



ECHOES IN TIME: KOREAN FILMS OF THE GOLDEN AGE AND NEW CINEMA

Goryeojang

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Director: Kim Ki-young

Production Companies: Korean Art Films Co.,

Kim Ki-young Production

Producer: Park Won-seok

Screenplay: Kim Ki-young

Cinematography: Kim Deok-jin

Editor: Kim Ki-young

Art Directors: Park Seok-in, Kim Hyeon-kyoon

Music: Han Sang-gi

Cast:

Kim Jin-kyu

Joo Jeung-nyo

Kim Bo-ae

Kim Dong-won

Lee Ye-chun

Park Am

Jeon Ok

South Korea 1963

89 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

Restored in 4K in 2019 by the
Korean Film Archive (KOFA)

Bong Joon Ho on Kim Ki-young

I discovered Kim's films in the 1990s. In Korea it was only after military rule ended at the end of the 1980s that a proper film archive was established, and it became possible to see older films again. That coincided with an explosion of cinephile culture in Korea, and it was at that point that Kim re-emerged as a very significant figure in Korean cinema. In 1997 the Busan film festival held a retrospective of his films, which introduced many international critics to his works – and many young cinephiles in Korea too. I became a huge fan. I was working as an assistant director at the time. I remember rummaging through various video stores trying to find his rare films.

Kim's death in a fire at his home in 1998 was shocking, but – and this may sound crass – it was also fitting that even his death was dramatic and cinematic.

After his death, interest in his films exploded. There was a retrospective at the Berlin film festival in 1998, and another at the Cinémathèque française in Paris in 2006, where I was a part of the panel. From the late 1990s through the 2000s Kim really took on an immortal standing in Korean cinema. What he gave to us Korean filmmakers was the originality of his visual style, and this uniquely raw attitude – a need to portray human desires honestly. Those, and the uncanny ways he dealt with cinematic space. These things were all shocking to me – especially the fact that he was able to create such works during the military regime. Of course, there had been similar filmmakers in other countries – like Luis Buñuel and Shohei Imamura, other masters of dealing with desire. I used to devour their films, but I was very surprised to learn that there was a filmmaker like that in Korea.

Kim's film *Goryeojang* (1963) is very similar to Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983) – it's about similar traditions. Kim and Imamura are really inseparable in the way they deal with desire and female characters. Women in Kim's films are not your femme fatale archetypes, though they are always stronger than the men – the maid in *The Housemaid*, for instance, is a very powerful working-class character. His male characters tend to be pathetic, pretentious and idiotic, and that's an influence you can see in my films as well. I think the way he depicts male characters is tied to his own life.

Sight and Sound, March 2020

The eccentricities of Kim Ki-young

In his heyday, Kim Ki-young (1919-98) was a perfect paradox: a man absolutely of his time but also a one-man counter-current. He flourished from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, the years when the South Korean film industry struggled to reinvent itself after the Korean War, latterly fighting the military government's censorship and production policies; he won awards and made several big hits but kept a distance from the mainstream. He responded to social issues but also worried away at his own idiosyncratic obsessions. Those included weak men emasculated by their own desires and strong women driven dangerously crazy when their machinations go wrong, so it's fair to call him a maverick. His tastes ran to the grotesque and grand guignol; many of his films feature pesky rats. Korean newspaper critics regularly denounced his excesses – in terms very much like those the British press deployed to abuse Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* in 1960.

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Key Scholar Lecture: Laugh Together,
Weep Alone: South Korean Cinema's
Ethical Ambiguities

Thu 5 Dec 18:20

Golden Age

The Coachman Mabu

Sun 1 Dec 11:40; Mon 16 Dec 20:50;

Fri 27 Dec 18:20

Mother and a Guest

Sarangbang sonningwa eomeoni

Sun 1 Dec 15:20; Sat 14 Dec 12:40

Goryeojang

Mon 2 Dec 18:20; Sat 21 Dec 20:50

The Devil's Stairway Maui gyuedan

Mon 2 Dec 20:45; Mon 16 Dec 18:15

The Seashore Village Gaenmaeul

Sat 7 Dec 20:50; Sat 21 Dec 15:00

A Bloodthirsty Killer Salinma

Mon 9 Dec 20:40 + intro by Professor Jinhee Choi,

King's College London; Sat 14 Dec 20:45

In partnership with

Korean Cultural Centre UK (KCCUK) and
Korean Film Council. Special thanks to Eunji Lee.

This landmark season was prepared in
collaboration with the Korean Film Archive (KOFA),
which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.
Featured in the programme are 12 digital
restorations and 5 digital remasters supervised by
KOFA, as well as unique 35mm prints from its
archival collection.



Korean Cultural Centre

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Too many of Kim Ki-young's films are lost, but it's clear enough that his career fell into three phases. After studying medicine and working in theatre he got his start in filmmaking with the United States Information Service during the Korean War. His earliest surviving film is the unsigned short *I Am a Truck* (*Naneun Truck Ida*, c.1952; it's an extra on the *Goryeojang* Blu-ray), a poetic documentary about recycling metal parts which equals anything that Western war-effort film units came up with. The earliest feature which survives more or less intact is his second, *Yangsan Province* (*Yangsando*, 1955), a traditional tragic melodrama set in the late Chosun Dynasty in which the spoilt son of a village chief tries to snatch a young woman from the farmer she was betrothed to. Kim virtually eliminates the sentimental aspects, dials the cruelty and sadism up a notch or two and stresses the dirt and squalor of rural life. Judging by these examples, this first phase was marked by his innate grasp of orthodox film language and his slight tendency towards the outré.

The second phase, his greatest, began with *The Housemaid* in 1960 and lasted a good 17 years. These are the films in which Kim prefers stylised plots and visuals over 'realism' and reaches for an understanding of human perversity through tales of escalating hysteria. *The Housemaid* set the pattern: a married man who teaches music to factory workers hires a country girl as housemaid and – fatally attracted – gets her pregnant. She induces a miscarriage by deliberately falling down the stairs (two-storey homes were a novelty at the time, and a status symbol) but then brazenly torments him in front of his wife (a home seamstress), his daughter (a polio survivor) and his young son (a nice kid with a dark streak). Kim's *mise en scène* expertly stages the action in confined spaces and uses recurrent motifs (sliding doors, a sewing machine treadle, high and low angles, rat poison) to build the hysteria until the film arrives at a punchline worthy of Pasolini's *Pigsty* (*Porcile*, 1969). Kim liked this plot so much he used it again and again, and not only in his own remakes *Woman of Fire* and *Woman of Fire '82* (*Hwa-nyeo '82*, 1982).

Two other standouts from this phase are the titles recently restored and published on Blu-ray by the KFA: *Goryeojang* and *leo-do*. Kim hadn't seen Keisuke Kinoshita's *The Ballad of Narayama* [1958] when he made *Goryeojang*; Japanese films were banned in Korea until the late 1990s and he likely read the published script. His version of the legend (villagers are carried up the mountain to die when they reach 70, to make way for the next generation) replaces the original's kabuki references with a belief system rooted in shamanist predictions and adds storylines about village vendettas and ten delinquent brothers. The highly stylised, studio-shot film is vastly more brutal and alarming than Kinoshita's. *leo-do* adapts (and apparently transforms) a Korean novel by Lee Chung-joon into a shamanist fable about a legendary island of women divers near Jeju and adds protests against environmental pollution. Both films are manifestos for Kim's eccentric ideas about propagation of the race by any means necessary, the post-Freudian ideas which led him to sex-war themes and new definitions of the death-drive.

The final phase of Kim's career saw him floundering to make ultra-low-budget quickies to meet government-imposed quotas for Korean production, tied in with the right to import lucrative foreign films. He dismissed most of the results, though they did include the fan-favourite *Woman After a Killer Butterfly* (*Salinabireul Jjotneun Yeoja*, 1978), a Mario Bava-esque three-episode story about a student haunted by menacing and/or lustful ghosts. Kim's eccentricities carry through, but the underlying seriousness is gone.

Tony Rayns, *Sight and Sound*, March 2020