity. For Bhabha (1994, 53), "hybridity is an interpretive and reflective mode in which assumptions of identity are interrogated." As such, the theory of cultural hybridity assumes that hybrid culture is more rich, resistant, democratic, diverse, and heterogeneous than cultures of Western states (Appadurai 1996; Tomlinson 2000). Several scholars (Bhabha 1994; Joseph 1999; Shim 2006) also claim that domination within a culture may become more dispersed, less orchestrated and less purposeful because culture can then be negotiated by local and global power.

These approaches assume that the relationship among different cultures is more one of interdependence and interconnectedness than dominance, and also that no single power and no single model can control all the processes of hybridisation (Bhabha 1994; Kraidy 2005a). Garcia-Ganlini (1995) and Jan N. Pieterse (2004) especially state that hybridisation offers an opportunity for local culture to be highlighted or to be continued, and furthermore that globalisation is built on the base of local culture and local interpretation. In other words, they strongly refute the idea of cultural imperialism, which argues that there exist a one-way flow of cultural products from Western to non-Western countries (Schiller 1976), and the idea that capitalism creates a homogeneous or a universal culture; instead they claim that

global culture is hybrid and thus more diverse (Ferguson 1990; Kraidy 2005a).

While the term hybridisation is a significant concept for explaining globalisation, the concept of hybridity and/or cultural globalisation is not without areas of concern because there are some deficiencies in both theory and practice. Most of all, the concept of hybridisation falls short of acknowledging structural inequalities, which is one of the major concerns of political economy, and it has allegedly become a neocolonial discourse that is complicit with transnational capitalism (Friedman 2000). It means that the theory of cultural globalisation or hybridity intentionally or unintentionally ignores the commercial and capitalist nature of the global expansion process (Mosco 2009). Under the logic of capitalist production, hybridisation inevitably has inherent limitations, and we cannot be pointlessly optimistic about the idea that hybrid culture is democratic, resistant, diverse and less purposeful. In fact, hybridity is often criticised as de-powering and with apolitical concepts (Wang 2008). Golding (1997) also points out that the theory of hybridity overly emphasises cultural dimensions, leading to a neglect of the dynamic impact of structure, especially the unequal and asymmetrical power relationships among countries, cultures, regions and audiences.

Most importantly, hybridity has not given much attention to the nature of hybridised cultural products at the local level. While hybridity emphasises the nature of local resistance and diversity against homogenous western hegemonic power by providing some examples of developments in local culture as seen in Korean cinema, it does not reflect the results of the hybridisation process in terms of content. Again, hybridisation should not merely represent the mixing, blending or synthesising of different elements that ultimately forms a culturally faceless whole. Instead, hybridisation means that local culture generates new forms of culture, not homogenised, but the mixed third space by resisting global forces. However, hybridity theory misses in understanding the fundamental part, which is the nature of hybrid local cultures – whether they are unique local cultures representing local specificity, or whether they are only another form of global cultures with local clothes. Unlike many previous studies, therefore, this paper critically investigates the problematics of hybridity in interpreting Korean cinema by analyzing the characteristics of hybridised local cultures.

Korean Cinema Under Neoliberal Globalisation

The Korean film industry has experienced a roller coaster-ride change over the last two decades. After enjoying a boom period during the 1960s and the 1970s, the Korean film industry had almost demised due to the heavy influence of the U.S. government and Hollywood majors since the Korean government removed local barriers to imported films by opening up the domestic market in 1988 (Shin 2005). The market share of domestic film had significantly decreased since the late 1980s, and it was as low as 15.9% in 1993 (Korean Film Council 2009).

However, the rapid pursuit of globalisation by a civilian government since 1994 has substantially influenced the film industry because it contributed to the swift structural change of the film business. When the Kim Young Sam government (1993-1998) began to actively adopt the globalisation trend, it also initiated the resuscitation of the film business by applying the logic of globalisation to the culture and media industries. Facing a collapse in the domestic film industry, the

government began to use its legal and financial sources to promote content industries, in particular, the film industry, while continuously liberalising the cultural market (Jin 2006). The government first enacted the Motion Picture Promotion Law in 1995. The main section of this new law included diverse incentives, including tax breaks for film studios to welcome large conglomerates, such as Samsung and Hyundai, into the film industry, because the government believed these largest capitals become one of the main elements for the revitalisation of the domestic film industry. The government has also given financial support, either directly or indirectly, particularly to production industries.

The government's neoliberal cultural policies have expedited foreign investment in the domestic film industries, in both production and exhibition, unlike the previous market liberalisation which happened only in the distribution sector (Jin 2006). Foreign film majors had played a key role in direct distribution via their branches in Korea under the authoritarian regime since 1988; however, transnational cultural majors have invested in the Korean film industries, both in production and exhibition sectors, since the mid-1990s. They formed strategic alliances with domestic capitals to produce motion pictures in Korea. The Hollywood majors have developed an elaborate power structure to forge relations with independent producers, sub-contractors and distributors. By holding on to their power as international distribution networks, the majors tried to dominate the film industry (Aksoy and Robins 1992, 8-9).

Several TNCs indeed set up joint ventures with domestic capitals on a variety of levels for co-production, distribution, and exhibition. One of the largest joint ventures occurred between MCA and CJ of Korea, which was poised to jump onto the DreamWorks SKG bandwagon in 1995 (Brown 1995). Canal Plus also has a joint venture with the Hyundai Group for film production. In 1996, Diamond AD, a media subsidiary of Hyundai, which imported 20-30 films a year including blockbusters, signed a co-production and distribution deal with France's Canal Plus (Schilling and Wu 1998). Obviously, this new trend of foreign involvement in the Korean market was possible because the Korean government asked domestic companies to get involved in the global market to integrate the domestic cultural industries with the global cultural system. The government's changing cultural policies have resulted in a boom in domestic motion pictures through market competition and foreign investment (Jin 2006).

Against this background, the Korean film industry has been notable because it shows a consistent rise in its domestic market share, attendance at films, and the number of cinemas that have opened, since the late 1990s. The market share of domestic films produced by local producers reached 49.7% in 2001 and 63.8% in 2006 (Korean Film Council 2009). Korea has expanded its export of domestic films in Asia, and several Korean films have also received international film awards. For example, in 2007, Jeon Do-Yeon received the best actress prize at the Cannes Film Festival for her exquisite and ferocious performance as a grief-stricken woman in *Miryang* ("Secret Sunshine" in English), and the dark vampire thriller "Thirst" directed by Park Chan-Wook won the Jury Prize at Cannes in 2009 (Garcia 2009).

Korean cinema, however, has shown another downturn since 2006 right after the government changed its screen quota system in the midst of a free trade agreement (FTA) negotiation with the U.S. Arguably, a screen quota system had greatly

contributed to the recent development of the Korean film industry. However, the Korean government unexpectedly changed this crucial cultural policy under pressure from the U.S. before the FTA agreement between the two countries occurred in 2007. After several attempts to reduce or abolish the Korean screen quota system since 2003, the U.S. was finally able to reduce it, from 146 days to 73 days a year, from July 2006 onwards (Jin 2008). The U.S. government, MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) and Hollywood majors achieved what they wanted, and Hollywood subsequently boosted its presence and revenue in the Korean box office.

As a consequence of this new trend, the overall revenues in both domestic box offices and foreign exports have substantially plummeted. Among the top 10 grossing films (including both domestic and foreign) in the box office, there were only three domestic films in 2007, compared to seven domestic films in 2005 and 2006, respectively. The market share of domestic films has plunged from about 63.8% in 2006 to 50% in 2007 and to 42.1% in 2008 (Korean Film Council 2009). Unlike in previous years, local producers have experienced difficulties in finding funds and competing with foreign films; therefore, the Korean film industry has started to discuss whether it is in crisis.

How to Understand Hybridised Korean Films

Korea has witnessed the rise and fall of its film market due largely in part to its imbalanced relationship with the U.S. and Hollywood. While the market share of domestic films has achieved a strong growth, Korean cinema is still under Hollywood's massive influence as a recent decrease of its market share proves. In particular, since content is the most significant display of cultural hybridity, it is crucial to understand representation as an act of reconstruction rather than reflection, as Stuart Hall points out (1996),² and as an influence of hybridity in Korean cinema. However, Korean cinema is especially struggling with content issues in the midst of cultural hybridisation. Korean cinema was supposed to create new forms of local film through the hybridisation process; however, the reality is not there yet.

In order to determine the characteristics of contemporary Korean films, I analyzed domestic films in terms of film genres – a general categorisation of films – and themes – a basic conceptual or intellectual premise underlying the specific work of selected domestic movies. The sample films selected for this analysis are 210 films produced domestically between 1988 and 2008. The top 10 highest-grossing films, based on annual reports by the Korean Film Council, were chosen per year because only a few films dominated the market.³ During the period, there were three major historical events directly influencing the Korean film industry in the context of globalisation. First, the Korean government opened the film market to global film majors, particularly Hollywood majors in 1988; second, the Korean government initiated the resurrection of the Korean film industry through legal and financial measures starting in 1995 after the initiation of globalisation in 1994; and finally, the country changed the screen quota system in 2006, so it is reasonable to analyze the results of the changing cultural policy up until 2008.

The overall period can be analyzed in three different eras: first, the period 1988-1994 (70 films) – mainly the pre-globalised and/or the pre-hybrid period. Although

Hollywood majors had begun to penetrate the Korean film market since 1988, their major role was limited to distribution, so films produced domestically had been less influenced by Hollywood. The second is the period of 1995 to 2001 (70 films) – primarily the globalising and/or the hybridising era, when the government actively adopted the globalisation trend in order to survive against global competition. The most recent era is between 2002 and 2008 (70 films) – a continuation of the hybrid era, but different from the second period. The last two periods overlap primarily because domestic film producers have adopted so-called Hollywood styles, skills, capital, and effects, which have resulted in the hybridisation of domestic films; however, these two periods are also different because during the third period, independent producers, instead of large capitals, are major players after domestic-based transnational corporations (e.g., Samsung and Hyundai) left the production market, and the screen quota system has also changed. The last period is especially important in that local producers are able to create the third space to either challenge Hollywood films or develop local identities – people’s mentalities and socio-political agendas characterising a rather unique Korean society, including the South-North Korea division, democracy, and social class issues.

Hybridisation of Domestic Film Genres

Korea’s emerging national film industry is revealing itself to be open to struggle over its meaning and status at home and abroad, so questions of genre have a crucial role to play (Stringer 2005, 95). Movies, especially contemporary Korean films, are difficult to categorise because they often combine characteristics from different genres. However, grouping films by category is important because it may elucidate what producers and consumers of films do (Staiger 1997). Given the lack of serious scholarship on Korean film genres, to define a genre by identifying its differential characteristics is prerequisite to any serious discussion of Korean cinema (Min et al. 2003). In order to compare domestic movies with Hollywood films, including Westerns, action, comedies, horror, musicals, and romances movies, the Korean films chosen were categorised by their major characteristics based on Lopez’s categorisation (1993).

Slightly more than half of the movies analyzed (51.4%) were dramas, followed by comedy (20.5%), action (14.8%), and horror/thriller movies (7.6%). Others included adult (6 movies), science fiction (3), war (2), and Western (1). In Korea, only eight movie genres had made the top 10 grossing films, and the top three genres (drama, comedy and action) consist of as much as 86.7% of the highest-grossing movies. Although there are several hundred film genres, only a few of these genres are successful in Korea because movie makers produce familiar movies that can be imitated. This data shows that Korean audiences like dramas and comedies, and film producers heavily focus on a few successful genres. Although the situation has dramatically changed over the three different periods, it also confirms that drama, especially melodrama, is the most favoured genre, because it clearly reflects Korean society. As Hye Seung Chung (2005) points out, although the early Korean cinematic melodrama derives in part from the example of Hollywood, melodrama has become a national specificity due to the former’s focus on ordinary lower-middle and working class citizens as opposed to the latter’s gravitation toward upper-middle-class bourgeois housewives and widows:

[T]he Korean society of the 1950s and 1960s was torn apart by postwar poverty and chaos, so melodrama sided with underprivileged masses suffering social and familial alienation in the shadowy margins of modernization and economic development. Thus, in terms of its aesthetic characteristics and semantic ingredients, Korean melodrama was seldom divested of its realistic, socially conscious core (Chung 2005, 119).

The early Korean dramas not only hybridised Korean and Hollywood signifiers (costumes, languages, and soundtracks) but also mixed Hollywood melodramatic tropes and realist Korean aesthetics and issues. Therefore, this specific genre is well-developed, rich with unique national values, such as the division of the country, democracy, and its social values (e.g., class issues, income divide, and Confucian mentalities), which are distinctive to Korean culture, at least until the early 1990s. The situation has rapidly changed over the past several years, because Korean cinema has been commercialised, emphasising economic imperatives as in the case of Hollywood movies, rather than serious social issues and/or national values, in the midst of globalisation.

To begin with, during the first period, among the 70 films analyzed, drama dominated (52 movies, 74.3%), followed by action (8 movies), adult (5 movies), and comedy (3 movies). Drama, including melodramas, comprised the largest portion of domestic movies each year. In 1988 there were only two genres in the top ten grossing films: seven dramas and three adult films. In both 1989 and 1993, nine films were dramas. As a continuation of trends from the 1970s and 1980s, dramas were receiving warm attention from moviegoers. Several dramas, including *Rainbow Over Seoul* (1989), *Marriage Story* (1992), *Sopyonje* (1993), and *To You from Me* (1994) got distinctions as the top grossing films of their respective years. Since the mid-1980s, again, drama has become critical realism movies or social dramas, which deliver social messages, such as those based on student movements, class issues, and democracy. While melodramas and historical films with soft-core pornographic elements were the major trend, the 1980s and the early 1990s saw various directions searching for a new filmic aesthetic (Min et al. 2003, 65). However, since 1988 when Korea liberalised its market to foreigners, particularly for direct distribution rights to Hollywood majors, the Korean film industry had virtually demised.

In contrast, during the period 1995 to 2001, the number of Hollywood style action and comedy movies rapidly increased, while dramas significantly decreased. During this period, film producers still focused on dramas because the audiences loved traditional values, although several directors began to produce comedies. Among the 70 films, drama films still accounted for the largest share; however, the number of dramas decreased to 29 (41.1%), compared to 52 (74.3%) in the first period, while comedy and action movies soared. During the first period, there were only three comedy movies; however comedy consisted of 24.3% (17), followed by action movies (16; 22.9%). Comedy and action together consisted of 47.1% of the top 10 grossing films, which is a new phenomenon in Korean cinema history.

There were several significant changes in terms of film genres during the second period. The major characteristics of dramas changed from melodramas dealing with realism and social issues to dramas primarily dealing with entertaining crime and cop stories, as in many Hollywood movies. Some Korean film producers have focused on crime and police stories since the movie *Two Cops* (1993), which was the

first major crime and cop film in the 1990s, became a huge success. Regardless of the fact that some critics argued that it primarily copied “My New Partner,” a 1984 French movie, about rotten cops, several film producers have started to produce similar movies, including *Two Cops 2*, which ranked first among the top grossing films of 1996, followed by *Nowhere to Hide* (1999).

Meanwhile, the majority of comedies in the analyzed films were associated with love stories. The so-called romantic comedies, including *Dr. Bong* (1995), *Mister Condom* (1997), and *Jjim* (1998) signalled the arrival of a very popular genre in the late 1990s, although the stories often involved sexual discourse. As several crime and cop movies as well as comedies represent, the Korean film sector itself has hybridised with commercial Hollywood movies. Instead of maintaining its own unique drama genre, Korean cinema has utilised entertainment-driven films because making profits became a norm of the Korean film industry.

During the third period (2002-2008), this trend continued, while comedy was getting more popular. Among the 70 films analyzed, there were 23 comedies (32.9%), while there were 27 dramas (38.5%). Unlike in the second period, during 2002-2008 action movies plunged to seven (10%) primarily because major conglomerates who made blockbuster-style action films left the film market, while horror/thriller movies became popular in Korean cinema. There were only two horror/thriller movies during the first period; however, the number increased to six in the second period, and to eight in the third period. The comedy genre itself has changed, from romantic comedies to action comedies. Starting in the late 1990s, several comedy movies dealing with gangs as a new trend became popular, partially because movie production companies with lower budgets have turned their focus from action movies to action comedies. There were some successful gang comedy movies during the period 1995-2001, including *Attack the Gas Station* (1999) and *Kick the Moon* (2001). However, action comedy movies rapidly became one of the major genres in the most recent period. In 2002, *Marrying the Mafia*, a gang action comedy, ranked first among the top 10 grossing films of the year, and *Oh! Brothers* (2003), *Marrying the Mafia 2* (2005), and *My Boss, My Teacher* (2006) were also popular.

Meanwhile, since the mid-1990s, science fiction genre movies have appeared in Korean cinema (*Yonggary*, 1999; *Lost Memories*, 2002; and *D-War*, 2007). Some films have also utilised SF characteristics by using Hollywood style computer graphics (e.g., *The Host*, 2006), although they were mainly categorised as other genres. Among these, *D-War* (2007) became a top-ranked hybrid movie. *D-War*, directed by Shim Hyung-Rae, is a fantasy film with a heavy dose of computer graphics – best known in Hollywood SF movies, and the production budget was over \$50 million, including marketing costs (Kim I. 2007). Set in present-day Los Angeles in the U.S., the film depicts the mayhem that ensues when a giant dragon wreaks destructive havoc throughout the city. In a bid to capture the U.S. market, it cast American actors and was filmed in English, although the plot is based on a Korean legend about serpents that fight for the chance to become celestial dragons (Chun 2007). *D-War* is a hybridised Korean movie in several ways: the mix of Korean storyline, director, and capital with a Western location (LA), language (English), computer graphics, and major cast (Americans).

While admitting that *D-War*, as a hybrid movie, creates mixing, branding and the synthesising of different elements, the director mainly failed to create the third

place in that local culture could not generate new forms of culture, not homogenised, but the mixed third space by resisting global forces. Although one admires Shim's "anything Hollywood can do, I can do too" credo, this movie is nothing but another special-effect blockbuster (Wallace 2007). *D-War* attracted 8.4 million viewers in Korea; however, in the U.S. it earned only \$4.1 million, so the blockbuster movie's net loss is more than \$10 million because of the heavy marketing cost in the U.S. (Chosun 2009). Both aesthetically and economically, *D-War* has not been acclaimed in the global film market, because the movie is about producing a Hollywood movie by a Korean director, instead of overcoming Hollywood by creating a new form of culture resisting Hollywood dominance. *D-War* had a huge success in Korea mainly because Korean audiences, once touted for their sophisticated cinematic taste, have been drawn to movies that were entertaining enough but shallow compared to past box office successes. However, it could not become a global success due to its mix of a feast of A-grade F/X married to a Z-grade, irony-free script (Elley 2007), which means *D-War* seemed concerned with cracking the U.S. and international market on a technological level.

In Korean cinema, the hybridisation process has been active since the late 1990s when *Shiri* – the first Korean blockbuster movie funded by Samsung, which will be discussed in the next part – was made into a box-office hit. Many Korean production companies and directors have one after another tried to produce and even copy Hollywood style action movies. As one film critic points out (Choi 2005), "the Korean cinema is heading for Hollywood style blockbusters as if the globalisation of domestic films lies in the copy of Hollywood." However, Korean cinema has not sustained its glory because of its struggles in content, although a few commercial movies have been successful. Moviegoers dislike the copies of Hollywood genre movies, and domestic audiences still enjoy dramas reflecting national values and social issues, either hybrid or pure domestic genres, such as *The Way Home* (2002), *Taegukgi-The Brotherhood of War* (2004), and *Welcome to Dongmakgo* (2005).

Hybridised Film Themes and Cultural Globalisation

Theme is defined as a basic conceptual or intellectual premise underlying a specific work or body of works (Kaminsky 1985). Film themes determine whether the content of film includes some national identities, such as ideological conflicts, the South/North Korea division, political and social issues (including the military governments, student movements, unemployment, and immigration abroad), as well as some issues from traditional culture such as Confucianism, including its preference for boys and the strict social restrictions for women (Oh 1999). As Heather Tyrrell (1999) points out, theorisation around cinema and globalisation has largely been structured in terms of a basic opposition between Western commercial and culturally imperialist cinema, and the Third World's non-commercial, indigenous, and politicised cinema. National cinema concerns the lives and struggle of people in the nation, while entertainment predominates in Hollywood's commercial themes, including action, horror, Western and comedy.

Themes of Korean films, as one of the major standards in deciding movie characteristics, have rapidly shifted, as in the case of genres. Regarding themes, during the first period, more than 30% of films distinctively touched on social issues and national values embedded in the Korean context as dramas dominated box-office

hits. Several films, including North Korea's *Southern Army* (1990), *Silver Stallion* (1991), and *Tae Back Mountains* (1994) dealt with the issues of the South/North division and the Vietnam War. Several other films, including *Come Come Come Upward* (1989), *Seo Pyeon Jeoi* (1993), and *Hwa-eom-gyeong* (1993) showed national values such as Confucianism and Buddhism-related human stories. As a reflection of the democratisation issue under the military regime before 1993, several domestic films also dealt with social issues, including democracy, student movements, and class issues (*Passion Portrait* 1990; *Human Market, Oh, God!* 1989). During this period, drama was the major genre, and commercial Hollywood genres were not popular yet. Many domestic films still literally concerned the lives and struggle of people in the nation.

However, during the second period, themes touching on social and national issues had rapidly given way to crime action and comedy movies. Indeed, only two movies, *Shiri* (1999) and *Joint Security Area* (2000) dealt with North/South Korea issues, and *Hi, Dharma* (2001) talked about national values (Buddhism), while *A Petal* (1996) portrayed the brutality of the military regime that seized political power through massive massacre, which happened in Gwangju in 1980. Meanwhile, *A Hot Roof* (1995) portrayed feminism issues and *A Beautiful Youth Chun Tae Il* (1995) touched on the labour movement. As such, only a few films (10%) dealt with national and social issues. Domestic film producers could emphasise these issues, primarily because they were free from severe censorship, which was the major characteristic of the military regime. The concept of a Korean cinema was a counter-practice to the dominant films – commercially oriented U.S. films – in the domestic market, and a revolt against the oppression of the government's strong censorship. Korean filmmakers have begun to actualise the concept and the task of national cinema, dealing with subject matters that had been prohibited by censorship (Min et al. 2003, 11).

Among these, *Shiri* has been acclaimed as a new Korean cinema in style, because it successfully made a mixture of two different cultures between Korean history and Hollywood techniques and skills. It portrayed the confrontation between North Korean soldiers who were dispatched to South Korea as spies and South Korean anti-terrorist agents. The movie is not very original due to the fact that it was mixing Hollywood-style narratives and action with an old-fashioned yet refreshing Korean story. However, it contains a story that draws on strong Korean national sentiment to fuel its drama (Kim 2004), created as a deliberate homage to the "high-octane" action cinema made popular by Hollywood through the 1980s. This espionage action-thriller won over domestic audiences with a story centred on the continuing Cold War tensions between North and South Korea in the midst of loosening censorship, and its success was made possible by Hollywood style actions and blockbuster scale production costs, including the first helicopter scene in downtown Seoul in Korean cinema history. However, most films domestically produced during this period ignored serious issues that Korean society confronted, while focusing on more commercial genres such as comedy and action movies.

The most recent period is not much different from the period preceding it. Regardless of criticisms raised by several social groups, including film critics and college students, for the lack of unique films dealing with serious social issues or national values, film producers already embedded in commercial values continued

to produce films primarily based on economic imperatives. During this period, of course, a few films touched on important social issues; however, these films only consisted of 10% of the films analyzed. For example, *Silmido* (2003), *Taegukgi* (2004), and *Hanbando* (2006) are successful movies portraying the Korean War and South/North division issues. The movie *18-May* (2006) also portrayed the brutality of the Chun Do-Hwan regime that seized political power in 1980. With these exceptions, there were no particular films dealing with national values, social issues, or political ideologies.

Domestic movies have swiftly adopted Hollywood themes, focusing on entertainment instead of the lives and struggles of people in the nation. Blockbuster-style action and comedy movies all ranked among the top ten movies in recent years. The film industry could be considered an achievement for domestic cinema in the sense that it had attained a comparable status of special effects proficiency with Hollywood (Jin 2005). Until the early 1990s, national cinema worked with social, political, and cultural practices. Since its earliest beginnings, Korean cinema has developed the cinematic traditions of melodramas and social realism, which emerged from specific social contexts in Korean history; Japanese colonialism, South/North division, military governments, and strict censorship. However, with the democratic government starting in 1993, again, the Korean film industry has hardly concerned itself with these issues, which has resulted in the commercialisation of Korean cinema. Regardless of the fact that the country has achieved democratisation, several issues, such as national division, colonial legacy, and socio-economic divide are even worsening. Korean filmmakers have partially actualised the concept and the task of national cinema, dealing with subject matter that has been prohibited by censorship; however, Korean filmmakers mainly could not create new forms of culture. Hollywood films as global standards reign supreme, while a local cinema primarily tries to copy or follow what Hollywood has done. The primary trajectory of globalisation, not only in capital and structure but also in content, is still from the West to the local.

Of course, several directors, including Kwon-Taek Im, Joon-Ho Bong, Ki-Duk Kim, and Chan-Wook Park, who are considered the best contemporary auteur, have produced unique domestic movies, including several commercially successful ones. For example, “*Chiwaseon*,” which reflected Korean cultural traditions and values, achieved huge success. With his portrayal of 19th century painter Jang Seung-Up, director Kwon-Taek Im, won the Best Director Award at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. Chan-Wook Park who directed *Oldboy*, which also won The Grand Prix at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival, repeatedly returned to the same subject matter, which is “revenge,” as the central theme in his three consecutive films, including “*Thirst* (2009).” Some of these auteur movies have indeed achieved their successes not only with commercial investment, but also with a high level of cinematic literacy and creativity, so a few critics may say that Korean cinema is establishing unique content to overcome Hollywood’s dominance.

However, in very recent years, these auteur films had difficulties in attracting the audiences’ attention, primarily because the audiences have been drawn to movies that are entertaining enough but shallow compared to past box office successes. While Korean cinema was dominated by so-called “populace vanity” with people keen to trying to understand even the most abstruse films until the late 1990s and

very early 21st century, the audiences nowadays know what they want and no longer rave over a film just for the director's band power and colour (Shin 2009). For example, mixing drama with a right amount of comedy and tragedy, the two movies "Haeundae" and "Take Off" dominated the local box offices for months in 2009, although many professional film reviewers were reluctant to laud the two, mostly criticising the lack of logic and depth in their respective plots. However, these movies are without a doubt very clever and entertaining, but also very quasi-Hollywood and pro-commercial (Shin 2009). Instead of chanting auteur movies based on the brand name of directors, such as the same subject matter and a particular psychological or moral theme, and visual and aesthetic style, Korean movie-goers currently appear to favour those based on somewhat corny and easy-to-comprehend plots, feature good people, which mix several different genres with a touch of comedy. The audience's propensity has changed and they like hybrid movies, which are commercialised movies, and this has become a boomerang to ruin the diversity of Korean cinema, one of the key elements of strength.

Critical Interpretation of Hybridised Korean Cinema

Understanding cultural hybridity is crucial because it reveals the process which others enter and blend into another culture and then become incorporated into that local culture. It displays a process of cultural mutation or so-called cultural globalisation in contemporary cultural lives (Wang 2008). However, current theories of hybridity often ignore several significant elements, in particular, power relations, not only in terms of political-economic power relations but also in terms of cultural influences between two different cultures, as well as the nature of hybrid films.

Hybridity theory in Korean cinema distorts the inequality and imbalance of power relations between Hollywood and national cinema, while optimistically chanting or empowering the cultural capacity of the local in the processes of hybridisation. Unlike the optimism of the theories of cultural hybridity, which claim that hybridity implies the leading role of the local, the representation of the local culture gives way to connotations and value standards based on Western ideas (Wang 2008), so cultural hybridity is related to an unequal power balance. Several postcolonial theoreticians, such as Appadurai (1996) and Bhabha (1994), strike back at imperial dominance by recourse to hybridisation as an affirmative strategy of resistance and cultural pluralisation (Ryoo 2009). However, as seen in Korean cinema, local producers cannot guarantee pluralism and diversity, because the local film industry only produces a limited number of genres, especially commercially-driven Hollywood genres. The local (Korean cinema) is still not powerful enough to become the subject in the complicated and dynamic processes of hybridisation and cultural globalisation (Wang 2008), because many local producers have still mimicked what Hollywood has done, instead of creating new cultures to overcome Hollywood.

Hybridity is seen as a strategy of cooperation used by the power holders to neutralise difference; however, hybridity is another expression of globalisation dilating the negative impacts of Western forces (Wang and Yeh 2005). The birth of the third space requires more than a process of dialectic discourse and reflective interaction through which ideas, values, and class are negotiated and regenerated. Without this element, hybridity is not much more than a simple mixing and hybridising to include forms that blend different elements (2005, 188). Hybridity should be the

site of resistance against imperialist powers (Kraidy 2002); however, Korean cinema could not resist Hollywood's dominance in content. While admitting several well-made Korean films have boosted national cultural industries, many domestic films are not attractive in the global market because global audiences do not want to watch Korean-made Hollywood style movies. In fact, the export of Korean movies has significantly declined from \$75.9 million in 2005 to \$24.5 million in 2006 and \$12.2 million in 2007 (Korean Film Council 2009). The domestic-made commercial hybridised movies are not-global ready movies yet.

Korean cinema has experienced difficulties in creating new forms of movies. As the genres and themes of Korean movies demonstrate, many film producers have copied so-called money-making genre movies, such as comedy and horror movies, especially sexy and gangster comedy movies. Several young directors, who have been deeply influenced by Western cultures, have utilised a style that mixes indigenous cultural elements with regional and Western influences, and they are also responsive to contemporary domestic affairs and politics, as in the case of *Shiri* (1999) and *Joint Security Area* (2000) (Shin 2005, 56-57); however, in most cases, Korean cinema is another version of Hollywood. Instead of further developing aesthetic and social movies, hybrid movies have made commercially oriented entertainment movies. Many Korean film producers cannot produce a politically and aesthetically-viable third space in the midst of the commercialisation of domestic movies.

Unlike its promise that cultural globalisation breeds a creative form of hybridisation that works towards sustaining local identities in the global context (Shim 2006), the hybridisation of Korean movies primarily does not create new forms of the third space, nor does it maintain national values, such as traditional Korean mentalities and socio-cultural characteristics, against Western culture. Hybridity theorists believe that hybrid culture avoids becoming homogenous because the demands of the local still shape cultural products, and therefore, America's influence in other cultural industries is beginning to slip, although Hollywood remains a global powerhouse (Consalvo 2006). However, as Bhabha (1994) claims, hybridity should afford the emergence of new and legitimate identities, and these new identities should oppose those which hegemonic power desires to create locally. If hybridity simply means the mixture of two different cultures, Korean cinema would be one good case to prove this trend. However, as long as hybridity is about the creation of the third space beyond the simple fusion of two cultures, the local film industry has not successfully hybridised, with only a few exceptions.

Conclusion

Korean cinema has seemingly hybridised itself in mingling with two different cultures, in particular, with Hollywood. Consequently, the content of domestic films has significantly shifted, mainly from dramas formerly emphasising serious social issues to now utilising commercial entertainment formulas. However, as seen in recent years, the domestic film industry is not stable due largely in part not to create the new form of culture. The hybridisation itself is not necessarily bad for Korean cinema, because it is imperative, in some sense, and the mix of the two different cultures could create the new cultural space. The problem in Korean cinema is that the majority of films have by and large failed in making the third place, because the

display of the cultural factors of hybrid Korean films is western-centric and neglects Korean socio-cultural values to fit western tastes. It is perhaps naïve to attempt to maintain pure culture in some unadulterated form in the midst of globalisation; however, one also must remember that rootless hybrid cultural products, which are a rather simple mixture of two different cultures, cannot resist global forces.

In addition, the failure of the creation of the third space has been a problem domestically, because it has consequently affected audience propensity as well. The audiences, who have been major supporters of Korean cinema, have recently ignored auteur and independent movies, because they are now addicted to entertaining movies. They are bombarded by similar hybrid genre movies and are tamed by hybrid Korean movies whose major characteristics are commercial, which has resulted in avoiding traditional genres and themes. Korean movie producers have primarily pursued short-term commercial success, while disregarding the long-term effect, meaning they don't create the third space, and these commercial hybridised movies are not-global ready movies.

Cultural hybridisation in Korean cinema is happening as local producers interact and negotiate with global forces, and it is important to acknowledge that the interaction of the global-local culture should be understood through power conflicts, not only between two different political-economic entities, but also between two different cultures. In this regard, it is premature to say that domestic popular culture constructs its own cultural spaces, not as a simple mixture of two different styles, formats, and content, but as a resource to create new spaces, encompassing domestic cultural specificity as well as dominant western cultural genres. Korean cinema has become hybridised in production, in terms of style, special effects, and co-productions, but Westernised in content with its incorporation into globalisation since the mid-1990s. The global flow of images, though read actively by world audiences, is still very uneven and markedly one sided in its power to capture world markets (Shome and Hedge 2002). It also means that the Korean film industry broadly manifests the homogenisation thesis, which is the lack of hybridity emphasising the emergence of the third culture, therefore, contending the global force, which in this case would be, in Hollywood movies.

Notes:

1. It is essential to differentiate the concepts of global culture and national culture, which are building blocks of cultural hybridity. In this paper, I use the terms the local (culture) and the national (culture) interchangeably, against the notion of global culture, which is another term of American culture, symbolising commercial culture.
2. For example, the image of the woman on the cover of any magazine doesn't reflect what that woman really looks like. The image reconstructs something; but it isn't simply a woman. The surface meaning is an attractive woman, but the image was constructed to sell a specific kind of life-style that in turn demands the detailed use of commercial products and other commodities. Behind the image lies an entire world of beliefs, ideas, values, behaviours, and relationships that must be decoded and laid at the doorstep of transnational corporations, advertisers, cultural entrepreneurs and mythmakers (Hall 1996).
3. There are several significant domestic films other than top 10 high-grossing films, including independent and/or auteur films. Some of them are artistically successful, but not commercially. This paper does not consider these films as major target films to be analyzed, because they are mainly less hybridised movies. Of course, some issues of auteur movies will be discussed, as long as these films are related to the major theme of hybridity of Korean cinema.

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