

The Genealogy of Shinpa Melodramas in Korean Cinema

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The Beginnings of Korean Cinema and *Shinpa* Melodrama in the Colonial Period

In discussions of Korean cinema, the term “*shinpa*” refers to second-class or outdated melodramas. However, in the early twentieth century, the term referred to “new wave” as opposed to “old” theatrical plays. *Shinpa* originated in Japan, and the *shinpa* troupes led by Im Sung-ku, Kim Do-san and Lee Ki-se produced adaptations of Japanese plays. These *shinpa* troupes initiated filmmaking in colonial Korea with “*ki-no-dramas*” that interspersed stage plays with filmed scenes. As Im Hwa points out, “the reliance on another art form in the earliest stages of Korean filmmaking” (*Chunchoo* magazine, No. 10, November 1941) had an enormous impact on the Korean cinema.

First, the “encounters” between stage plays and films persisted for a long time. Not only the kino-dramas but also the prologues and epilogues that showed some film scenes in theaters, the attraction shows performed by singers and dancers at the start of film screenings, and sound as well as silent films that toured with narrators all prevailed widely and lasted for quite a long time, even after liberation. A new film generation emerged with the introduction of sound films in 1935 and pursued originality for the Korean cinema. For them, that meant



Ohmongnyeo (Na Woon-kyu, 1937)



The Snow Falling Night (Ha Han-soo, 1958)



The Lullaby (Ha Han-soo, 1958)

reducing its dependence on theater. They renamed the form of cinema that still depended on theatrical plays as *shinpa* and regarded it as unartistic and outmoded. The silent film star Na Woon-kyu represented the *shinpa*. His sound film *Arirang III* (1936) was accused of “copying *shinpa* plays” and *Ohmongnyeo* (1937) was actually criticized for “targeting low-class fans to sell more tickets” (*Chosun Ilbo* newspaper, 20 January 1937). During this period, cinema based on a related form of art was known as *shinpa* and audiences who enjoyed film screenings that integrated the theatrical stage with film were called “low-class” fans.

Yet, as long as it designates new as opposed to old theatrical plays, *shinpa* reflects the modern ideas that had arrived in colonized Korea, albeit via transplantation. The Korean cinema that developed out of *shinpa* inherited the modern perspective. Lee Young-il points out that “early films and plays shared the pattern of portraying a family conspiracy concerning an intellectual who studied abroad,” and that this was “a kind of modernism in kino-dramas” (2004, p. 65). Kang Young-hee explains in her 1989 master’s thesis at Seoul University that “antinomy” is the core characteristic of *shinpa*. Antinomy, referring to contradiction or opposition between two values, describes the pain and confusion of the public caught in the struggle between outdated pre-modern and new modern values. The main character in *shinpa* falls into a dilemma and his context usually makes the choice for him. The dependent self feels helpless, confused and troubled, and such feelings lead to defeatism and excessive emotionalism. In other words, *shinpa* is a form of melodrama that shows the collision of the modern and pre-modern worlds with defeatism and emotionalism in colonized Korea.

Drawing a Line between Melodrama and *Shinpa*: *Shinpa* films in the late 1950s

Lee Young-il divides the melodramas of the 1950s into “contemporary melodrama” and “*shinpa*” (2004, p. 248 and 266). What is the difference between the two? As the modifier “contemporary” suggests,



Love Me Once Again (Jung So-young, 1968)



A Moment to Remember (John H. Lee, 2004)



You're My Sunshine! (Park Jin-pyo, 2005)

the difference is in the relationship to time.

After the liberation, Korea was flooded with American pop culture, and after the Korean War, South Korea was rapidly Americanized. Korea depended on the US economically and culturally. In the late 1950s, the audience learned new fashion from American films and started establishing new sensibilities. The fashionable melodramas that started with *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyung-mo, 1956) were the outcome of this trend.

However, a large proportion of popular culture was still *shinpa*. After the 1930s, *shinpa* was continued by commercial troupes such as Shinmudae and Chosunyeongeuksa, the Dongyang Theater's plays such as *Being Lucky Neither at Cards nor at Love*, and the record companies' musical ensembles. The kino-drama also persisted, albeit on the periphery. In the 1950s, the kino-drama all of a sudden made a comeback and rejoined the mainstream of Korean cinema. Lee Young-il refers to an unexpected flood of *shinpa* in this period. However, considering the continued *shinpa* in the theater, maybe this development did not come out of the blue.

During the restoration period after the war, Korean cinema grew exponentially. In this period, stage stars rushed to the screen in search of audiences. Many actors, producers, directors, art directors, and lighting directors had theatre backgrounds. Film plots were adapted from theatrical plays and filmed using theatrical skills. In other words, the flood of 1950s *shinpa* was the result of theatrical artists shifting into the cinema.

The theater star Jeon Ok of the 1950s is a typical example. The heads of Baekjogageukdan troupe, Jeon Ok and her husband, established a film company and made popular plays into films such as *A Night of Harbor* (Kim Hwa-rang, 1957), *The Snow Falling Night* (Ha Han-soo, 1958), *The Tears of Mokpo* (Ha Han-soo, 1958) and *The Lullaby* (Ha Han-soo, 1958). Her films were known as typical *shinpa* films and distinguished from the melodramas made by Hong Seong-ki and Kim Ji-

mee. Jeon Ok, who had trained herself on the stage with singing and dancing, seemed to act in an exaggerated manner, and the stories from the colonial period were regarded as outdated. Yet her films gained popularity, because national division and the Korean War provided further stimulus for *shinpa* production. The defeatism and exaggerated emotionalism of *shinpa* was continued into war stories. The peculiar style adapted from the stage included standardized sets, the *mise-en-scène*, prolonged long shots, exaggerated acting and makeup, background music to arouse emotions, singing actors, monologues, and too much voiceover narration.

Modernization and *Shinpa* in the 1960s

Interestingly, the *shinpa* genre was marginalized once again in the 1960s, as it had been in the 1930s. The entrepreneurial spirit and industrialization of the late 1950s, the rise of a new generation of filmmakers including Shin Sang-ok, Kim Ki-young and Yu Hyun-mok, their theories of film art, the emergence of classical Hollywood filmmaking as something Korean cinema had to learn, and the neo-realist spirit all combined to push *shinpa* to the edge. With *shinpa* being condemned as a colonial hangover, its critics never had to justify themselves.

Family melodrama and youth films took over the mainstream from *shinpa*. Forced out of the cinema, *shinpa* could not even return to the stage, because cinema had taken over from the stage as the key entertainment in the 1950s. As a result, *shinpa* remained only as fragments of melodramas, or mere style. The remaining issue was to what extent this *shinpa* style was used in any particular film, because contemporary film critics harshly condemned any trace of *shinpa* as low-class and anachronistic.

However, *shinpa* made another comeback in the late 1960s. *Love Me Once Again* (1968, Jung So-young) signaled this revival. The return of the *shinpa* was still bitterly attacked, but the commercial success of *Love Me Once Again* and its sequels was so great that such criticism could eas-

ily be ignored.

1960s *shinpa* were different from their predecessors in two ways. First, they did not depend on the encounter with the theatrical stage. Although characteristics from the 1950s such as exaggeration of acting, illogical narration, and excessive background music remained, the *shinpa* style of 1960s film was more cinematic, using camera movement, zooms, original music scores, and cause-and-effect narrative structures. However, such characteristics were still regarded as “outdated and low-class” in the 1960s.

Second, the class conflict that developed with industrialization and patriarchal oppression both appeared in the *shinpa* films of the time. Lee Young-il points out, “While *shinpa* of the colonial period featured Japanese military or a loan shark who took the Japanese side, those of the 1950s depicted prostitutes in slums, and those of the 1960s took place in living rooms or the house of a company president” (2004, p. 268). In this living room or house of a company president lived a perfect bourgeois family composed of a competent father, a wise mother, and lovely children. People who might break this perfect family like a single mother or prostitutes and their children were pushed out of society and had to suffer poverty and deprivation. There was no hope left for change in this unequal world. Such defeatism and emotionalism made a space for the return of *shinpa*. With the public fighting poverty and deprivation just like the heroes in the films, *shinpa* took over the mainstream again. Most melodramas simply became *shinpa* films, and even horror films and action films adopted the style. Only some scenarists and critics who had studied western modern films and believed themselves to be sensible artists did not approve of the return to *shinpa* style.

For today's audiences, most of the films of the 1970s, including even new generation films by Lee Jang-ho, Kim Ho-sun and Ha Kilchong, would seem full of *shinpa* style. This shows that the concept responds to the times. However, the audience of the 1970s did not see contemporary films as *shinpa*. If outdated films were called *shinpa*, then all old Korean films would be *shinpa*. Among the determining characteristics of *shinpa* films such as a sense of the times, connections to the stage, pessimism, and excessive emotionalism, the last is the only aspect recognized by today's audiences as *shinpa*. Thus, critics find the *shinpa* style in 1997 melodramas as well as the latest films such as *A Moment to Remember* (John H. Lee, 2004) and *You're My Sunshine!* (Park Jin-pyo, 2005). Yet, if excessive emotionalism were the only factor that characterized *shinpa*, most melodramas would fall into the category. While *shinpa* is an important keyword in the history of Korean cinema, it may have become too empty to be useful for understanding today's cinema.