# Contemporary Korean cinema

## IDENTITY · CULTURE · POLITICS

Hyangjin Lee

# Contemporary Korean cinema

Identity, culture and politics

## HYANGJIN LEE

# Preface

The growing interest in Korean cinema by critics and scholars outside of the country has increased since the late 1980s. Despite these positive signs for Korean film studies, so far there has been no in-depth study written in this area. This book attempts to fill this vacuum, by providing a critical examination of the role of Korean film as a cultural text of contemporary Koreans in both North and South so that it discloses the conflicting self-identities of a people of a politically divided nation. This study started as my Ph.D. dissertation entitled 'Common Culture/Divided Nation: A Comparative Study of North and South Korean Film'. It has been developed to include further aspects of textual analysis and historical sources, and, as such, it presents a comprehensive survey of Korean cinema as an expression of self-perception of that society and its history.

I wish to acknowledge the following individuals who have provided me with invaluable suggestions and useful comments. I am indebted to Dr Richard Howells and Dr Graham Roberts of the University of Leeds, and Professor Fred Inglis of Sheffield University, Dr Hyangsoon Yi of the University of Georgia, George Turner, Dr Philip Charrier and Dr Rick Siddle of the University of Sheffield. I am very grateful for the support of the School of East Asian Studies at the University of Sheffield in granting me research leave to complete this project. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Manchester University Press for its support and recommendations.

# Contents

此为试读，需要完整PDF请访问：www.ertongbook.com

Conclusion 188

# List of plates

Stills are reproduced courtesy of the Korean Motion Pictures Corporation, Chung Ji-Young, Chung Jonghwa, Han Sang Hoon, Lee Kwangmo and Pak Kwang Su.

# Introduction

This book examines the ways in which Korean film reveals the ideological orientation of the society in which it is created and circulated. To understand the workings of ideology in contemporary Korea as a divided nation, this study takes a comparative approach to the films from both sides, considering gender, nationhood and class. A comparative analysis of the representation of ideology in the selected films clearly discloses, on one hand, the conflicting ideas of contemporary Koreans on their self-identity as a divided nation. On the other hand, these films show that Koreans are still strongly committed to their common cultural traditions despite their current partition into two states and the resultant political conflicts between them.

Film is a vital medium in both South and North Korean societies. As a mass entertainment, film portrays society. It is not only documentary but also feature films that provide the audience with images of the society in which they live. When a film presents socio-historical material in a concrete and realistic manner, the distinction between cinematic images and reality often becomes blurred, and the audience is disposed to perceive the fictional world on the screen as mirroring the actual conditions of the existing society.

Film is a cultural text produced in society. Among a variety of issues raised by film as a cultural text, those related with ideology are of critical importance. According to Graeme Turner, ideology is 'the most important conceptual category in cultural studies'.[1] To those film theorists and critics who are concerned with the relationship between social realities and cinematic representation, ideological forces behind the manifest message of

a film text offer rich material for research. As Annette Kuhn points out, ideological analysis aims at a 'recovery and examination of the hidden work of ideology within film texts'.[2]

A filmic depiction of society cannot be fully understood in isolation from its dominant ideology. James Spellerberg emphasises that 'since its inception the cinema has rarely, if ever, been considered innocent of complicity in ideology'.[3] Film, similar to other cultural artefacts, tends to exhibit an underlying ideology that is embedded. Film can reflect and at the same time perpetuate the ruling ideology of society. Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) well demonstrates how a dominant ideology figures in various aspects of the content and form of a film. By portraying society in a positive light, film can effectively disseminate a particular ideology supportive of the existing political system, projecting the given conditions of society as coherent with its historical needs and demands. Thus filmic images of society inevitably harbour a reality gap.

Society portrayed in film is essentially a construct. It is not the existing society but a creation reflecting salient aspects of a prevailing ideology. Through film, the audience can experience an imaginary social world which is reconstructed by a film-maker from a particular point of view located in a particular historical moment. Hence, when the film is purposefully designed to approximate the actual conditions of society, its ideological effects dramatically increase because the audience tends to accept the mimetic correspondence between the image and its model as an authentic portrayal of social reality. As repeatedly stressed in film literature, the camera does not simply capture, record or report what happens in life, but it creates an imaginary world.[4] Even a work that appears faithfully to treat 'fact' has been filtered through the film-maker's interpretative eye, although it may be claimed to be an exact copy of reality and thus, has no intentional distortion or implicit bias. Despite its close resemblance to reality, film is fundamentally, the product of a complex mechanism fostered by various forces, political, economic, social and cultural; to say nothing of the film-makers' aesthetic perception. All these forces contribute to shaping a film in a certain ideological mould.

The present study analyses seventeen Korean films that treat socio-historical themes. History is a rich source of subject-matter. Film can accordingly reconstruct past events and situations in powerful verisimilitude. One of the historical materials widely available to film-makers is the folk tale. Traditional folk narratives are drawn on the collective, shared experiences of the community members in various realms of their lives. These narratives,

therefore, contain time-endured, familiar motifs and themes for the audience. By utilising such motifs and themes, film can effectively transform a fictional space into a 'desirable world' with an instant emotional appeal to the audience. For this reason, film often becomes a wishful, imaginary projection of desires, which audiences cannot actually fulfil in their own lives. It is, therefore, not unusual that audiences respond to the cinematic depiction of their past in historical films as if it were an ideal version of their present society, which they find full of ills and hardship.[5]

The use of historical materials in film serves a double purpose. A cinematic reconstruction of past society puts history in a new perspective, and by doing so, it provides insights into the present state. While this study investigates these two interrelated aspects of the historical film, it is particularly interested in the latter effect: ideological messages that the film conveys about present society through its images of the past. By examining the ways in which previous experiences are reinvented on the screen, we can discern the subtle and complex operations of contemporary ideologies in everyday life. In historical films, specific sets of socio-political concerns of the present moment are often interwoven with seemingly timeless storylines.

A central methodological question raised in this study is this: How can we critically read the cinematic text to grasp its underlying messages about present society? An appropriate answer to this question would be one based on an approach that probes the link between the operations of ideology in the text and the historical and cultural contexts of the text. In this sense, film is a socio-cultural form of practising ideology. To analyse the ideological elements of each selected film, this study explores, first of all, in what way specific socio-historical material is reconstructed in the film. Second, it examines the latent meaning of the film text, given the tension between the specific ideological needs of the present society and the inherited cultural tradition that can be assumed to condition the audience's general attitude toward its society. These questions, however, do not aim at an 'objective' historical truth but rather an interpretation of the past created through a constructed ideology. This ideology tends to reflect contemporary societal norms and values.

To approach the most compelling ideological issues for the contemporary Korean people as a divided nation, this study investigates three groups of films from the North and the South. The first group deals with the cultural tradition from pre-modern Korea shared by both sides; the second set of films is concerned with the historical course of the national division and its

aftermath; the third category commonly depicts the social realities of the divided nation. My analysis focuses on the character portrayal and main themes of the films. A comparative reading of South and North Korean films exhibits the patterns of similarities and dissimilarities in terms of their ideological orientations. Films dealing with the same subject-matter are particularly useful because different perceptions and expressions between the South and the North Korean film-makers are explicitly contrasted. The significance of ideological colouring is clearly discernible in such films. Moreover, it can be further related to the general discussion of the cinematic representation of society.

One of the recurring themes of Korean cinema is the burden of the ideological heterogeneity between the communist North and the capitalist South. Ironically, the complexity of this theme stems from the keen awareness Koreans have of their cultural homogeneity, which, rooted in their shared tradition from the past, has remained unchanged in essence despite the recent political partition. The co-existence of these contradictory strands characterises contemporary Koreans' self-perception, giving rise to two distinct traits in Korean films. On the one hand, the regimes in the South and in the North are both depicted as claiming historical legitimacy over the other.

On the other hand, Korean films from both sides subtly adopt the rhetoric of 'one nation', justifying the necessity to reunify the country. This rhetoric, in a way, reflects the genuine aspiration of the Korean people to restore their cultural homogeneity and solidarity, which, they believe, transcends the current ideological confrontation. The idea of 'one nation' is deeply valued by the public on both sides, as it appears to be grounded in their firm sense of ethnic homogeneity. The idea of ethnic unity is bolstered by the fact that the Korean people maintained one polity in the Korean peninsula for more than a millennium. Their political unity ceased as recently as 1945 with the Liberation from Japanese colonial rule. The long history of single nationhood explains the strong ethnic cohesiveness among Koreans even after the half century of division into capitalist and communist states. The idea of 'oneness' in contemporary Koreans' self-identity is epitomised in their frequent allusion of their country to an extended family. While the metaphor of familialism is not unique to Korean culture, its impact in political ideology is unusually powerful and deeply rooted.

Familialism is commonly used in the South and the North Korean films as a way of defining 'proper' or 'desirable' relations among individuals and between an individual and state. This kind of cultural norm derived from the common Confucian past

confirms the lasting power of cultural heritage that resists the heterogeneous political ideologies that have been forcefully implemented in relatively recent times.

This study is informed by several theories of ideology, which provide basic terminology to describe not only unequal power relations in society but also key factors determining such relations, including gender, class and national identity. Prime consideration is given to those theories that are directly relevant to political film studies, such as Marxism and post-structuralism/ postmodernism. These schools of thought all address the significance of film as an ideological apparatus. They approach film essentially as a constructed image of society that is sifted through its ruling ideology. Therefore, the insights they provide into the relations between ideology and the cinematic construction of social realities serve as indispensable conceptual resources in this book.

In film studies, scholarly interest in the subject of film and ideology has evolved into a distinct tradition of political criticism. Marxism was crucial in establishing the fundamental theoretical framework for political film studies. Arguing that social existence determines consciousness, Marx formulated the basic tenet that the base determines the content and form of the superstructure. This definition of the relationship between the base and the superstructure constitutes the foundation of the Marxist theory of culture and ideology. According to Marx, 'culture cannot be the primary force in history, but it can be an active agent in historical change or the servant of social stability'.[6] In *The German Ideology*, he claims that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling class: i.e. the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force'.[7] Hence he views mass culture as one of the 'ideological forms of the superstructure' and the function of ideology as concealing the realities of class exploitation and oppression of bourgeois society.[8] In this view, ideology is 'false consciousness' or 'illusion', which is no more than an expression of the interests of the ruling class.[9]

The Marxist concept of 'ideology' is based on economic materialism, whose deterministic tendency has drawn much criticism recently from cultural studies. John Storey pointed out that the deterministic approach to ideology often results in a 'vulgar Marxist "reflection" theory of culture'.[10] For Marxist sociologists, ideology functions largely as an instrument to 'misrepresent "the real"' and to 'mask any political struggle', whereas for those in cultural studies ideology is 'the very site of struggle'.[11] Hence

cultural theorists reject the Marxist notion of ideology, shifting the focus of their discussion from the economic basis of ideology to its cultural implications. John B. Thompson, for example, said that to study ideology means 'to study the ways in which the meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination'.[12]

Despite this criticism, Marxism – especially its notions of superstructure and ideology – continues to be the main source of inspiration for a number of critics interested in the socio-political aspects of film.[13] Among the various branches within the Marxist tradition, the Althusserian approach to ideology is most illuminating in analysing the cinematic representation of society. Louis Althusser's idea of ideology provides a useful and relevant conceptual ground for the present study.

Althusser defines ideology as 'the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'.[14] This definition provides theoretical guidance for critics who explore the issues of why and how dominant ideology functions to legitimise the existing society. Althusser helps to situate film within the larger realm of the interplay between history and ideology. He has revised some of the key concepts in classical Marxism in such a way that they become more pertinent to the study of the ideological manipulation of film. Neo-Marxism has incorporated many of Althusser's ideas and has become a powerful basis for today's political film criticism.

An ideological critique of film relies specifically on Althusser's explanation of social formation and relative autonomy of the superstructures. The notion of the relative autonomy of the superstructures is an important element in Althusser's theory of ideology. His mention of the 'contradiction and overdetermination' between the base and the superstructure highlighted the reciprocal action of the superstructures on the base.[15] Informed by the works of Fredriech Engels and Antonio Gramsci, Althusser introduced this notion to revise the traditional model of economic–materialistic Marxism. By adding autonomy to the superstructures, Althusser took a major step from the original Marxist definition of the term 'superstructure'.[16] Althusser's theory enables film critics to address how ideology operates historically in its functional relation with the economic, political and cultural aspects of class society. His theory of ideology has indirectly helped to thrust political film studies into the post-structuralist/ postmodern era.

In some respects, Althusser's revision of Marxist theory, and especially his notion of the 'relative autonomy' of the superstructure, echo the work of Gramsci, which opposes the economic

determinism of Marxism. Gramsci devised the concept of hegemony which refers to the 'domination' and 'intellectual and moral leadership' that wins consent to unequal class relations.[17] Gramsci maintained that the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups depends not only on economic forces but also on cultural or ideological forces. He conceived the popular culture as a 'site of struggles between the forces of resistance of subordinate groups, and the forces of incorporation of dominant groups in society'.[18] By shifting the focus from economy to culture, Gramsci attacked, as Althusser did, the Marxists' dogmatic and mechanistic reduction of the 'superstructure' to materialistic factors.

Post-structuralism and postmodernism have recently offered another important conceptual basis for political film criticism. While Marxist film theorists concentrate on economic and class conflicts, post-structuralists and postmodernists tend to emphasise hegemonic coalitions formed on the basis of ideological and cultural interests. The Marxist groups criticise the latter for replacing the materialistic relation between the exploiting and the exploited with the non-materialistic relation between the dominating and the dominated. Marxist theorists also claim that the postmodern theory of domination and resistance stresses the uniqueness and individuality of the film, which is nothing but a redundant explanation.[19] These disagreements serve as indispensable theoretical resources in contemporary political film studies. Commonly centred around the notion of 'power', Marxism, post-structuralism and postmodernism provide film critics and film historians with differing yet equally useful paradigms with which to explore the ideological elements of the cinematic text.

In essence, post-structuralism and postmodernism have broadened the context for discussing the issues of the power relationship between the dominating and the dominated. A good example of the salient differences between post-structuralism and postmodernism, and Marxism, can be cited from the feminist analysis of the image of women in the mainstream films. Feminist filmmakers and critics show that the suppression of women in patriarchal society is reinforced through more than one channel. This multichannelled mechanism of suppression operates through economic exploitation, political exclusion and cultural discrimination of women.[20] The invisible orchestration of all these different practices of political power on women demonstrates that economic class is no more than one of the many categories of society's power structure. Contemporary political film critics take a similar stance to the feminist group on the issues of power. They attempt to differentiate various kinds of oppression represented in film. In

the Marxist film studies, 'seeing films politically' means divulging the workings of a single factor, that is, the economic relation between the film and class society. In contrast, post-structuralists and postmodernists insist that films should be examined in the light of the interrelated networks of divergent elements, which range from politics, economy and culture to ideology.

For the last two decades, film theorists oriented towards post-structuralism or postmodernism have critically informed film studies. They have been directly affected by the ongoing debate on 'postmodern culture'. Many theorists have enriched this debate by proposing different perspectives regarding the central concerns of ideology. Among numerous works touching on this subject, Foucault's theses on the relation between power and knowledge have played a vital role in articulating the post-modern cultural discourse. His Nietzschean concept of genea-logy, which traces the power–knowledge relation, has drawn much attention from cultural studies and has created a con-siderable resonance among political film critics.[21]

Foucault's 'genealogical' study of power has introduced new concepts of 'domination' and 'resistance' to post-modern film studies.[22] The meanings of these concepts are succinctly sum-marised by his statement: 'as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance'.[23] The term 'resistance' in the cinematic context refers to refusing the 'domination' of the film's ideological effects. It is a denial of the repressive power that is located not only in economic and political sites but also in cultural and ideological sites. The concepts of domination and resistance, along with the idea of hegemonic coalitions, are enthusiastically received by the contemporary film critics who study the ideological and cultural struggle as inscribed in the film text. They apply Foucault's theory to all aspects of the film-producing and film-viewing activities.[24]

Foucault's argument on power–knowledge relations has had a broad impact. In his Orientalism, the prominent critic Edward W. Said, for example, remarks that Foucault's idea is useful in identifying a Western discourse on the Orient.[25] Foucault main-tains that the discourse of sexuality constitutes knowledge of sexuality and that the history of sexuality reveals the power–knowledge relations of sexuality. Modelled on this theory, Said describes 'Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restruc-turing, and having authority over the Orient'.[26] In other words, 'the Orient' is a European 'invention' and 'the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience'.[27]

As illustrated by Said's application of Foucault's theory, the

ideological interpretation operates most effectively with films which deal with socio-historical materials. In this sense, Foucault's ideas are pertinent to the present study. Above all, they help to justify why we need to look at the hidden meanings of the texts from multiple perspectives. Second, they suggest that the most meaningful way of comprehending the ideological aspect of a film is to analyse the functional relation of the contextual elements of the film. This strategy enables us to locate the ideological sites within the film text where power is exercised at particular historical moments.

Film can, of course, be studied solely for its internal aesthetic qualities. Yet, the present study does not embrace an exclusively aesthetic approach to film. So far as film functions as a cultural text in society, this study shares the interests of political film critics in relating the film text to its external contexts. A cultural text cannot be properly understood without looking at the power contestation among individuals or between individuals and their community, which is not always observable from the surface of their social interactions. In reading the latent ideological meanings of Korean films, this study treats the works as stories told by the Korean people about their daily lives, investigating their complex implications by situating them in specific temporal and spatial contexts.

For an interpretative procedure for the latent meanings of the film texts, the present study subscribes to hermeneutic and semiotics. Among the previous hermeneutic studies of cultural texts, Clifford Geertz's is of particular importance to this study. His essay, 'Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight' supplies diverse conceptual insights into and practical strategies for handling film as a cultural text. As Geertz puts it, the culture of a people is 'an ensemble of texts'.[28] Furthermore, the concept of culture is essentially a semiotic one, and the analysis of culture is not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.[29] In adopting a hermeneutic perspective, the present study pays particular attention to its limitation of which Geertz rightly reminds us in his study of Balinese life: a hermeneutic approach is not to be regarded as '*the* master key' to the text.[30]

As a methodological apparatus, the hermeneutic approach has several advantages over the traditional methodologies drawn from natural sciences. First of all, a hermeneutic understanding of cultural texts is fuller and more dimensional than the 'scientific' explanations of social lives. The hermeneutic approach allows the researcher to focus on why, as well as how, people construct their lives in a particular fashion. Experiential meaning

in social phenomena, especially relating to the question of why people act the way they do, cannot be fully examined from experimental methods that rely upon statistical measurements. Second, the hermeneutic approach exempts researchers from arguing on the quality of texts. The central concern of the hermeneutic approach is to find out how the subjects make a sense out of cultural texts, not to make a value judgement of the texts with the researcher's yardstick. Works of art are not an exception to their fundamental premise of hermeneutics. As Geertz says, 'works of art are elaborate mechanisms for defining social relationships, sustaining social rules, and strengthening social values'.[31] From the hermeneutic point of view, how and why people impart a significance to works of art in their local context should be the locus of investigation.

The hermeneutic approach has a dual task of reinterpreting the interpretation. This prime characteristic of the hermeneutic methodology is clearly expressed by Geertz: 'societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them'.[32] The reader of the text who gains an entry into the story constitutes an essential component in the mechanism of interpretation. After all, understanding meaning in cultural texts is a retelling of stories of the people from the researcher's point of view. Hans-Georg Gadamer conveys this idea succinctly: 'understanding belongs to the being that which is understood'.[33]

The hermeneutic paradigm of analysis helps to secure the reader's place in the whole process of interpretation of cultural texts. The importance of interpretation, as is argued by hermeneutics is noted by film theorists such as Dudley Andrew, who, in *Concepts in Film Theory*, remarks: 'cinematic figures openly require the work of interpretation to complete them. Interpretation is integral to the specific structure of discourse they constitute'.[34] Andrew's argument indicates that to complete films as cultural texts, there should always be the subject to interpret them. The complexities of the hermeneutic methodology involve these multi-layered perspectives of the subjects and the researchers. This once more reinforces the multi-faceted and multi-dimensional nature of the hermeneutic approach.

In exploring the deeper meaning of a cultural text, a hermeneutic perspective can be further strengthened by Barthes's methodological model. Compared with scientific film semiotics, which is capitalised on by the works of Christian Metz, Barthes's theory provides a more persuasive and applicable paradigm for researchers who are interested in the ideological aspects of film texts. Obviously, Barthes is dissatisfied with the semiotic framework, which is strictly based on linguistic rules. Unlike early