

Book Review

Ju Jinsuk [Joo Jinsook] 주진숙 and Yi Sunjin [Lee Soonjin] 이순진. 2020. 『영화하는 여자들』 [Women who make films]. Paju: Sagyejeol 사계절. 396 pp. ISBN 9791160946772 ₩19,800

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How do you write women into the history of Korean cinema when they are systematically denied positions of power within the film industry? This book addresses this question and attempts to avoid the pitfalls of adhering to dominant narratives of Korean film studies, which often render women invisible or represent them as helpless victims marginalized by the film industry. Ju Jinsuk and Yi Sunjin successfully present the vivid voices of twenty women who shaped the South Korean film industry as directors, producers, cinematographers, actresses, film editors, sound engineers, marketers, and policy makers. In this regard, *Women who make films* can be read as an ethnography of women who transformed South Korean cinema during the past 30 years. The book, composed of 20 interviews, is divided into three parts and moves chronologically from the 1990s to 2010s, during which the women emerge as a force to reckon with in the South Korean film industry. Each of the women filmmakers mentioned below corresponds to the chapter in which she is interviewed. This book review will discuss a few themes that cut across time periods.

First, women were at the forefront of bringing about and implementing much-needed structural changes in the film industry. Traditionally, film

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staff in training worked as apprentices to directors, and the immense power imbalance between staff and upper-level management often led to abuse and overwork without fair pay. In 2007, this *doje* (master-apprentice) system was replaced by standard labor contracts, which prohibited employers from requiring employees to work more than 52 hours a week. In the past, new staff members worked countless hours, sometimes to the point of compromising their health. Given that those aspiring filmmakers were often praised for fueling the South Korean film industry, this new legal protection brought seismic change to the system. Film producer Sim Jaemyeong's Myung Film was the first production company to embrace the new system. Choe Euna, a respected sound engineer, argues that a better labor environment will lead to film staff whose economic status is less precarious, which in turn will result in better sound quality in Korean films.

Other examples of women leading out to change the film industry include Sim Jaemyeong, Im Sunrye (director), and Chae Yunhui (marketer), who together founded the Korean Film Industry Gender Equality Center in 2018 to combat sexual violence and foster a women-friendly environment in the film industry. An Jeongsuk, a prominent journalist and policy maker, led efforts to support independent filmmakers and played a critical role in founding an indie-only theater. This generation of women, who established their careers in the 1990s, has initiated and witnessed firsthand the notable changes that define the current film industry, which is considerably more humane and friendly to newcomers, women, and filmmakers with smaller budgets and alternative visions.

Second, changes in the film industry favoring women involved shifts in the ways women are portrayed in films. The book discusses representational strategies of female directors (Im Sunrye, Kim Ilran, Yun Gaeun, Jeon Goun), producers (Sim Jaemyeong, Kim Yeongdeok, Je Jeongju), and cinematographers (Nam Jina, Eom Hyejeong) who put forth new sensibilities and unique perspectives gained through their positionality as women. Jeon Goun, the director of recent independent film sensation *Microhabitat*, notes that female characters in the past were indistinguishable and uninteresting, so representing diverse and vibrant female characters is an important mission for her. The actresses featured in this book, Jeon Doyeon, Mun Sori, and Cheon Uhui, embody this shift and have built successful careers playing characters that go beyond stereotypical womanhood. Mun Sori argues, "All female characters should have more agency, and every film should incorporate more gender sensitivity." She

adds that stereotypical representations of women in South Korean cinema are ironic, given how central young female viewers are to the success of films in South Korea, as they are the target audience for marketers.

Third, the collapse of the *doje* system coincided with technical changes in the film industry. Women, mostly working behind the scenes, were successful early adopters of these new technologies: the shift from film to digital, discussed in interviews with cinematographers Nam Jina and Eom Hyejeong; new digital editing formats, utilized by Bak Gokji, Sin Mingyeong; emergence of a “production design” system, which gave a uniform “look” to films, discussed by Ryu Seonghui; professionalization of film marketing, as explained by Bak Hyegeong; and the merging of lighting, technical directing, and cinematography embraced by Nam Jina.

Staying faithful to their promise to avoid the depiction of women in the film industry as victims, the authors present nuanced portraits of women who built their paths, trajectories, and networks in a filmmaking environment that was traditionally hostile to women. These women come across as intelligent, innovative, and strategic agents of change. The authors, who have researched Korean cinema for the past several decades, ask highly informed questions, leading to fascinating dialogues about Korean cinema and women’s place in it. Also central to the dialogues presented in this book is the cooperation and solidarity among women in the South Korean film industry. Readers will appreciate how the conditions people take for granted in the current film industry are the outcomes of the struggles and negotiations of women filmmakers of the past.

Given the lack of English-language literature on the role women play in the South Korean film industry, this book is a welcome addition to the studies of Korean cinema and ethnographies of the Korean film industry. Those with general interests in gender, cinema, and the anthropology of Korean cultural production will find this book well worth the read.