

PAST AND FUTURE OF KOREAN CINEMA IN RUSSIA

Leshakov,

Pavel S. Moscow State University

Russia and Korea have a long history of cultural interrelation. Quite symbolically one of the first Russians to land on Korean coast in 1854 was a famous Russian writer Ivan Goncharov, who published his travelling notes on the country and its people in an essay called “Pallada Frigate”. A few decades later in 1898 another well-known Russian writer Nikolay Garin-Mikhailovsky as a member of Russian geographical field expedition gathered the collection of Korean myths, legends and fairy-tales which on his return were published as the first book of Korean tales in Russian language.

In the second half of the XIX century Russia became the first foreign state to accept Korean outward migration allowing peasants from famine stricken North provinces to settle along its Eastern border. By the middle of XX century Korean diaspora in the USSR was the third largest following Chinese and Japanese and included not only peasants but intellectuals who escaped from Japanese colonisation. Tragic deportation of Soviet Koreans from Russia’s Far East to Central Asia in 1937 put a kind of a taboo on all Korean matters. The situation changed radically in 1945 when large-scale military operation of Soviet army against Japanese Quantum army in Manchuria and North Korea brought long-awaited liberation. It led to inevitable military, political and economic engagement of the USSR to Korean peninsular generating new wave of interest in Korea, its history, culture and traditions. That was the period when

the solid basis for Korean scholars and researches was found in the USSR though unfortunately those studies were mostly limited to Northern part of the peninsula. Total severance of ties with Republic of Korea after Korean war and “self-isolation” of the North in the 1960-s surely diminished public Soviet interest in Korea.

Informational break-through happened only in 1988 when Soviet sport team participated in Seoul Olympic Games. It coincided with Gorbachev’s “glasnost” (openness) and paved the way for growth in humanitarian, business and political exchanges between Republic of Korea and the USSR. Yet abrupt mutual discovery of the late 1980-s which led to fast diplomatic recognition and booming bilateral trade didn’t bring about adequate cultural and media exchange. Average Russian man-on-the street has little knowledge of cultural aspects of Korean life even though the destruction of Soviet “iron curtain” and rapid globalisation seems to make it quite easier for both sides to obtain such information.

To summarize, for more than a century Korea and Russia have been close neighbours with intertwined, sometimes tragic, but yet commonly shared history. At present judging by GDP we are same-size economic powers struggling with each other to get into the world’s top ten economies. We’ve become trusting partners in world politics. In international sports we’ve been main rivals in hosting 2014 Winter Olympics. Yet we lack very important information about each other, about our mentality, the information, which could be truly discovered only through intensive media and cultural exchanges.

In my opinion our less-than expected bilateral trade turnover, tiny capital investments, set-backs in political rapprochement, low-level students and scientists exchange are partly to be blamed by inadequate mutual cultural knowledge. At least I could insist that we have here wide space for improvements. And one of the most promising areas to promote Korean culture (both modern and traditional) in Russian society in my view is Korean cinema.

Korean cinematography has recently celebrated 100 years anniversary, though local film industry first appeared in Korea under Japanese colonial rule in the 1920-s. During all these years Korean cinematography went through several ups and downs related to Japanese colonial government's propaganda efforts in 1930-s and early 1940-es, flourishing local filmmaking in late 1950-es (when production exceeded 100 films a year), a shot swallow of freedom after 19.04, growing governmental control and restrictions after the establishment of the Motion Picture Law in 1962 and liberalization and revival after 1997 IMF crises.

Russian cinematography has also more than a century history and such masterpieces as "Potemkin Battleship" created by Sergey Eisenstein in 1925 and "Mother" directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin in 1926 gained it a world-wide recognition. Vladimir Lenin, the founder of Soviet Russia used to say that cinema was the most important of all arts to the first socialist state and its revolutionary culture. That was one of the reasons for Soviet movie-industry to become an important part of proletarian mass culture and state propaganda. Cinema-going was one of the most admired hobbies of Soviet citizens and movies, actors and directors had a huge influence on Soviet society, its culture, even peoples code of behaviour.

In late 1950-s biennial Moscow International Film Festivals were initiated to promote the image of Soviet cinematography worldwide and to introduce foreign films to Soviet audience. The festivals have become one of the most favoured and awaited events for Moscow citizens. People crowded for Western films which in spite of strict censorship raised a bit the "iron curtain" bringing more knowledge about western way of life, getting them acquainted with world movie masterpieces. The festival was usually attended by numerous foreign participants and delegations mainly from newly liberated countries and North Korea was always on the guests list.

The development of North Korean cinematography started just after liberation and quite understandably it was heavily influenced by Soviet socialist traditions. The first documentary was produced in July 1946 "Our Construction" followed by "Democratic Choice"

in September the same year. First feature film “My Motherland” dealing with Kim Il Sung anti-Japanese struggle was shown in June 1949. In 1958 15 full-time feature films were produced in the North and in 1959 their number reached 25. Those films were dominated by military and guerrilla themes inspired by Korean war and after war cultivation of Kim Il Sung personal cult. nevertheless at Moscow International Film Festival North Korean cinematography debuted with feature interpretation of Korean classical legend on Chun Hyang “Chun Hyang Cheon”. The film was awarded silver medal for directory and that was the only success of North Korean film-makers for the decades.

Only in 1985 North Korea again attempted to take part in the competition at Moscow International Film Festival with the “Salt”. The film was created by late Sin Sang-Ok, famous South Korean director who was mysteriously abducted to the North together with wife Choi Un-Hee, a famous South Korean actress. They settled in Hungary, established with personal support of Kim Chung Il “Shin Film” studio with the aim of improving film-making in the North. Actually they succeeded in their attempts by creating several depoliticised films which got recognition at several international film/ thus Choi Un-Hee managed to win the Best Actress Award at 1985 Moscow International Film Festival for her performance in “Salt”. That was the fhighest North Korean award on Moscow International Film Festival. Though frankly speaking the audience was not much attracted by this historical film and to mass spectators of that period North Korean cinematography was associated with action film “Hong Gil Don” which presented to Soviet viewers traditional Korean combat arts.

By some interesting coincidence four years later in 1989 South Korean debut at Moscow International Film Festival was marked by the Best Actress Award going to Kang Soo-Yeon in film “Aje Aje Bara Aje” directed by Im Kwon-Taek who came to Moscow festival as a winner of Venice festival for his film “Surrogate Mother”. The success was followed by first South Korean film week which was held in 1990 in Moscow, Tashkent and Alma-Ata.

Soviet disintegration in 1991 delayed the process of recognition of South Korean cinema by Russian audience. Within a decade once most popular form of art was almost totally destructed by uncontrolled wave of Western videos and TV serials. In fact that was the time when South Korean film industry was also teetering on the verge of virtual collapse. Nevertheless brief acquaintance of Russian film critics and specialists with Korean cinematography took deep roots. Suffice it to say that in 1994 on Sochi International Film Festival a retrospective show of Korean films was staged with the title “Unknown Movie Empire”.

The situation changed in 1999 when blockbuster “Swiri” directed by Kang Je-Gyu arrived on the scene smashing domestic box-office records. The film was noticed by those Russian cinema specialists who tried to diversify the inflow of foreign films dominated by that time by Hollywood products. It was bought for local distribution in 2000 and even had a small commercial success. “Swiri” was the first Korean film which I was asked to translate from Korean to Russian and I am so glad now that it was followed by a new large wave of Korean movies reaching our country.

Along with commercial success the beginning of the new century has brought global recognition to Korean films. In 2002 Korean most renowned movie-maker, Im Kwon-Taek, received the Best Director Award at Cannes Film Festival for his film “Strokes of Fire”. The same year another Korean director, Lee Chang-Dong won the best director award at Venice for his film “Oasis”, and after serving a term as Korean Culture and Tourism Minister returned even with a bigger success getting in 2007 the Best Actress Award at Cannes for his film “Secret Sunshine” (Actress Jeon Do-Youn). In 2004 director Park Chan-Wook’s thriller film “Old Boy” won the Grand Prize at Cannes, which is considered second in line with the Golden Palm. February the same year Korean movie-maker Kim Ki-Duk earned the Best Director Award at Berlin Film Festival for his film “Samaria” and just seven months later at the closing of the 61st Venice Film Festival received the Silver Lion Award for best director of the film “Empty House”.

Indeed it was unprecedented for Korean directors to garner awards at the world's most prestigious film festivals in such rapid succession and it surely boosted the prestige of Korean movies worldwide. All above mentioned films as well as many others created by the same directors have been shown in Russian cinema clubs, and distributed on CD.

Korean director Kim Ki-Duk is paid special favour by Russian audience though as far as I know most of his films failed to attract wide attention from Korean movie-goers. His most popular film in Russia "Spring, Summer, Fall and ... Spring" is considered to be a masterpiece by many film-lovers and I suppose all his 14 films are available on local CD market. Kim Ki-Duk's phenomenon in Russia is quite understandable. From early 1960-s many Russian cinema-goers were much fascinated by the so called "author's films" – films for intellectuals or thinking audience. The most famous representative of that trend in the USSR was world-renowned director Andrey Tarkovsky and his films "Andrey Rublev", "Stalker", "The Mirror". Collapse of the USSR and financial problems of the splintered 1990-s almost totally killed that trend among Russian directors, yet the audience and the demand remained and that niche was taken by outsiders like Kim Ki-Duk whose latest film "Breath" has appeared on Russian screens early this year.

Thus I am very optimistic about the prospects of Korean films in Russia. The only existing problem is the lack of close cooperation between those small Russian companies headed by real professionals in cinema business who are well aware of Korean movie industry and are constantly purchasing Korean films managing to get some commercial profit from it and Korean organizations responsible for promotion of Korean cinema abroad. Korean films could surely become the channel for cultural penetration, raise common interest in Korea and even spread Korean "hallyu" phenomenon into Russia and C.I.S.