Undomesticated Visions:
A History of South Korean Independent Women's Films, 1974–2004

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Abstract

Women's and feminist film practices in South Korea are normally considered to have emerged in the mid-1990s, when class issues and nationalism no longer drew serious attention from the country's dominant intellectual discourse. This view tends to imply that women's filmmaking practices were virtually nonexistent before the 1990s. In opposition to the conventional view, this work shows that women's filmmaking with feminist intent arose in the 1970s in South Korea, contemporaneous with Western cine-feminism. It also argues that South Korean women's films have developed a unique narrative discourse in which patriarchal male-centrism sustaining class politics and nationalism is challenged and deconstructed. To illustrate these points, this study calls attention to the fact that women's filmmaking has taken place in the noncommercial independent cinema sector since the 1970s in South Korea. By examining four independent women filmmakers—Han Ok-Hee, Kim So-young, Byeon Yeong-Ju, and Ryu Mi-Rye—and their films, it maintains that independent women's films have made continuous efforts to subvert male-centered ideologies, seeking new positions for women.

Keywords: women's film, feminism, Korean national history, independent cinema, women filmmakers

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Introduction

Calling it a "long tradition" does not seem adequate to describe women's and feminist film practices in South Korea. It was not until the early 1990s that the notion of "women's films" appeared in Korea's cultural milieu. Critics concur that the emergence of the women's film and renewed interest in women's issues coincided with the waning of the class issues and nationalist thought which had predominated the intellectual discourse at the end of the 1980s (Kim Soyoung 2005, 186). Indeed, the annual Women's Film Festival launched in 1997 has carved out a new cultural field where intensive debates regarding women's filmmaking and film viewing. Witnessing the ardor of participants in the first Women's Film Festival held in Seoul, Debbie Zimmermann, director of *Women Make Movies*, reportedly said, "It's just like our 70s" (Kim Soyoung 2005, 186).

Implicit in the historical account above is the assumption that women's filmmaking practices were non-existent or not worth talking about before the 1990s. In other words, class politics and nationalism dominated the intellectual discourse of the 1980s, allocating no room for women's issues and stunting the development of woman's film. This is related to a rather complicated historiographic question. While it is true that intellectuals were preoccupied with issues of class and nationalism under military regimes (1961-1979, 1980-1987) and the quasi-military government (1988-1992), one cannot deny that women's filmmaking did exist from the 1970s, as I will discuss later at greater length. The problem is that although the age of class struggle and nationalism passed, the historiography built upon those two factors still looms large, blocking women's films from the past from being restored. Historiography oriented toward class politics and nationalism is liable to ignore the presence of women's films, which deviated from such themes. More importantly, the same historiography glosses over the fact that the woman's film in South Korea has formed its peculiar thematic by challenging class politics and nationalism and by attacking their underlying ideology of patriarchal male-centrism.

The following discussion aims to show that women's films in South Korea emerged contemporaneous with Western cine-feminism, which Zimmermann unwittingly singularizes as "our 70s," and that once established, it has constructed a unique cinematic discourse in which misogynistic film practices and male-centered national historiography and film narrative are deconstructed.

Women's Film

The only Korean terminology which corresponds to the term "women's film" is *yeoseong yeonghwa*. Meaning women in general, *yeoseong* refers to a socioculturally constructed female identity and connotes the social roles and activities performed by women. *Yeoseong yeonghwa*, therefore, indicates films that render women's social experiences. The earliest example of the self-proclaimed *yeoseong yeonghwa* is found in the film advertisements for *The Woman Judge* (*Yeopansa*), produced by Hong Eun-Won and released in 1962, as "the best *yeoseong yeonghwa* this year" (Byun 2001, 272). Tackling a real-life scandal in which a woman judge committed suicide, *The Woman Judge* has been considered a shift from melodramatic to the more "serious" realities of contemporary women. This illustrates that from its inception, *yeoseong yeonghwa* appealed to the social consciousness of viewers.

Yeoseong yeonghwa reemerged in the 1980s when some male commercial filmmakers, such as Chung Ji-Young, director of *A Woman on the Verge* (*Wigi-ui yeoja*, 1987) and Park Chul-Soo, director of *Mother* (*Eomi*, 1985), dealt with women's issues, especially prostitution, extramarital affairs, and domestic violence (Byun 2001, 272). Still the representation of women and women's issues in *yeoseong yeonghwa* of the 1980s adopted a visual style that catered to male voyeuristic desire. By the 1990s, however, *yeoseong yeonghwa* had enlarged its scope with the coming of nationwide civil democracy and perhaps also in response to the massive influx of film feminism from the West (Byun 2001, 272). Since that time, *yeoseong*

yeonghwa has functioned not only as a tool of cinematic representation of women's issues, but also as a critical discourse reinterpreting the female spectatorship marginalized in South Korean film historiography. In valorizing such newly-found female spectatorship, film director and critic Kim Soyoung considered *yeoseong yeonghwa* identical with Anglophone "women's films," and suggested that the term "women's film" indicates the alternative films that are "more consciously oriented towards women's issues" on the one hand, and the popular films addressed to female audiences, such as the 1960s melodramas on the other (Kim Soyoung 2005, 189).

The present discussion focuses on the original ethos of *yeoseong yeonghwa*, which is social consciousness. Although South Korean melodrama appealed to female audiences, it is evident that these films were incapable of raising consciousness among female viewers about the sociopolitical conditions in which they were situated (Byun 2001, 272). This may explain why the appellation failed to earn recognition among filmmakers and audiences during the 1960s-1970s, the heyday of melodrama. Until its nominal resurgence in the 1980s, the ethos of *yeoseong yeonghwa* was encapsulated in such expressions as *yeoseong munje* (women's problems) or *yeoseong uisik* (women's consciousness). Both terms indicated the growing self-consciousness among South Korean women of the patriarchal base of the state's dominant ideology that virtually dismissed women as second-rate citizens. The reality of institutional discrimination against women unfolded in the 1970s, and led to the birth of the women's movement in South Korea.

The women's movement began as part of the democratic trade union movement. In 1972, Ju Gil-ja was elected as the first female president of a trade union in South Korean history, replacing the male leader of the pro-management union at the Dong-Il Textile Company in the city of Incheon. In February of 1978, there was an incident with international as well as national repercussions, when the company dispatched a gang of thugs and male workers to raid the poll sited on the day of election for union officers, primarily female workers. *Asian Labor* reported the incident as follows:

> The [election] meeting could not be held because the union room was being ransacked by a gang of thugs, who included male workers at the plant. When the women appeared, they were beaten and kicked and buckets of excrement were thrown at them, rubbed into their clothes and into their faces. Policemen who had been called to the plant by the management stood by and watched without interfering. When the women appealed to them for help, the policemen shouted at them to keep quiet. . . . The workers at the Dong-Il plant, and all others who attempt to organize themselves democratically to bargain collectively with their employers and stand up for their rights, face a strong and well-managed alliance of management, government and certain union officials, whose mechanisms for suppressing the workers' demands are brutal and effective (Chun 2003, 127).

Later known as the Dong-Il Incident, this episode revealed how women workers had to confront not only the dictatorial state and the unfriendly corporate management, but also the abusive male colleagues who resented the female leadership in the formation and management of the labor union. The differentiated social status of working class women from their male companions also offered a crucial momentum in the formation of the social consciousness of South Korean women in general. The 1970s were the period in which the newly acquired *yeoseong uisik* (women's consciousness) manifested itself in women's social actions and artistic activities, including filmmaking.

The term "women's film" in the present discussion refers to those *yeoseong yeonghwa* that originated from women's social consciousness. The establishment of the women's film cannot be considered apart from women film directors as the bearer of this social consciousness. Film directors are also a product of history and project their personal experiences onto their film texts. This rationale holds true for the historicity of the women's film. The theme and style of the woman's film changed along with the transformation of women's consciousness and the emergence of a new generation of women filmmakers.

Han Ok-Hee and the Kaidu Club

Han Ok-Hee debuted as a founding member of the Kaidu Club (1974-1979), a women filmmakers' collective. Proclaiming itself to be a "woman's experimental film group," the formation of the Kaidu Club was a pioneering action by women artists, virtually unprecedented in South Korean cultural history. Named after "Kaidu," the legendary Mongolian empress (An 2001, 202), the Club had three notable artistic visions. First, the members shared an antagonism toward the standard "feminine melodramas" which represented women's film as a genre at that time (Han 2006, 9). Second, echoing the 1960s Off-Broadway movement's anti-establishment spirit, the Kaidu Club attempted an "off-Chungmuro (the center of the South Korean film industry)" movement, believing that short, experimental films would challenge the hackneyed conventions of industry cinema (Han 2006). Finally, the group proclaimed a "feminist film movement," in which their films tapped into the growing sense of women's consciousness in South Korean society (Han 2006).

Like Han, other members such as Kim Jeom-Sun, Lee Jeong-Hee, Han Soon-Ae graduated from Ewha Woman's University, one of oldest and most prestigious women's educational institutions in Seoul (An 2001, 203).[1] The mode of self-expression afforded to the female students differed from that of female workers: as seen with the Dong-Il incident, female workers in the 1970s relied on collective action such as unionism to make their economic demands, and by so doing were able to sustain their class identity. By contrast, the female students were far from being organized as a collective whole, and were disparagingly thought of as a privileged group, exempt from the immediate concerns of the day (Kwon 2005, 131). In any case, neither mainstream society nor working class accorded them a legitimate membership. Thus, the women's youth culture that Han carved

1. The number of the students who attended colleges and universities throughout the 1970s were reportedly 891,328. Out of this, only 42,000 were female students (*Chosun Ilbo*, October 25, 1999).

out in the 1970s was a highly contested arena where marginalized female intellectuals strove to affirm their gender identity via cultural activities.

While majoring in Korean literature at Ewha Woman's University (BA 1967-1971, MA 1971-1973), Han also displayed a keen interest in progressive ideas, such as the women's suffrage movement in the West and New Leftism of the United States in the 1960s. The biography of Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst and the writings of Angela Davis and Herbert Marcuse drew Han Ok-Hee to contemporary activist thought, especially radical feminism, in her early 20s. Asked why she became passionate about radical politics, Han said her turbulent family history, including the stories of her father's remarriage and her sister's tragic marital life, awakened her to the concept of social rather than personal responsibility for women's problems.[2] Prior to filmmaking, Han's actions for the cause of feminism mostly took the form of critical writing. Starting with "The Current Status and Future of the Women's Liberation Movement" in the annual magazine *Ewha* in 1971, her journalistic activity culminated in "Man and Woman, the Mirage of Equality" in *Chosun Ilbo* in December 1974, which was viewed as "scandalous" because of its exaltation of extreme leftwing politics and Angela Davis's radical feminism.[3] Han recalls that the article elicited sharply divided responses, praised as being brave but also criticized as being "crazy," it even managed to alienate a number of her male friends.[4] The anticommunism espoused as the most important state ideology by the military government did not allow open discussion about left-wing politics. This political climate surrounding intellectual societies, including universities, may account for the disorientation that her former friends felt about Han's arguments.

Han's initial encounter with experimental cinema took place in 1973, when she went to a short-film exhibition presented by the Film

2. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, July 26, 2007.
3. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, July 26, 2007.
4. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, July 26, 2007.

Laboratory (Yeongsang Yeonguhoe 1971-1974), an avant-garde filmmaking group established by graduates of Sogang University. These experimental films led Han to decide to make film art of her own. In 1974, she organized the Kaidu Club in collaboration with other female members of the Film Laboratory, such as the painter Kim Jeom-Sun. Kim viewed film as an extension of painting, applying oil colors and nail scratches onto the celluloid to explore the resultant visual effects. Another member, Lee Jeong-Hee, took on social criticism and antiestablishment themes in her work. Thus, the members of the Kaidu Club covered a wide spectrum of stylistic and thematic idiosyncrasies, so much so that their works seldom converged on one single aesthetic principle. However, they felt a shared antagonism toward the sexist contents of commercial cinema. Han points out that the so-called "hostess films" were one of the most popular film genres in the 1970s in South Korea, and that she and her associates loathed their tendency for being regressive and misogynistic.[5]

The Kaidu Club made a sensational debut with the First Experimental Film Festival, which took place in Seoul on the roof garden of Shinsaegae Department Store from July 27 to 31, 1974 (An 2001, 203). Not only the first women's film festival in South Korea, the event was also the first experimental film festival in the history of South Korean cinema (An 2001). Han Ok-Hee showed *Rope* (*Batjul*) and *Repetition* (*Jungbok*); Kim Jeom-Sun presented *Film 74-A* and *Film 74-B*; Lee Jeong-Hee showed *XXOX*; and Han Soon-Ae screened *Over* (An 2001). In addition, the members exhibited eight collective works, including *The Song of Massacre* and *Elevator,* and introduced some works by Ed Emshwiller, an American avant-garde filmmaker (An 2001). The overall style of the films was strongly iconoclastic. Han Ok-Hee's *Rope* (*Batjul*) features a piece of umbilical cord to suggest the birth of a human, but soon it transforms into an animated picture, then into a hangman's noose to indicate the same person's death (Han 2006, 9). *The Song of Massacre* shows graphic pictures of animal slaughter, which allegorized the sociopolitical conditions of

5. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, July 26, 2007.

the day. Although ordinary viewers felt disoriented by the films and their "chaotic and metaphysical" qualities (An 2001, 203), professional artists generally welcomed the works. Avant-garde artist Jeong Chan-Seung described the films as "a sharp razor carving out the ossified layer of consciousness" (Han 2006, 17).

The Second Experimental Film Festival on May 23 through 25 in 1975 presented only three works: Han Ok-Hee's *Three Mirrors* (*Saegae-ui geoul*), Kim Jeom-Sun's *75-13*, and Lee Jeong-Hee's *Nevertheless, We Should Leave Once Again* (*Geureona uri-neun dasi chulbalhaeya handa*) (An 2001, 203). The reduced scale was reportedly attributed to some members having married and left the group. Nevertheless, the remaining members did not deviate from the initial goals of avant-gardism and feminism. In 1976, Han Ok-Hee, Lee Jeong-Hee, and Yu Yeon-hui staged a series of street performances of *gut* (exorcism rite) in business quarters in Seoul, once again raising plaudits from a multitude of critics and spectators. A year later, in 1977, the core members produced a multi-media show entitled *No Title* (*Muje*) that combined film, theatre, and performance arts. However, the collective was dissolved that year when the original members left the group, with no replacements joining.

Commercial print media remained friendly toward the Kaidu Club throughout its four-year life span, presumably because the group's unconventional films and activities provided good news copy. Immediately after the First Experimental Film Festival, *Jugan hanguk* (Weekly Korea) covered the event under the headline "A Banner of Revolt against 'Male Snobbism'" in which renowned film director Yu Hyun-Mok was quoted as saying, "The films by the Kaidu Club will equal the entries in international film festivals."[6] *Jugan yeoseong* (Women's Weekly) report "An Act of Revolution: Only Unconquerable Women Accomplish Art" stated that "the country's first women's experimental film collective makes it a point to rebel against established male-oriented ideas in order to incorporate

6. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, July 26, 2007.

women's lives into creative art."[7] Although the media attention helped to publicize the Kaidu Club, it also tended to relegate its works into the realm of eccentricity. This can be seen in Han's statement that the majority of established filmmakers in Chungmuro disparaged the Kaidu films. Han recalls a meeting in which a producer working for a commercial film company denounced her and the general activities of the Kaidu Club.[8] In another case, a famous publisher approached her with a book proposal, which turned out to be a clumsy attempt at seduction.[9]

Under the circumstances, it was natural for Han Ok-Hee to seek opportunities to move abroad. According to Han, Kaidu members were well aware of the women's film festival initiated by Agnès Varda in the mid-1970s in Europe, although it was impossible for them to participate in such an international event. However, the Goethe Institute (also known as the German Cultural Center) provided an important venue for the Kaidu members to exhibit their films and to view contemporary German films. Han developed interest in German Expressionist cinema, which helped motivate her to leave for Germany to further her film study in 1980.

Her departure was timely because a new generation of the woman's film armed with social realism and documentary emerged in the early 1980s. Although Han showed high regard for the social realism and the women's documentaries of the 1980s,[10] women's films of this decade did not preserve the Kaidu Club's legacy of experimental film. The intervening years between the Kaidu Club and women's films of the 1990s were to be filled by feminist intellectuals who utilized the film medium to draw popular attention to women's issues, such as the work of Kim Soyoung, one of the leading figures of the period.

7. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, July 26, 2007.
8. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, July 26, 2007.
9. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, July 26, 2007.
10. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, July 26, 2007.

Kim Soyoung: Modernity and Women

The women's movement starting in the late 1970s and lasting until the late 1980s developed in conjunction with the *minjung* cultural movement, which viewed the working classes as the ultimate social force to initiate democratic reforms. The women's movement regarded working-class women (*minjung yeoseong*) and lower class women (*gicheung yeoseong*) as the central subject for the realization of women's liberation. On the surface, the rediscovery of working-class women seems a significant theoretical advancement for two reasons. First, the concept of the working-class women implies a class division between middle-class women and working-class women who resist being absorbed into the liberalism that upper-middle-class intellectuals had saturated the women's movement with. Second, by opposing working-class men (*minjung namseong*), working-class women disclosed the male chauvinism hidden under the monolithic working class identity. Thus, "working-class women" constituted a distinctive social identity whose interests were linked to issues of class and gender politics.

Nue (Silkworm), established in 1985 by a group of student filmmakers at Ewha Woman's University, exemplified filmmaking geared toward representing working-class women. The films of Nue focused on women's issues, since "women's issues are important to female students, but they usually fail to form a serious matter in the eyes of men" (Mun 1988, 135). For instance, the group's first work *The First Departure* (*Sibal*, 16mm, B/W, 10min, 1985) portrays the burdensome life of a working woman who has to labor at her work place and at her household as well (Mun 1988). The storyline denounces the belittlement of household labor imposed on women without reward. Another film, *A Graduation Thesis* (*Joreop nonmun*, 8mm, Color, 17min, 1987), tackles the issue of prostitution. The production notes for the film show that the student filmmakers approached the subject matter as "a societal and structural problem, and a form of oppression of women perpetuated by the male-centered dominant ideology" (Mun 1988), based on the idea that the transformation of

the social structure will bring the liberation of women. Structural determinism accounts for not only the narrative discourse of the Nue films, but also the general doctrine of the women's movement in the 1980s in South Korea.

Kim Soyoung admitted that Nue paved the groundwork for the women's film as an autonomous domain within the independent cinema movement in the 1980s.[11] However, it is difficult to assert that Kim utilized structural determinism as a theme to substantiate the narratives of her own films. Two short films that Kim made in the mid-1980s offer clues to her aesthetic position. *Fantasy in Winter* (*Gyeoul hwansang*, 1985), Kim's graduation piece for the Korean Academy of Film Arts, uses surrealism to adapt *Gongmudohaga*, an ancient Korean fable, to the reality of contemporary South Korea. The original story tells of a woman who tries to save her deranged husband from drowning in a river. In the film, three symbolic characters are inserted into the narrative frame and ancient setting: A female factory worker takes the place of the female lead, a male union activist instead of the husband, and a factory manager representing institutionalized oppression. By reimagining the oldest narrative known in Korea, *Fantasy in Winter* allegorically re-imagines national history through a woman's perspective. The film stands apart from narrative discourses devoted to "realistic" representations of women's issues. It also bypasses the structural determinism upheld by the films of Nue because the narrative focuses on a female subjectivity where an alternative mode of socio-historical representation resides.

In 1989, Kim organized an independent women filmmakers' collective called Bariteo under the motto of "Let us solve women's issues through the film screen" (Byun 2001, 274). Bariteo followed Nue in the tradition of women's independent cinema. Kim, acting as the leader of the group, directed the first project entitled *Even a Little Weed Has Its Name* (*Jageun pul-edo ireum itseuni*, 16mm, 42min, 1990). The story concerns female office workers, focusing on the instability of their employment and gender discrimination against

11. Kim Soyoung, Personal interview with author, July 7, 2006.

female employees (Byun 2001, 275). The narrative is divided into two parts: the first portrays a married woman whose daily life is troubled due to her double duties of child care and office work, while the second dramatizes a personal memoir written by an actual female worker. In terms of the subject matter, *Even a Little Weed* echoes Nue's first project *The First Departure*, which also addressed the struggles of a female office worker. Nevertheless, Byeon Yeong-Ju, who worked on *Even a Little Weed* as a camera operator, said that "the film maintains an introspective attitude, admitting that the reality the film captures is also a reflected reality" (Byeon 1995, 73). The narrative relies on self-reflexivity, which avoids any privileged viewing position. Thus, the film invites a "more active and questioning position" (Kuhn 1994, 155) to the subject matter. In this respect, the film indirectly resists the structural determinism characterizing the works by Nue.

Despite a subsequent series of documentary works capturing the labor movement, Bariteo underwent a sudden shift in the make-up of its members in 1991, which led to the equally sudden liquidation of the group in 1992. Film critic Byun Jai-Ran interpreted the transformation and final dissolution of Bariteo as a result of "the habitual practice of the progressive movement to put aside the women's movement as a mere subdivision of the social movement as a whole" (Byun 2001, 275). Along with the demise of Bariteo, Kim Soyoung became also invisible in women's films.

In 2000, Kim broke a decade of visual silence by releasing a documentary entitled Georyu. This video work was soon to be followed by two sequels, *I'll Be Seeing Her* (*Hwangholgyeong*, 2002) and *New Woman: Her First Song* (*Sinyeoseong-ui peoseuteu song*, 2004). The three works together comprise *The Korean Women's History Trilogy*. As a way to approach the trilogy, one may draw on the two books that Kim had worked out prior to the documentaries: *Cinema: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology* (1996, hereafter *Cinema*); and *Fantastic Korean Cinema: The Specters of Modernity* (2000). In many respects, these volumes indicate that Kim's theoretical perspective expanded beyond the sociological confines of the women's move-

ment, and equipped itself with an ethnographic angle to probe the multiple layers inscribed in the history of South Korean cinema.

Cinema identifies the postwar Seoul as one of the primal scenes of Korean cinema, where Western modernity began to erode premodern remnants and drive the city dwellers toward newly-developed urban spectacles (Kim Soyoung 1996, 112-113). Drawing on Karl Marx's dictum, "All that is solid melts into air," which Marshall Berman reappraised to depict the experience of modernity,[12] Kim describes modernity in Seoul as an ironic experience in which the promise of hope and adventure coexisted with the dread of disruption and ambiguity" (Kim Soyoung 1996, 113). South Korean cinema was initially situated in such Janus-faced modernity and registered in its anxiety about social mobility and confusion of gender roles (Kim Soyoung 1996). For example, Kim invites readers to see in the 1960s films how vividly the people of the period are living modernity, and how the characters in the films fall prey to militarization, industrialization, and modernization, while at the same time committing rebellious actions against such powers (Kim Soyoung 1996, 127). Kim here suggests a new assignment that South Korean film studies need to undertake, and implicitly challenges the established historiography of realism.

The following excerpt is from "Realism in South Korean Cinema" by Hong Ki-Seon, one of the leading figures of the independent cinema movement in the 1980s.

> The 1970s were the period when many problems surfaced in our society. Contradictions innate in coercive industrialization set in motion in the 1960s started to transform into real social problems in an all-out manner. The blind, uncritical reception of the Western lifestyle permeated every corner of society. Rampant materialism and the pursuit of Western values caused a radical break with tradition and a complete moral devastation (Hong 1983, 300).

12. See Berman (1988).

Historically, the 1970s that Hong describes as a moral wasteland was not much different from the 1960s that Kim portrays as the age of mobility and vivacity. Hong assesses the majority of South Korean films from the 1970s as well as the 1960s as having only left negative legacies since they failed to "realistically analyze and criticize the society" depicted in Hong's statement (Hong 1983, 301). However, in the preface to Fantastic Korean Cinema, Kim denounces the predominance of realism in South Korean film dramaturgy and criticism on the grounds that "although it once temporarily played a progressive role, now it connives to perpetuate the position of the ruling thought" (Kim Soyoung 2000, preface). If realism claims that "historical changes, conflicts, and contradictions are rendered textually within developments of consciousness on the part of characters" (Kuhn 1994, 136). Kim argues that South Korean cinema has conventionally advanced male protagonists to embody those characters, and therefore the prioritization of realism must stand on "male-suprematism." It is out of her sensibility of the pitfalls of realism that Kim mobilizes cine-feminism in her two books to dismantle the fundamental male-orientedness in the mainstream historiography of South Korean cinema and to rewrite it from women's perspectives. In addition, if realism is a narrative effect to be obtained through linear temporality and definite closure, its ultimate aim is to minimize the room for alternative readings. This is why Kim tries to reinstate the long-time marginalized fantasy in Korean cinema, in which, as Tzvetan Todorov points out, "imperfect tense and modalization" engenders ambiguity in the entire film text (Todorov 1975, 38).

The Korean Women's History Trilogy is the visual interpretation of Kim's ideas of women and cinema. Part I—*Georyu: Southern Women, South Korea* begins with the narrator Kim's journey to Goseong, her grandmother's hometown. On the surface, the narrative seems to be structured around the trajectory of the journey. However, the journey in itself is to question how to understand the grandmother's life story buried in her granddaughter's memories. Early in the narrative when Kim on her way to Goseong, she observes the remains of a lighthouse, active during the closed period before the

modernization of the country in the 1960-1970s, and the voice-over narration states, "Now people say this beacon was the first digital medium. But it was only for men's communication." Kim summons her memory of her grandmother as a skilled writer of *eonmun jemun*, a memorial address in the Korean alphabet. It was a literary genre popular among the elite women of the ruling class of the Joseon dynasty. While Chinese characters functioned as the official mode of literary communication among male elites, the *eonmun* alphabet provided a tool for the literary enunciation of women. Its producers were primarily married daughters who encapsulated the lives of their deceased mothers in these memorial addresses, constructing a cross-generational women's history.

However, the restoration of women's literary genres is not entirely in the service of proving an uninterrupted women's history in opposition to that of men. Rather, it poses a challenge to the very notion of linear history, which advocates the histories of dominant subjects such as nations, men, and the ruling classes. Women and their voices serve to debunk the myth of linear history and liberate multiple histories and historical subjects from its confines. This point is cemented by the interview with an overseas Chinese woman who married a Korean man and settled in Goseong. Speaking in both Chinese and Korean, she instantiates a personage who freely crosses the threshold between the two languages and by so doing becomes liberated from the "mother tongue," an ideology underpinning the linear national history.

The overseas Chinese woman in the film points to the fundamentally diasporic status of women within the boundary of a single nation-state. The narrative proceeds to depict another female subject who is a native Korean but living in the U.K. She and her younger sister have inherited a tea shop from their parents. Portraying the younger one currently managing the place, the story seems to converge around the difference in geography faced by the two siblings. However, as the succeeding interviews reveal, it is the younger sister who was originally meant to move abroad to study music, a plan aborted due to the deaths of the parents. Meanwhile, the older sister

says that an extended stay in a foreign culture has awakened her to the "Koreanness" imbedded in her character. If diaspora refers to a dispersion of people from their original homeland, it materializes not only in the older sister's physical immigration, but also in the internal immigration that the little sister's planned study abroad might have facilitated in her mind.

If *Georyu: Southern Women, South Korea* sheds light on the liminal area women inhabited while not being subsumed into any "canonical" histories, then the two sequels of *The Korean Women's History Trilogy, I'll Be Seeing Her* (2002) and *New Woman: Her First Song* (2004), show how the women have "lived" the area. *I'll Be Seeing Her* focuses on the female spectatorship which was constructed in favor of film melodramas since the late 1950s. Although the genre has perennially been dismissed as "weepies" and failed to raise critical attention, the documentary shows that film melodramas provided rare occasions for women audiences to move outside the household and utilize movie theatres as a public sphere where they could build solidarity across social divisions. By extension, the documentary draws attention to filmmaking practice as a privileged arena in which a woman's self-expression is enabled more actively than in other cultural practices. The narrative ends with an illustration of a variety of women's films made in the late 1990s in Korea. In this way, *I'll Be Seeing Her* portrays the historical period between the 1950s and the present as a synchronic space where the exchanges of meanings and pleasures between women are constantly occurring in the present tense.

The theme of women's inter-generational rapport is repeated in *New Woman: Her First Song*, which tells of the life of Na Hye-Suk, one of the first "New Women" and female intellectuals in Korea. Na advocated women's liberation in the 1930s, when she strove to establish her career as an artist performing Western-style painting in the face of male conservatism. This is juxtaposed with the present, in which contemporary feminists are waging the same struggle that Na had begun half a century ago. Here again, women's history does not decline but consistently regenerates itself, developing new meanings across generations.

Byeon Yeong-Ju and Ryu Mi-Rye: From History to the Personal

Despite the uninterrupted flow of the women's films since the mid-1970s, it wasn't until 1993 that woman's film in South Korea recognized Euro-American feminist cinema. Kim Soyoung stated:

> In 1993, South Korean feminist cultural workers made an attempt to introduce Euro-American feminist film practices to South Korean audiences. Information and reviews of films by feminist filmmakers Chantal Akerman, Helke Sander, Michelle Citron, and Sally Potter were disseminated in film magazines, public lectures, and books. In addition, the women's video festival, *Riddles of the Sphinx*, screened Euro-American feminist avant-garde works (Kim Soyoung 2005, 190).

In 1997, the Women's Film Festival in Seoul was launched as the first film festival devoted to women's issues. From 1993 to 1996, preexisting women's film practices tried to reach the public and feminist cultural workers utilized public screenings of Euro-American feminist films as a litmus test to measure the public receptivity of films that dealt with women's issues.

South Korean women's independent documentaries have demonstrated an increasing self-consciousness pertaining to the narrator's enunciative position since the mid-1990s. Former Bariteo member Byeon Yeong-Ju directed *Asia-eseo yeoseong-euro sandaneun geot* (A Woman Being in Asia) in 1993, which addresses the issue of institutionalized sex tourism (*gisaeng gwangwang*) in Jejudo island. In order to obtain firsthand information, Byeon and her crew interviewed prostitutes working for Japanese male tourists. The candid dialogues between the filmmakers and anonymous prostitutes allowed the former to obtain first-hand information about the world of sex tourism, while at the same time engendering female camaraderie between the two sides. The closer their relationship becomes, the more details about the exploitative conditions of the prostitutes become disclosed. Recalling the interviewing process in her memoir *A Woman Being in Asia* (1995), Byeon confesses that she felt like a

fish out of water in front of the interviewees. She asked herself,

> Why is it that? It definitely resulted from the relationship; that is, the relationship between the camera operator and the viewed person. If we cannot overcome this indirect representation, then what is the use of our meeting? What are we trying to talk about? Only because we are equipped with a camera, we are allowed to be in a position to coerce the interviewee to tell her story. What is the true nature of this superiority? (Byeon, 1995, 137-138).

These queries call into question the psychological detachment that a documentarian normally maintains from the interviewees to secure objectivity. Byeon's dilemma is that she and her crew members established mutual trust and solidarity with the female informants, but then must view the women at a distance on behalf of objectivity. Reflecting on this puzzle, Byeon realized that despite her own female identity, she continued to view the matter of prostitution as something irrelevant to her own life (Byeon 1995, 145). In order to maintain this attitude, representational objectivity and emotional detachment are enacted as a device to justify the documentary's non-engagement with the issue in question. What the camera captures through the uninvolved eye ends up with a didactic criticism, and fails to link the meaning of the documented subject matter to the viewers' immediate realities. Byeon admits that "I am also a woman," and decides that "we ought to re-view the prostitution issue from a women's perspective" (Byeon 1995, 145). *A Woman Being in Asia* shows the process by which the crew members gradually shift their attitude from lukewarm impartiality to earnest partisanship toward the prostitutes and their lives. Thus, the documentary forsakes the omniscient voice-over of a panoptic narrator and employs an unsettled female subject which eventually opts for female solidarity.

Byeon's film documentary series, *The Korean Comfort Women Trilogy: The Murmuring* (1995), *Habitual Sadness* (1997) and *My Own Breathing* (2000), deals with the buried history of Korean comfort women forcibly conscripted by the Imperial Japanese Army during the Pacific War. The process of camaraderie-building between the

filmmakers and the filmed subjects is the major mode of narratology in these works. Its themes bear similarities to Kim Soyoung's *Korean Women's History Trilogy*, but a distinguishing characteristic of *The Korean Comfort Women Trilogy* is its approach to this traumatic national history. It focuses on the ongoing present of the survivors, in which each one of them wages struggle against the memory of forced prostitution and joins in collective action to denounce the war crime and demand an official apology from the Japanese government. Byeon and her crew avoid serving as the mouthpieces for these former comfort women, but participate in their daily lives so as to maximize the space for the women to speak for themselves.

In this sense, *Habitual Sadness*, the second installment in the trilogy, is significant because the production of the film was initiated at the request of one of the former comfort women. These survivors of the wartime sex slavery live together in the place called "The House of Sharing" (*nanum-ui jip*). After the residence was moved outside of Seoul, the residents asked Byeon to document their lives in their new environment. Now media-savvy after the shooting of the preceding work, *The Murmuring*, the Sharing House members were able to orchestrate their own images the way that they wanted to be featured to the viewers. The following words were exchanged between Byeon and Kim Soon-Deok, one of the former comfort women in the midst of shooting:

> Byeon: Why did you ask us to film you while carrying these pumpkins?
> Kim: Because we grew them ourselves. We wanted you to film the harvest.
> Byeon: How do you think you'll look in the film?
> Kim: What do I expect?
> Byeon: How'd you like to be seen?
> Kim: As someone who works like a cow.
> Byeon: Are you serious?
> Kim: That's why I painted a cow.

To work like a cow presents an idealized image that Kim desires to

incarnate in her own life. But she has actually lived her life like a working cow and now wants to be inscribed as such in film image. The question is why she bothers to imprint such a plain fact on film, possibly because Kim's memory of forced prostitution tainted her psyche and led her to believe in the honest life that she wanted to live. The traumatic national history and personal truth pose a conflict which Kim tries to visually eliminate by forwarding her image of "working like a cow." Yet the film also contextualizes Kim's desire and suggests that the female subject and the women's history can be in conflict and have an on-going dialogic relationship with each other.

Byeon's *Korean Comfort Women Trilogy* marked a transition period from the "grand narrative" of the women's films of the 1980s and 1990s, which focused on socio-historical issues regarding women, to the personal narratives that probe the psychological and interpersonal realm in the daily lives of women. One may find evidence of this transition in the films submitted to the Women's Film Festival in Seoul, launched in 1997. One of the most common subject matters in the films is family, and mothers in particular. In handling the subject matter, personalized narration is normally enacted to earn sympathy from the viewers. In this regard, Ryu Mi-Rye's documentaries in particular deserve examination.

Ryu Mi-Rye debuted with a serial documentary entitled *I Am Happy*. Divided into two installments, *I Am Happy* (*Na-neun haengbok-hada*, 2000) and *Friends: I Am Happy 2* (*Chingu: Na-neun haengbok-hada 2*, 2001), the *I Am Happy* series looks similar to *The Korean Comfort Women Trilogy* in terms of its mode of narration. In order to minimize the intervention of the camera, the director Ryu cohabits with a group of handicapped who attend The House of Fellowship (Hamkke saneun sesang), a workshop and day-care facility for people who have mental disabilities. In so doing, she intended to record everyday situations with which those living in the facility were faced.

In *I Am Happy*, Ryu follows Sang-hun, an autistic patient, to make sure that he arrives home safely. Sang-hun gets distracted by a street vendor selling rice cakes and Ryu buys him a piece out of sym-

pathy. The next day, however, this act places her under a torrent of admonitions from the facility instructors, who worried that Sang-hun would keep visiting the vendor, anticipating constant giveaways. In *Friends*, Ryu revisits the same people to document their efforts to make their own living. Yet again she has to confront unexpected situations. At one point, Ryu sees a person named Gwang-su isolated from his colleagues because of his unsophisticated communication skills. Another patient, Gyeong-su, steals money from Gwang-su and feigns innocence, which results in the temporary suspension of all the housemates from coming home.

The documentation of these daily occurrences is not solely intended to awaken the viewers to the realities surrounding disabled people. Rather, it focuses on Ryu herself and the change of her views on the issues of the disabled. After witnessing the theft incident, Ryu confesses, "I hardly imagined such a thing would happen between disabled people. Considering that the conventional attitude toward the handicapped is either patronizing, seeing them as pitiable, or mythologizing them as pure hearts, now I realize that I too have fallen into the same mistaken beliefs" (So Yun 2005, 106). This type of indeterminate speaking subject is a far cry from omniscient narrators. Feminist film critic So Yun points out that the narrative of the *I Am Happy* series, "does not press the director's opinion, but only reveals her experiences as they unfold, and in that sense it resembles 'feminist writing'" (2005, 110). Indeed, if feminist writing supports "disorder and chaos" in opposition to "universal, totalizing" logo-centrism of male writing (Finke 1992, 6), the indeterminate narration in documentary fits into feminist writing. This point proves itself in Ryu's next project, *Life Goes On* (2004).

Originally entitled *Eomma. . .* (*Mommy. . .*), the documentary *Life Goes On* captures the story of the documentarian Ryu's mother, who lived as a single parent for two decades and was at the time engaged in a love affair. Ryu tries to support her mother's choices, but at a deeper level finds herself still wanting her mother to remain single and to keep to self-sacrificing motherhood. This contradiction deepens when Ryu becomes a mother herself and realizes how hard

it is to be a "good mom." In the opening narration, Ryu states:

> For a long time, marriage wasn't for me. It seemed impossible for a woman documentarian to juggle family and work. It became harder after I had a baby (Yu Ha-eun, 3 years old). I carried her around on the job, but eventually put her in a day-care center. I'd thought of asking mom (Bak Sa-sim, 63 years old) to baby-sit, but she'd begun a new life. I started the film caught between guilt over my child and disappointment in my mom. If I come to terms with her being so different from average mothers, perhaps I'll feel less guilty about my child.

Ryu confesses that it is through her marriage that she has been awakened to "female identity" (*yeoseongseong*) and to her identity as a woman filmmaker.[13] Nevertheless, as the narration affirms, the female identity that Ryu has found is self-contradictory and multivocal.

The rest of the narrative consists of numerous spontaneous interviews with her mother and other family members, including an older sister living in Russia. What this inter-family discourse reveals is feelings of both love and hatred in each member of the family. One scene in which Ryu holds the camera to talk with her sister in Russia demonstrates this point:

> Sister: What do our sisters have against Mom?
> Ryu: Big sis said, "Look how much Mr. Ahn (the mother's boy friend) loves his family, but Mom, she only cares about her boy friend and not us."
> Sister: Mom's not affectionate enough? I've always thought our whole family is desperate for affection. Mom wants affection from us, too. She wants us to be warm and nice to her. And we, vice versa. We all want affection, but don't give it. So I feel sorry for her, but I understand Sisters opinion, too. Oh, I don't know.

13. Ryu Mi-Rye, E-mail Interview with author, September 17, 2007.

The dialogue does little to establish any ideological stance such as familism or feminism. It only discloses the painful feeling that originates from unrequited love. From a psychological perspective, the disclosure of trauma constitutes the first step in the healing process. The interviews and monologues in *Life Goes On* register the process of confession and mental recuperation on the part of the filmed subjects. In this regard, the indeterminate and contradictory position of the narrator should be viewed as a strategic device designed to insert as many confessions as possible into the narrative.

Ryu has regarded her films' *raison d'être* to be the representation of "the women situated in a warped and distorted life, the images of a mother divided between ideal and reality, and all other conditions of women's existence in which discrete female voices converge."[14] Underlying this position is Ryu's unique definition of feminism as "the attitude to persistently side with the weakest and the most powerless in the world."[15] She recalls that feminist critics showed only a lukewarm response to *Life Goes On* at its premiere, pointing out that the story does not manifestly uphold the mother's position.[16] On the contrary, female audiences hailed the documentary because, according to Ryu's analysis, the mother character has universal appeal.[17] Thus, the key aspect of Ryu's documentaries consists in eliciting empathy across film and audiences.

Conclusion

The three-decade history of the women's film discussed thus far has left one of its important elements untouched: public response. As is often the case with independent films, accurate numerical informa-

14. Ryu Mi-Rye, "Challenging Cinderella." Interview by Yi Chong-Hee and Jeong Eun-Ju. Directed by Seoul Traffic Broadcasting System, August 17, 2006.
15. Ryu Mi-Rye, E-mail Interview with author, September 17, 2007.
16. Ryu Mi-Rye, Personal interview with author, September 11, 2007.
17. Ryu Mi-Rye, Personal interview with author, September 11, 2007.

tion, such as the number of viewers, is unobtainable. However, women's film is one constituent of the independent cinema movement which has made the most intensive and successful efforts to bring independent cinema to the eyes of ordinary audiences. As early as the 1970s, the Kaidu Club conducted public events, such as experimental film festivals (1974, 1975), a series of street performances (1976), and a multimedia show (1977). The events were received as an eye-opening experience, if not outright scandalous, to the general public as well as mass media at the time. The enduring impact of the Kaidu Club activities can be perceived in Han Ok-Hee's memory that "Even in the 2000s, some decades after the Kaidu Club, I meet a number of people who remember the Kaidu Club and its activities in the 1970s."[18]

Byeon Yeong-Ju's *The Korean Comfort Women Trilogy*, consisting of *The Murmuring* (1995), *Habitual Sadness* (1997), and *My Own Breathing* (2000), was another breakthrough in enlarging the scope of public access to independent cinema. Throughout the production processes of the first two films, Byeon and her crew conducted a fund-raising campaign called the "100-foot Film Membership."[19] A 100-foot film member provided the filmmaking crew with the amount of money equal to the price of a 100-foot-long piece of film stock. 175 people participated as "100-foot film members" for *The Murmuring* and 426 people for *Habitual Sadness*.[20] This viewer-turned-producer system was able to maximize its popular appeal when *The Murmuring* became the first non-commercial independent film to be released in commercial theaters. The film was screened at Dongsung Cinematech, Picasso, and Lumiére theaters from April 29 to June 2 in 1995 in Seoul.[21] *Habitual Sadness* and *My Own Breathing* were also screened in commercial theaters across major cities, including Seoul and

18. Han Ok-Hee, E-mail interview with author, March 28, 2006.
19. "From The Murmuring to My Own Breathing," *Cine* 21, March 14, 2000. (http://www.cine21.com/Article/article_view.php?mm=005001001&article_id=31364, 2 April 2009)
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.

Busan. The ending credits of each film showed the full list of 100-foot film members who contributed to the production of the documentary. This way, the trilogy garnered phenomenal popular attention, not only for the films but also the issue of comfort women under Japanese colonial rule.

It would be unfair to say that only women's films have made earnest and successful attempts to reach general audiences. Nevertheless, considering the overwhelming number of male filmmakers in the independent cinema sector, the popular appeal that women's films have realized remains an unsurpassed contribution to the development of independent cinema. On the other hand, this means that women filmmakers still feel blocked and are looking for more venues to share their issues and experiences as women with others. Asked who her target audiences are, Ryu Mi-Rye mentions "women like herself;" that is to say, "each one of women who was in despair somewhere in her life, who ever gave up something she valued, and who ever felt helpless in the face of a situation she couldn't surmount with her own power and effort."[22] Defeat may epitomize women's destinies in male-chauvinistic society, but their voices cannot be buried completely. Women's film evidences this truth.

22. Ryu Mi-Rye, E-mail Interview, September 17, 2007.

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