

The successors of *Arirang*

A young Korean is led away from his village, bound by a rope pulled by a Japanese policeman. He used a sickle to beat the henchman of a sadistic landowner, who was terrorising the villagers, to death. This is how the ending of Na Un-gyu's film, *Arirang*, goes. Legend has it that when the film was released in 1926 during the Japanese occupation, its Korean spectators wept in cinemas and sang the folk song, "Arirang", in chorus.

This film, now generally considered to have marked the true start of Korean cinema, is highly representative of one of its main characteristics: it reflects the context and social reality of the time, while expressing the emotions and desires of its audience. In *The Ownerless Ferryboat*, another hero of the silent era, Lee Gyu-hwan, evoked the anger of a population suffering the atrocities of Japanese imperialism in this film about a boatman who kills a railway engineer. Subsequently, the first Korean talkie, *Histoire de Chunhyang* (1935), was an adaptation of a traditional story that also evoked contemporary suffering and sadness.

In the 1960s, following a period of mass destruction caused by the Korean war (1950-1953) that took place soon after the end of Japanese colonisation (1945), film directors like Shin Sang-ok, Yoo Hyon-mok, Kim Soo-yong, Kim Ki-young and Lee Man-hee brought about what came to be known as the "Renaissance" of Korean cinema. Their talent was demonstrated through a wide variety of styles ranging from art-house productions to mainstream films, all of which shared the common characteristics of reflecting social reality and speaking on behalf of the Korean people.

This artistic tradition, which could be described as "realist", was put on hold in the 1970s because of the strict censorship imposed by the dictatorial regime that reigned during this period. Under the regime's watchful eye and controlling hand, the only productions authorised were melodramas and action films that avoided specific local settings, or works of propaganda that served the sole function of meeting the quota required to enable foreign films to be imported. Korean cinema inevitably plunged into a deep depression that it struggled to recover from, which affected both the industry itself, as well as artistic quality. At the turn of the 1980s and then again towards the middle of that decade, Bae Chang-ho and Lee Jang-ho on the one hand, and Park Kwang-su and Jang Sun-woo on the other, used their own unique styles to capture reality on film once again and, in so doing, lifted national cinema out of its long-term lethargy. Joining them in their regeneration efforts, their older counterpart, Im Kwon-taek, produced a number of highly modern works which set him apart from his generation.

Then, in 1988, the country's film industry reached a key turning point when American films began to be introduced directly by their distributors. Consequently, Korean films found themselves having to compete with Hollywood productions. The entire system started to totter, before completely collapsing around 1992. The fight for the "screen quota" turned out to be crucial to setting Korean cinema – by then in a critical situation – back on its feet. Acting on their own initiative, film directors campaigned for enforcement, or more precisely a revival, of a law that had become a dead letter. In so doing, they created the conditions that would enable Korean cinema to prosper towards the end of the 1990s.

Imagination and new talent, both freed from censorship following the country's democratisation, brought new energy to national cinema, which henceforth would bravely withstand the presence of American productions on the local market. Today, names like Kim Ki-duk, Hong Sang-soo, Park Chan-wook and Bong Joon-ho cross borders.

A key characteristic of today's Korean cinema is its diversity. That said, Korean directors have continued to speak on behalf of their fellow citizens and to express their emotions and desires, regardless of the distinct genres and techniques they employ. Singing the songs the audience wants to sing: this is the spiritual legacy they have received from the past and which drives them in their work.

Lee Chang-dong