Review of *Unexpected Alliances: Independent Filmmakers, the State, and the Film Industry in Postauthoritarian South Korea*

By Young-a Park. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. 221 pages. ISBN 978-0804783613.

Steve CHOE

Young-a Park's book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Korean cinema. Unexpected Alliances tells the story of activist and independent filmmaking, and the cultural politics that surround it, roughly from the 1980s to the post-IMF period. This periodization already suggests to readers that the book will focus on the activities of the 386 generation, and that it will address the ideological struggles between activism, commerce, and nationhood that engaged this generation. *Unexpected Alliances* does not present these struggles as theoretical problems, but as issues that arise from concrete historical situations and involve key players who had fundamental vested interests in these struggles. In doing so, Park's book contributes to our knowledge of the alliances, disavowals, and negotiations that took place among individuals and institutions as Korean films experienced a meteoric rise in popularity around the world. Clearly organized and well-written, this book will appeal to readers who are familiar with this surge in popularity as well as for those who may be less familiar with this history.

Unexpected Alliances argues that the rise of Korean cinema was realized, in part, due to new, indeed unexpected, collaborations forged between

Steve Choe is an Associate Professor of Critical Studies in the School of Cinema at San Francisco State University. E-mail: stevec3@sfsu.edu

commercial and activist filmmaking. The "explosion" of Korean cinema in the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, as Park writes, "was a product of a wide range of new alliances among social actors" (p. 2). On the other hand, this explosion was accompanied by the rise of a number of political and aesthetic tensions within the 386 generation, revolving around the status of independent cinema in an industry increasingly dictated by principles of entertainment and profitability. A crucial discourse that held sway in the midst of these tensions was that of moral privilege, one that circulated among Korean social movements during the 1980s and "represented a moral critique of Korean society and was framed in terms of moral righteousness" (p. 19). The discourse of moral privilege should be understood as delineating a "safe" ideological space for left intellectuals and artists who sought to create a counter-public sphere in a context where communist views were anathema to the South Korean state.

Park's book will be of interest, even for those familiar with the history and politics of Korean cinema, because of its utilization of ethnographic sources. One may note on the back cover that the publisher categorizes the book as belonging to the field of "Anthopology/Korea." *Unexpected Alliances* focuses less on close readings of films, and much more on the livelihoods and opinions held by the makers, distributors, and programmers of these films. In addition to primary and secondary textual sources, Park draws from participant-observation fieldwork she conducted for eighteen months between 2000 and 2005 as well as follow-up trips that took place in 2008, 2011, and 2013. During this time, she worked with informants closely tied to the Korean Independent Film Association (KIFA), a vital site where old networks were regrouped and renamed as they strove to maintain their political identity and moral legitimacy. Park recounts conversations that took place between herself and filmmakers, festival programmers, and leaders of activist organizations throughout her text. The facial expressions and body language of individuals present at these conversations are described as well, which help in conveying the mood of the scene. *Unexpected Alliances* moves deftly between established historical narratives around cinema and modern Korea and personal, subjective accounts grounded in memories of Park's informants. In this, scholars in Film Studies will be pleasantly surprised at how their broad narratives of cinema and cultural

history are corroborated through Park's fieldwork, while those in Anthropology will appreciate her contextualization of these particular accounts, thus revealing how they speak on behalf of Korean history.

Unexpected Alliances consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a short epilogue. The chapters proceed chronologically, for the most part. Chapter One, "Film Activism: Cinema as Politics," introduces many of the terms and debates that will be elaborated throughout the book. In the 1980s and early 90s, *minjung* ideology provided inspiration for activists to utilize the film medium and draw critical attention to the authoritarian and oppressive regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, as well as garner sympathy for the plight of the disenfranchised and working poor. This cinema positions itself in opposition to the commercial mode and the practice of passive consumption typically associated with its mode of spectatorship. Film activism encourages viewers to become engaged, actively collaborating with the images and sounds they see and hear in the production of cinematic meaning. Indeed, this opposition, between passivity and activity, remains fundamental in thinking the politics and aesthetics of cinema, not only in Korea but in many other contexts as well. "In this regard," Park writes, "film activism was a movement that attempted to constitute totally different kinds [of] filmmakers and viewers with agency that were distinct from their commodified counterparts" (p. 25). The life and career trajectory of the well-known documentarian, Kim Dong-won, illustrates this colaboration of politics and cinema. Inspired by the work of radical Catholic social activism while a college student, Kim gave assistance to the working poor and went on to produce a number of key films, including *Sanggyedong Olympics* (1988), a short documentary that depicts the razing of an impoverished neighborhood to make way for the 1988 Olympics. Kim is perhaps best known for *Repatriation* (2004), a film that depicts the return of two North Korean spies after they were detained for more than thirty years. Not only does it feature his first-person narration, but the director also developed a close friendship with the North Koreans during the twelve years of filming. *Repatriation* evinces a distinct documentary style—long takes, long shots, subjective camera, and an overall melancholic mood—that attests to Kim's activist politics and anti-commercial aesthetics. Park continues in her chapter to point to a number of

developments in the late 1980s that reveal a radicalization of left politics, that is an intolerance to the politics of the left that was perceived to have remained complicit with the status quo, and perhaps, an indication of difficulties to come. Park notes that a topic that repeatedly arose in her conversations with filmmakers of the period revolved around "whether they were making fiction or documentary," and whether they "considered themselves 'witnesses' to violent reality rather than 'creators' or 'artists'" (p. 44). As time went on, the status of film art would be further jeopardized.

Chapter Two, "Independent Film: Cultural Production under Postauthoritarian Conditions," details the rise of Korean independent cinema. In the early 1990s, film activism was on the wane while new, smaller, and less expensive digital cameras made possible new visual and auditory engagements with reality. Films of the previous decade were produced for small audience numbers, such as at protest locations, who had shared memories of political oppression and disenfranchisement. In the next one, this work found new audiences that cut across class distinctions. Old alliances were broken up and films were regrouped under the banner of independent cinema, rendering them less political and more historical. When Kim Dong-won came to understand that his films were being historicized in this way, he "and other film activists had come to accept [it] whether they liked it or not" (p. 48). KIFA has been a key organization for advocating for radical, challenging films, albeit by repackaging them for new audiences, for film festivals, art cinema houses, and other screenings for the general public. Perhaps in an ironic turn of events, Kim would become the chairperson of KIFA. In another sign of the politics of the time, Kim Dae-jung's bid for the presidency in 1998 mobilized the politics of the 386 generation and through this appealed to the plight of the downtrodden. "Set in this context," Park writes, "the 3-8-6 generation label that was once a stigma in Korean society turned into a symbolic and social resource in accessing and consolidating power" (p. 57). Intertwined with their access and consolidation of power was their mobilization of activism and its concomitant appeal to moral legitimacy. In a parallel development, Korean activist cinema steps onto a more global, more universal stage and in the process loses some of its relevance to a particular time and place. In the 1990s, the largest chaebols, including

Samsung, Daewoo, and LG, entered the film industry, turning its production, distribution, and exhibition networks toward market concerns. Film festivals found their footing at this time, such as the Pusan International Film Festival (PIFF) and Film Forum in 1996, and soon became key locations for screening political cinema but also for the chaebols to scout new talent. Park notes that filmmakers became "auteurs" who produce film-art, and this moniker allowed film commodities to be branded through the name of the film-artist: "Booming film festival circuits reinforced ideas of independent filmmakers as 'auteurs' who possess complete authorial control over their artwork, which corresponded to the notion of a sovereign subject, an increasingly important concept in contemporary South Korea" (p. 72).

The next chapter of *Unexpected Alliances*, "Beating *Titanic*: Independent Filmmakers at the Helm of Cultural Nationalism," discusses the film quota movement that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. South Korea has had a screen quota system in place since the late 1960s to provide a bulwark against foreign film commodities, particularly coming from Hollywood, from overwhelming the local market. Starting in 1985, this quota stipulated that Korean theaters screen local films for two-fifths of the year (146 days), such that the number of days that these films would be allowed to screened is determined by cultural and national concerns, and not merely commercial ones. When, in 1998, Foreign Affairs-Trade Ministry negotiators announced that they were willing to reduce or even eliminate the mandatory days for the quota, instigated by Jack Valenti and the Motion Picture Association of America, a series of demonstrations protesting against these liberalizing forces took place that went into the next year. In June of 1999, filmmakers and actors shaved their heads and mourned their "deaths" in the face of these policies, bringing visibility to the quota in the media and elsewhere. "When I asked participants about the symbolism of head shaving," Park writes, "the points of reference that the participants express varied greatly, ranging from a Confucian text to memories of repressive secondary school years to common student activist tactics" (pp. 83–84). Ultimately, she surmises that the mass shaving ceremony "symbolized the precedence of the collective body over the individual as participants acting in unison" (p. 84). Activists who took part in these protests responded highly

ambivalently to the success of *Shiri* (1999), a Korean blockbuster that has been canonized as the film that beat the unsinkable *Titanic* (1997) at the local box-office. Park notes that for the low-budget film producer, a "Mr. Jang,"[1] who was politically active in the 1980s and was a member of the Screen Quota Emergency Committee, the screen quota policy was "both a poison and a remedy" (p. 101). Like Plato's Pharmakon, the quota had both beneficial and detrimental effects on Korean cinema, protecting the big-budget filmmaking coming out of Chungmuro while marginalizing political filmmaking further.[2] Nevertheless, Mr. Jang recognizes that, without the quota, the Korean film industry would be overcome by foreign products and would have eradicated all small-budget films. At stake here in all this is the question of what films count as Korean cinema under the screen quota policy.

Chapter Four, "Transforming Activist Culture: Women Filmmakers and New Filmic Spaces," details the ways in which two women documentary filmmakers, Kim Jin-yeol and Min Sung-mi, negotiated the postauthoritarian configurations of independent cinema and film culture in the new millennium. In its anecdotal style, the overall tone of this chapter is somewhat different than those previous. The critical literature on Korean film after 1997 has granted much of its attention to male auteurship, so Park's ethnographic accounts of the professional lives of important women documentarians are especially welcome. When she joined Docu Purŭn, a documentary group at KIFA, Kim Jin-yeol was well-versed in the academic discourse around film and had already produced documentaries that were shown at the Seoul Women's Film Festival. After winning a grant from the Film Institute, which is made up of members from Docu Purŭn, Kim questioned expectations about how this money was to be used, for *hoesik* events and other activities for the group, rather than for funds to help the subjects of her documentary. *Forgotten Warriors* (2005) is about North Korean women prisoners of war and is a subject that Kim became interested in while assisting for Kim Dong-won's *Repatriation*. Her resulting

1. Here, as elsewhere throughout the book, Park occasionally provides pseudonyms for filmmakers, organizations, and films that warrant confidential treatment.
2. See Derrida (1981).

film expresses her realization that the "representation of these female guerillas was hampered by the gender bias inherent not just in Korean society in general but even in 'progressive' movement subcultures" (p. 123). Min Sung-mi had been involved in labor activism for a number of years before she produced *Divergence*, a documentary that critiques the labor union for Hyundai. When left-leaning newspapers deemed the laying off of 289 female dining hall workers (out of a planned total of 400 employees at the company) as "reasonable," this caused a furor between these women and the union leaders, a conflict that was documented by Min. During filming, she discovered collusion between union leadership and corporate managers while her resulting film pointed to ways in which labor was compromised by old, male-dominated alliances.

Finally, the last chapter of *Unexpected Alliances*, "Film Festival Fever: The Circulation of Independent Films," considers the ramifications of thinking the film festival as a discursive site for activist cinema. Drawing from her participant-observation work at the PIFF, Park describes the work of festival organizers and the desires of attendees that make up the changed conditions for political films. The international film festival raises the profile of local cinemas and legitimates local products as global art. The festival also raises the global consciousness of those who fanatically attend screenings of films by directors such as Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Wim Wenders from Germany. According to Park's report, young, *sinsedae* cinephiles clamored to events featuring Wenders and which were organized by former film activists at the PIFF. A film programmer explains the significance of inviting Wenders to Busan, connecting it to an invitation that he extended to the director in 1973 within the context of the film activism movement to:

> During the festival, I also heard many PIFF staff repeating the same line that the small group of 'film activism followers' a decade earlier – who were in the small room where Wenders was lecturing – turned out to be the decision-makers in Korea's film institutions and industry today. The pseudo master-apprentice relationship that PIFF programmers and organizers deployed to imagine their relationship with Wenders was also appropriated by festival film fans. (p. 146)

The sensibilities of those belonging to the 386 generation continue into the present through the organizational and programming decisions made by them in the international festival. This is the context in which the works of activist Korean directors are shown as historical, independent, or even "cult" cinema. Park notes the uneasiness of these categories after a documentary by Bae Ho-yong, about the closing of rural schools and the efforts of locals to keep them open, was screened in Busan. During the Q&A session, she noticed that an "odd space" was constituted in the theater where the farmers depicted in the film somewhat awkwardly encountered the urbane audiences who came to see it (p. 161).

Invoking Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,"[3] Park argues in the introduction and last chapter of *Unexpected Alliances* that these events "re-enchant" activist cinema and, far from being devoid of aura, bestow upon the films a new form of cult value through political ritual (p. 161). This difficult claim is not sufficiently elaborated upon; what is unfortunate here is the missed opportunity to contemplate the question of what Korean cinema might tell us about the art and politics of cinema more generally in the age of neoliberal capitalism. Another key concept that could have been further elaborated in the book is that of "moral legitimacy." This formulation is repeatedly referenced as Park shows how activist filmmaking turned to independent cinema, yet one is curious to understand the conditions under which this legitimacy may be constituted, who has to right to claim it, and how it plays out in the politics of film culture in Korea. Such elaboration would help us assess the status of activism and critique in general, particularly in contexts where modernity has continued to exacerbate social challenges and economic inequities. Readers familiar with Korean film history will find that their knowledge of this history, particularly in the key role that the 386 generation played in the cinema of the new millennium, will not be radically altered after reading *Unexpected Alliances*. On the other hand, one will also find that the detail offered in the book greatly enriches this narrative.

3. See Benjamin (1968).

Park's book will appeal to students and scholars interested in the cultural politics of Korean cinema, and is recommended for readers who seek clarity on the transformations of activist culture in an increasingly global Korea. Highly readable and well-researched, *Unexpected Alliances* is a noteworthy contribution to the field of Anthropology as well as Korean and Film Studies.

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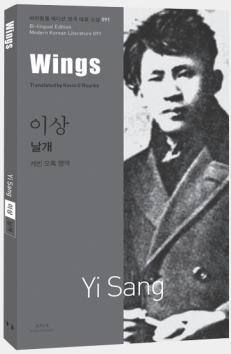

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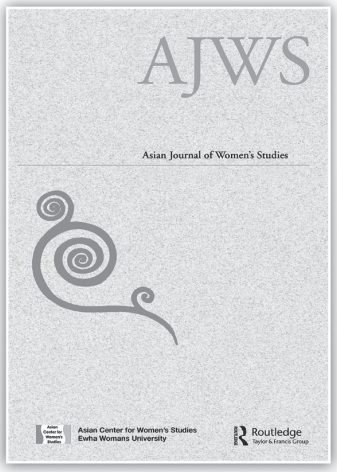

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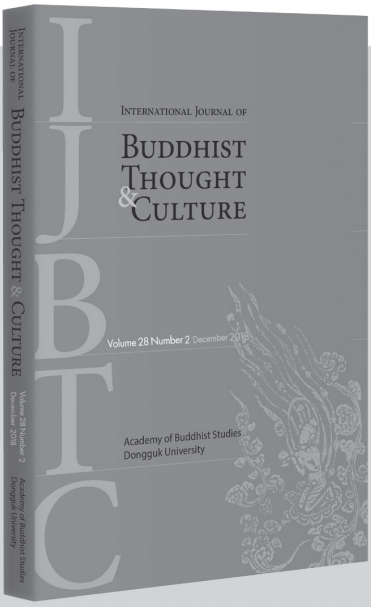

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