

1970s Korean Cinema and Ha Kilchong

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“Like all forms of art, the film that does not recognize people or human endeavor is completely false. It is the same with government.”

Ha Kilchong (1941-1979)¹

The decade of the 1970s was the darkest period of Korean cinematic history both in terms of the volume and the quality of the films. There were two major causes for this. First, television emerged as a new means of entertainment in place of cinema. According to Ham Chongho, the distribution rate for television sets in 1965 was statistically insignificant - 0.2% but in 1969, it skyrocketed to 89.1%.² In addition to this new competition, Park Chunghee, the new President since 1963 since he had taken over the government through a military coup in 1961, exerted an unprec-

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- 1 The quote is excerpted from Harvard University's retrospective screening on Ha Kilchong. The event was held in 2017 under the title, "Ha Kilchong and the Revitalization of the Korean Cinema." It screened all of Ha's seven films for the first time in America.
- 2 Ham Chongho, "Nihilism and Tragic Nature Appeared in the Ha Kil-chong's *The March of Fools*," *Hanminjok Munhwa yŏn'gu* (The Review of Korean Cultural Studies) 39 (February 2012): 3.

edented level of power over the film industry to control any anti-government contents and personnel. Park revised the Motion Picture Law and film policies over four times during his presidency (1963, 1966, 1970, and 1973) following the enactment of Korea's first systematized Motion Picture Law in 1962.³ The fourth revision of the law, in particular, dramatically strengthened the censorship measures. By then Park had instituted the so-called Yushin system of government, established to secure his dictatorship and to ensure the Park regime's "[suppression of] the resistance of workers, students and dissident intellectuals against authoritarian rule."⁴ Under this fourth revision, multiple censorship viewings were possible for one movie. The percentage of film scenarios returned for revision by censorship was at mere 3.7% in 1970, but with the revision of the Motion Picture Law in 1973 it shot up to 58%. In the year of 1975, the rate of rejection for the scenarios submitted reached 80%, indicating most of them were requested to be revised.⁵

The censors vigilantly spotted and deleted any depiction that was anti-authority, socially realistic or politically conscious. Under these circumstances, creativity for filmmaking was nearly decimated and many realist or socially conscious films became "extinct." It resulted in the increase of "apolitical, escapist genre films such as action/martial arts films, melodramas or government propaganda films."⁶

Ha Kilchong was one of the very few film directors of the 1970s who

3 Molly Kim, *Whoring the Mermaid: The Study of South Korean Hostess Films* (1974-1982), PhD Diss, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2013, 29.

4 Im Hyugbae, "The Origins of the Yushin Regime: Machiavelli Unveiled" in *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

5 Cho Chaehŭi, "Flashback Korean Cinema Centennial"

6 Molly Kim, *Whoring the Mermaid: The Study of South Korean Hostess Films* (1974-1982), 29.

constantly and persistently countered against Park Chunghee's military dictatorship by producing socially and politically critical films. Ha made a total of seven films until his premature death at the age of 38. Most of them, especially his early films including *The Pollen of Flowers* [Hwabun] (1972) and *Fidelity* [Sujöl] (1973)⁷ were censored heavily and sometimes boycotted for censorship by government officials for his politically critical tone.⁸ In his films including his debut work, *The Pollen*, Ha constantly attempted to present political satires and allegories of Korea's military dictatorship. Shortly after his debut, Ha was branded and targeted by government censors.⁹

Ha Kilchong was also notable for his artistic engagement with global film/aesthetic movements of the era. In his essays, Ha insisted that it is important to recognize globally rising new wave film movements and other concurrent cinematic aesthetics including French New Wave, New American Cinema and the Euro-American avant-garde cinema.¹⁰ As a film critic, Ha wrote extensively on the films of such European auteurs as David Lean, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Bernardo Bertolucci. His strong engagement with European cinema is in fact reflected in his films through images and characters. Perhaps because of his open admiration of European auteurs, some of his films such as *The Pollen* and *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars II* have been accused of plagiarism due to their similari-

7 For the titles of films including *The Pollen of Flowers* and *Fidelity*, I used the official English titles provided by the KMDB (Korean Movie Database).

8 Ha Kilchong, *T'aerül wihan Kwagöbunsa,paengma t'ago on Ttotto* (The Past Participle for the Birth, Tto-tto on a white horse) (Seoul: Korean Film Archive and Busan International Film Festival, 2009), 263.

9 Ha Kilchong, *T'aerül wihan Kwagöbunsa,paengma t'ago on Ttotto*.

10 Ha Kilchong, *Sahoejök Yöngsanggwa Pansahoejök Yöngsang* (Social images and anti-social images) (Seoul: Korean Film Archive and Busan International Film Festival, 2009), 160-203.

ties to Euro-American films.¹¹

Yet, among all Korean films of the 1970s, Ha's films were most damaged by government censorship.¹² Ha's biggest commercial hit, *The March of Fools* [1975, Pabodül ūi Haengjin] for example was reviewed by the state censorship more than three times before it was finally approved. The film was cut for a total of 30 minutes including four entire sequences. The government even confiscated the deleted negatives of the film because "they were unacceptably anti-regime."¹³

It was Ha's great misfortune that his years of active filmmaking from 1972 to 1979 overlapped with the period of the Yushin dictatorship.¹⁴ Due to this tragic coincidence, Ha's friend and a writer, Lee Mun'gyu and Lee Manjae have both described Ha as a 'martyr' of the tragic times.¹⁵ It might not be an exaggeration to say that Ha's misfortune itself was the personification of Korean cinema of the 1970s. The ups and downs of his filmmaking career and his crippled films remain as testimony to the brutality of Park Chunghee's regime.

Ha Kilchong however has been largely underrepresented and less researched compared to his other contemporaries such as Lee Changho and Kim Hosŏn. Since BIFF (Busan International Film Festival) had a retrospective of Ha in 2009, there has been increased attention paid to this unfortunate, and yet historically and cinematically significant filmmak-

11 Im Togyŏng, "Ha Kilchong: The Leader of Korean New Wave Film Movement," https://monthly.chosun.com/client/news/viw.asp?nNew_sNumb=201201100057. *Monthly Chosun*, 2012.

12 Kang Seongryul(Sŏngnyŏl), "Tragedy, Criticism and Experiment: Three Codes to Understand Ha Kilchong," *Journal of Film Studies (Yŏnghwa Yŏngu)*, 44 (June 2010): 10.

13 Kim Sŭnggyŏng, "A Release of Censorship Documents of *The March of Fools*," www.kmdb.or.kr/story/180/4769. 2018.8.13.

14 Kang Seongryul(Sŏngnyŏl), "Tragedy, Criticism and Experiment: Three Codes to Understand Ha Kilchong."

15 *Ha Kilchong: T'aerŭl wihan Kwagŏbunsa, Paengma t'ago on Ttotto*, 142-150; 324-341.

er.¹⁶ As a part of the event, the Korean Film Archive published a three-volume set on Ha Kilchong combined with scholarly essays and Ha's personal notes. Since the event, there has been an increase of scholarly research on Ha with various perspectives. Kim Tongsik has viewed surrealism in Ha's films and writings in relation to his political consciousness.¹⁷ Kim Won has analyzed the representation of the mass in Ha's films while Park Myŏngjin focuses on the representation of sexuality in the films.¹⁸ While academic attention on Ha is gradually increasing within Korean scholarship, there has been very little work done in the English language. This article is one of the first attempts to introduce Ha Kilchong to Anglophone scholarship and to showcase some of his early works, *The Pollen of Flowers* and *Fidelity* where his cinematic vision and political critique shine the most. By doing so, I hope to pay my tribute to the work of Ha Kilchong that they have not properly received, and more importantly to highlight the historical significance of his films in the context of 1970s Korean cinema.

16 Kang Seongryul(Sŏngnyŏl) had written many articles on Ha even before the retrospective at BIFF. The most collective work would be his book project, *Ha Kilchong, Hok Eun Haengjin Hae Tŏn Yŏnghwa Pabo* which is a collection of film analyses and personal essays written based on the oral history about Ha Kilchong (Seoul: E-ron gwa sil cheon, 2005). An Jae-seok focuses on Ha's cinematic achievements before he entered Chung Moo Ro. "The Right View of a Film Director, Ha Kilchong – Focusing on the Achievements before Entering Choong Moo Ro," *Journal of Film Studies* 40 (June 2009): 127-159.

17 Kim Dongsik, "4·19 Generation's Political Unconsciousness and A Symbol of 'Surrealism'- Footnotes on Ha Kilchong's Films and Writings," *Journal of Popular Narrative* 18, no.1(June 2012):77-108.

18 Kim Won, "Ha Kilchong as Historical Events: Masses Represented in the Films of Ha Kilchong in the 1970s", *Journal of Contemporary Literature* 50 (June 2013); Park Myungjin(Myŏngjin), "A Study on the Sexuality and Politics of Space in the Films of Ha Kilchong", *Journal of Korean Literature* 26 (February 2009): 219-245.

Allegorization of Power: *The Pollen*

Ha started studying French Literature at Seoul National University, one of the most prestigious universities, in 1959. He was not happy with his college life because his own country was plagued with dictatorship and his colleagues were being killed in student demonstrations. Ha participated in the April Revolution (1960) but not long after, the nation soon was overtaken by the dictator Park Chunghee by military coup.¹⁹ Deeply hurt and desperate, after working at Air France for some time, Ha left for the US to study film. He received his MFA from UCLA, which made him the first Korean filmmaker with an advanced degree in filmmaking from an overseas institution. Jo Joon-hyung argues that Ha's graduation project, *A Ritual for a Soldier* (1969), was received highly and based on its strength he was recruited by American film companies upon his graduation. But Ha decided to come home. Ha was confident of his future filmmaking career in Korea and was certain that he could make a difference in Korean cinema with the most up-to-date filmmaking training that he received in the US.²⁰

The Pollen was Ha's first full-length feature that he made after he came back to Korea from the US in 1972. Ha retrospectively claimed that *The Pollen* was like a 'prototype' of his films that capsuled Ha's political

19 The April Revolution took place on the date of April. 19th, 1960. It was a nationwide democratic movement which originally had initiated by high school and college students. "As the public and professors joined a movement for justice, they brought down a dictatorial government that sought prolonged rule through illegal elections. In the course of the campaign, however, 186 people were killed and 6,026 injured. This was a sacrifice for democracy and a revolution through bloodshed." Excerpted from the article, "Remembering the 4.19 Revolution", *Dong-a Daily*, <http://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20100417/264838/1/Remembering-the-April-19-Revolution>.

20 Cho Joonhyung(Chunhyöng), "The Life and Films of Ha Kilchong" in *Ha Kilchong: T'aerül wihan Kwagöbunsa,paengma t'ago on Titotto* (Seoul: Korean Film Archive and Busan International Film Festival), 20.

view and the aesthetics of cinema.²¹ Ha believed that films should not shun societal and political issues. The film also reflects the influences from a variety of European art films and avant-garde films he had encountered over the years. *The Pollen* was the most comprehensive work infused with Ha's political inclination and the aesthetics he mostly observed in European 'auteur' films.

The film presents a story of a wealthy bisexual businessman, Hyönma (Nam Kungwõn). He lives in a deserted blue house with his mistress, Saeran, her younger sister, Miran and a maid, Ongnyõ. One day, he brings a young male secretary, Danju (Ha Myõngjung) into the house, introducing him as his protégé. Noticing Hyönma's growing affection towards Danju, Saeran gets jealous and expresses great displeasure towards him. Meanwhile, Danju and Miran fall in love with each other and leave the blue house for a night out. Hyönma tracks them down and locks up Danju in the basement. Shortly after, Hyönma's company goes bankrupt and the creditors raid the blue house. As Hyönma runs away from the deadly chaos to save himself, Saeran gets gang raped by the creditors and shortly after dies from the incident. Dan-ju escapes the house leaving Miran behind.

Apart from being highly unconventional and possibly the most controversial film up until that point of Korean cinema, *The Pollen* contains what Ha had constituted for his own definition of 'true film' – the political tale presented with high aesthetics. *The Pollen* is replete with political allegories particularly presented through the character of Hyönma, the dictator in the 'blue house,' which is an obvious metaphor for the Presidential Blue House.

In terms of visualization, Ha employs a striking red color tone and unstable camera movements to portray the escalation of Hyönma's control

21 Lee Seonjoo(Sõnju), "Translating "New Cinema"-Self-reflexivity and Cultural Politics in Ha Kilchong's *The Pollen of Flowers*," *Journal of Film Studies* 42 (December 2009.): 489.

on other members of the house. As Hyönma becomes increasingly erratic, stimulated by the romance between Danju and Miran, he is increasingly shown in tilted angles filmed with a hand-held camera. When his insanity reaches the peak and other characters are physically threatened by him, the hue of the film becomes bloody red, accentuated by the lighting and costume of the characters.

The film is also notable for its first screen representation of bisexuality ever employed in Korean cinema, one of the main reasons for its censorship troubles with the state. Hyönma's bisexuality eloquently signifies his insatiable greed for both sexual and authoritarian domination. This is observed through his attitude towards his two lovers, Saeran and Danju. During the sex scenes with Saeran, Hyönma displays excessive sexual desire and abusive manner which Saeran occasionally complains about. In the scenes with Danju which mostly take place at his office, Hyönma displays his absolutely authority over, in fact ownership of Danju. When he is turned away by Danju because of his new lover, Miran, Hyönma is literally driven insane.

The film was censored about 30 minutes including the depiction of Hyönma's tyranny and homoeroticism.²² Such instance of severe censorship damaged the film extensively, making what was already a complicated story even more difficult to follow. According to Lee Sönju, when the film was released, the press vied with one another to label *The Pollen* with such phrases as "shocking," "sensational," and "problematic," ostensibly meant as warnings to the sensitive among the viewing public but also partly as marketing ploys.²³ Even with such catchy phrases, the film completely failed at the box office. What's worse, it was accused for plagiarizing *Pasolini's Teorema* (1968) by a film critic, Yu Hanch'öl.²⁴ De-

22 In the scenes involved with these depictions, the shots were visibly cut and do not coherently flow.

23 Lee Seonjoo(Sönju), "Translating "New Cinema"-Self-reflexivity and Cultural Politics in HA Kilchong's *The Pollen of Flowers*," 489-490.

24 The issue was first raised by Yu Hanch'öl based on the similarities of the plot and

spite this unsuccessful outcome both financially and critically, *The Pollen* remains as Ha's most original film true to his passion for cinema and his genuine concern for Korean society.

Portrait of Violence in *FIDELITY* (1973)²⁵

Ha was devastated and frustrated not only with the tyranny of government censorship but also with the cold responses from both critics and filmgoers. Perhaps because of this frustration, he turned his eyes to unrealist, period drama cum horror film. This could have been regarded as a safer choice both for censorship and marketability.

Fidelity takes place in the Hansagun Period [2333, BC~ 108, AD]. Yusin (Ha Myōngjung, the director's real-life brother) gets enlisted in the military and leaves his wife, Gillye (Park Chiyōng) and his young daughter, Yongbun (Lee Yōngok). Yusin is taken in a battlefield. Gillye and Yongbun gradually lose the hope that they will see Yusin again after the prolonged wait. Meanwhile, their village has been taken over by a tyrant. The villain takes fancy on Gillye and sends his soldiers to claim her. Starved from prolonged drought, Gillye follows the soldiers deceived by their lies that they will give her food. The leader drugs and rapes Gillye and orders his soldiers to kill her daughter. Yusin comes back home and unites with his wife and daughter without knowing they are the ghosts of Gillye and Yongbun. When he wakes up, he notices what he saw was an illusion. He also finds out about the tragedy that happened to his family.

Ha has mentioned that "*Fidelity* is a film for which I made many com-

character while serving a role as a jury member of the Blue Dragon Film Awards. Although the charge was never validated, it caused Ha being disqualified from multiple awards including the Grand Bell Film Awards.

25 *Fidelity* is sometimes referred as 'Her Fidelity' but I use the official English title of 'Fidelity' that KMDB (Korean Movie Data Base) indicates.

promises unlike *The Pollen*.”²⁶ It appears when he said ‘compromises’ he pointed to the fact that he chose horror/fantasy genre set in the distant past, not a realist drama, which would be less troubling in terms of government censorship. Further to this, Ha provides a (relatively) happy ending in *Fidelity* which would have made the film seemingly more acceptable. When Yusin learns that his wife and daughter have been murdered by the leader, he decides to avenge their deaths. In collaboration with the spirits of Gillye and Yongbun, Yusin kills the leader. Even though the revenge is completed at the expense of Yusin’s life, the massacre of village people finally ends. The ending presents a hero’s final punishment of the dictator and his soldiers. The tone of the ending is markedly different from the tragic ending of *The Pollen* wherein Hyōnma successfully escapes punishment, while the two sisters either get raped or vanish.

Yet, Ha’s critique of absolute power and dictatorship is still predominant in the film even more so than *The Pollen*, explicated through a high level of eroticism and violence.²⁷ The multiple rape scenes led by the leader and his soldiers for example, vividly portray the brutality and savageness of the dictator and his soldiers. The last rape sequence involved with the soldiers raiding the village and raping all village women is set up similar to the last sequence of *The Pollen* where Saeran gets gang-raped by Hyōnma’s creditors. However, unlike the bird’s eye view or long shots for the rape scenes in *The Pollen*, here Ha utilizes close-ups of the soldiers forcibly undressing and raping women closely depicting the cruelty of dictatorship.

Despite the ‘compromises’ that Ha claimed that he made, *Fidelity* was also censored more than 20 minutes, including the rape sequence, and did

26 Cho Joonhyung(Chunhyōng), “The Life and Films of Ha Kilchong” in *Ha Kilchong: Taereul Wihan Gwageo Boonsa, Baekma Tago on Tto-Tto*, (Seoul: Korean Film Archive and Busan International Film Festival), 22

27 For the detailed analysis of the representation of eroticism in *Fidelity*, read my article (written in Korean), “Wedding Eroticism and Horror: The Rise of Erotic Horror Films in the Period of Yushin Regime,” *Journal of Korean Literature and Films* 19, no. 2 (September 2018): 205-221.

not do well at the box office. He described his state of mind about the final (cut) version of *Fidelity* as follows: “I feel like my eyes were poked out and limbs were cut. The version that the audience watched is just like wrapping paper without content.”²⁸ It was another failure that tore apart the once-full-with-passion-and-talent artist. Ha mentioned that he almost quit filmmaking after the release of *Fidelity*.²⁹ As Pak Hyönsön notes however *Fidelity* is the most stand-out film that is filled with the radical language of cinema and self-reflexivity of Ha who had been struggling between his political ideals and fascist reality of Korea.³⁰ As he did with *The Pollen*, Ha allegorizes the evilness of power through the figure of the tyrant, who remains anonymous throughout the film. Perhaps with the more graphic representation of sex and violence, the film explicates the greed and brutality of the leader and the pain of the people.

Epilogue

Ha Kilchong was deeply frustrated following the heavy censorship of these two films and their commercial failures. Ha finally was able to become a commercial and critically successful filmmaker with his third feature, *The March of Fools* (1975) [Babo Deul Eui Haengjin]. The film presents a socially critical tale about three college misfits but this time with comic dialogue and romantic plots that many audiences could enjoy. The film sold approximately 174,500 tickets during its 49-day theatrical run

28 Ha Kilchong, “Newspaper Ads and The Portrait of a Fool” in *Ha Kilchong: T’aerül wihan Kwagöbunsa, Paengma t’ago on Ttotto*, (Seoul: Korean Film Archive and Busan International Film Festival, 2009), 264.

29 Ha Kilchong, “Newspaper Ads and The Portrait of a Fool” in *Ha Kilchong: T’aerül wihan Kwagöbunsa, Paengma t’ago on Ttotto*.

30 Pak Hyönsön, “The Return of a Cosmopolitan Subject and the World of Violence in Ha Kilchong’s *Her Fidelity* (1973)”, *Journal of Korean Drama Arts Studies* 52 (June 2016): 166.

and was well-received by the press as well.³¹ Lee Yöngil, a film critic/historian writes that even though the overall quality of Korean films had decreased due to the state censorship, *The March of Fools* signaled that Korean films had a promising future.³²

Yet, *The March of Fools* was also subject to severe censorship, resulting in the film being cut around 30 minutes.³³ Furthermore, the government destroyed the film's negative so that he could not restore it to his specification.³⁴ A noted film critic Chung Söngil, mentions that he seemed to give up on himself at this point.³⁵ Truly, Ha drank and picked fights everyday around the release of *The March of Fools*.³⁶ As Chung notes, "*The March of Fools* was not an ambitious film for Ha; it was a film representing shame and self-abuse. The film ridiculed Korean intellectuals of the era but at the same time sought to provide consolation to the upcoming younger generation."³⁷

After *The March of Fools*, Ha's films visibly became 'compliant.' His later films including *Ascension of Han Ne* [Hanne üi Söngch'ön] (1977), *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars II* [Pyöl dü'r üi Kohyang] (1979) and *Byung-tae and Young-ja* (1979) passed state censorship without any re-

31 Molly Kim, "Wedding Eroticism and Horror: The Rise of Erotic Horror Films in the Period of Yushin Regime," 99.

32 Molly Kim, "Wedding Eroticism and Horror: The Rise of Erotic Horror Films in the Period of Yushin Regime," 99.

33 Yoon yösu, "Celebrating the Centennial of Korean Cinema: The Best Korean Film, *The March of Fools*," *Sports Dong-a Daily*, <http://sports.donga.com/3/all/20190501/95340096/5>. 2019. 5.2.

34 Chung Söngil, "Our Fools that were censored," *Han'györe Daily* <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/movie/894684.html>. 2019, 5.21.

35 Chung Söngil, "Our Fools that were censored," *Han'györe Daily* <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/movie/894684.html>. 2019, 5.21.

36 Chung Söngil, "Our Fools that were censored," *Han'györe Daily* <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/movie/894684.html>. 2019, 5.21.

37 Chung Söngil, "Our Fools that were censored," *Han'györe Daily* <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/movie/894684.html>. 2019, 5.21.

quests for cut or revision, indicating that Ha Kilchong was giving up on his fight for autonomy.³⁸ Some of these films for instance, *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars II* (1979) earned a top box office spot. However, despite the financial stability that would have secured him enough funds for future projects – the films that he heartfully wanted to make—Ha unexpectedly died from a stroke in a shabby motel. He was only 38 years old.

Although he only made seven films in his lifetime, they mirrored the chaotic reality of Korean society led by the insanity of dictatorship with the carefully crafted, new kind of cinematic language. These films are also invaluable historical documents that unravel important dynamics across Korean cinema, especially associated with the shifting film policies and censorship that the Park regime imposed. Truly, Ha Kilchong is a singular auteur and a rebel who dared to create cinema of the victims and for the victims under the unjust power that reigned the 1970s of Korea. His passion and talent that were shared for too short of a time will be re-lived eternally in his films.

38 Kim Yoonmi(yunmi), “A Visual Analysis of ‘Korean Image’ in *Ascension of Hane,*” *The Drama Studies* 28 (June 2008): 9.

