

## **Film Censorship Policy During Park Chung Hee's Military Regime (1960-1979) and Hostess Films**

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### **Abstract**

Park Chung-hee's military government (1960-1979) purportedly used film censorship to distract the public from political consciousness by controlling political materials in films while condoning censorship control on sexual content. As a result, the production of soft-core adult films soared and became popular among Korean audiences. One such film genre that thrived during this period, so-called hostess films (prostitute films), is worthy of attention for the films' foregrounding issues of class, poverty and other social issues that the state censorship board heavily regulated. In viewing such dynamics between state censorship and film, this article aims to unravel the questions of how the state was willing to turn a blind eye to the explicit sexualization of women in hostess films when film censorship was at its peak and why the social and political aspects of this group of films about female sexual workers were not considered socially relevant by the censorship board, through scrutinizing the interplay between Park's state censorship and hostess films. Furthermore, it offers an analysis of a hostess film, *The Rose that Swallowed Thorn* (Cheong, 1979), as a case study to show how it strategically orchestrates visual and thematic elements to circumvent censorship enforcement.

**Keywords:** film censorship, hostess films, prostitute films, military regime, film policy

*The regulatory apparatus extends beyond any single institution to a “thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions.”*

–Theresa Cronin (2009)

*Where there is repression or censorship, there is also “production,” the calling-into-representation of the very content to be censored, and yet, or rather consequently, this calling-into-representation is never in a position of exteriority to the censorship.*

–Paul Morrison (2013)

### **Introduction: Korean film censorship policy during the military regime**

Films are inevitably influenced by censorship, either as an obligatory or self-regulatory form by the film industry. The terms of censorship exercise strong power over films, specifically to the constituents of the film genre. As Jacobs correctly puts it, “Genre provides a focal point for the permutations of conventions of genre instigated by film censorship” (1997, p. x)”.

In the case of South Korean cinema, especially during Park Chung-hee’s military regime, state-operated film censorship exerted unprecedented power over film studios and directors. During his military dictatorship from 1960 to 1979, Park revised the Motion Picture Law and its constituting film policies four times (1963, 1966, 1970 and 1973) after his promulgation of Korea’s first systematized Motion Picture Law in 1962. The fourth revision of the law, in particular, dramatically strengthened the censorship measures as part of Park’s national revitalization project, the Yushin system, which was carried out to secure his dictatorship and to heighten the Park regime’s “capacity to suppress the resistance of workers, students and dissident intellectuals against authoritarian rule” (Im, 2011, p. 257).

As a result of the fourth revision of the Motion Picture Law (1973), censorship enforcement became even stricter and films were required to pass multiple censorship viewings. At the initial viewing, scripts were examined by the board. They were examined again after shooting to see if the final product was consistent with the prior assessment. The censors focused on locating and deleting any depiction that was anti-authority or socially/politically realistic and critical. Given these circumstances, film producers and directors alike were increasingly becoming critical towards state film censorship. They attributed the drastic decrease of the film business in the 1970s to this state-operated film censorship.<sup>1</sup>

The Park regime’s state censorship was notorious not only for its draconic, rigid nature but also for its highly inconsistent and irrational measures. During this time, the number of film productions plunged and many realist or socially conscious films became extinct, leaving

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<sup>1</sup>The special survey on the subject, “The Reasons of Recent Decline of Korean Films”, indicates that a majority of producers and filmmakers consider state censorship as one major cause of the decline of Korean films. This survey was originally contained in *The Era of Image* (summer 1978) and is used by An Jae-suk’s “The Study of The Era of Image.” Due to the loss of the original document, I used An Jae-suk’s data.

predominantly apolitical, escapist genre films such as action/martial arts films, melodramas or government-financed propaganda films as major runners.<sup>2</sup> As Kim Shi-moo (2000) states,

A military dictatorship had forcibly seized power in the government, and rather than presenting any fundamental solution for the social contradictions that began to surface in the 1970s, it focused instead on stopgap measures to minimize the anxieties of the public and steer them in a different direction... In the film world, the same irrational laws that had choked the art form since the 1960s were kept in place, albeit with some loosening of restrictions on sexual content. In other words, as a kind of trade-off for repressions on political freedoms, they relaxed ethical strictures to some extent. (p. 27)

Park Jae-yoon (2008) concurs that “sexual content (e.g., prostitution, adultery) was exempt from censorship practices with the military regime condoning sexual subjects in order to divert the public’s attention away from political issues” (p. 123). These scholars share the view that the military government purportedly used film censorship to distract the public from political consciousness by controlling political materials in films while condoning censorship control on sexual content.

### Unlikely birth of hostess films

As mentioned, during this period of military ruling, the Korean film industry was suffering heavily from a decrease in filmgoers. However, one strand of films, so-called, ‘hostess films’ (ho-sū-t'e-sū' is a euphemism for prostitutes or bar girls in the Korean context of the 1970s and 1980s) were exceptionally popular, to the extent that they had saved the nearly bankrupt 1970s Korean film industry. This body of films deals with a story of a young girl’s social migration to a city and her gradual downfall instigated by rape or a similar type of sexual trauma. These films are characterized by the exploitive employment of female sexuality as well as frequent rape scenes involving with female protagonists. With the record breaking success of *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (Lee Jang-ho, 1974, hereafter *Heavenly*) which drew the largest film audience of any Korean film up to that point, *Young-ja’s Heydays* (Kim Ho-sŏn, 1975, hereafter *Young-ja*), was ranked with the highest box office score of the year.<sup>3</sup>

The record-breaking success of these two hostess films was soon followed by dozens of similar films that contained similar prostitute themes and characters. The list includes: *The Woman I Threw Away* [Naegabeorinyŏja, Chŏng So-Young, 1977], *I Am a Number 77 Girl* [Na nŭn 77 pŏnagassi, Pak Ho-t’ae, 1978], *Winter Woman* [Kyŏulyŏja, Kim Ho-sŏn, 1977], *26x365 = 0* [No Se-han, 1979], *Ms. O’s Apartment* [O yang ũiap’at’ŭ, Pyŏn Chang-ho, 1978] and *Do You Know, Kkotsuni?* [Kkotsunirŭlasinayo?, Chŏng In-yŏp, 1979], all of which were ranked within the box office top three from 1974 to 1979 (Table 1).<sup>4</sup>

Despite hostess films’ overt focus on sexual themes, these films somehow survived censorship regulation and were hugely popular when Park’s notorious film censorship was at its highest. Furthermore, these films demonstrate important social problems that other films could not

<sup>2</sup>According to Park Yu-hee’s research (2012), melodramas ranged from 35% to 52% and action films from 18% to 32% of the total genres of films produced from 1970 to 1979.

<sup>3</sup>*Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* drew 464,308 film viewers to a single theater in Seoul during its 105 days of screening. *Young-ja’s Heydays* drew 361,213 viewers during 87 days. Excerpted from audience documents provided by the KOFIC (Korean Film Council).

<sup>4</sup>The table is made by the author based on data collected from Park (2012, p. 56).

because of the strict censorship rules. For instance, hostess films featured potentially troubling issues such as prostitution, rape in workplaces and working-class poverty while many other films during this period were severely cut by censorship measures even for the depiction of “not being able to afford coffee,” because the representation of poverty was highly discouraged.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, whether focusing on obscenity or on lower class issues, hostess films inevitably bring up an important question – how were hostess films with seemingly “obscene” themes and/or socially sensitive issues, both of which were problematic elements for Park’s censorship criteria, granted permission for public viewing without much alteration? For one thing, the films clearly violated Motion Picture Law No. 9-14 for their “portrayal of prostitutes, prostitution, rape, or illicit sex” but none of the films were accused of this or prevented from having a public release.

In this respect, it is crucial to scrutinize the “unwritten protocols” of Park’s film censorship as much as the written protocols. There was a varying degree of control over films with sensitive social problems presented through hostess heroines. While I do not intend to determine whether or not hostess films came into being as a result of unjust film censorship under the Park regime, my major focus is on the ways in which hostess films accommodated and negotiated the terms of state censorship, particularly in association with the representation of females. In viewing such dynamics between state censorship and film, the following questions are inevitable: how was it possible that the state was willing to turn a blind eye on the explicit sexualization of women in hostess films when military-era film censorship was at its peak? Why were the social and political aspects of this group of films about female sexual workers not seriously considered socially relevant by the government at a time when censorship was so high?

This article aims to unravel the above issues, first by looking at the history of film policies and censorship, particularly during the Park Chung-hee regime. It also examines the interplay between Park’s state censorship and hostess films by viewing censorship records and notes, and comparing major censorship cases during Park’s reign in the 1960s and 1970s. With concern to the implicit deregulation of censorship practices on sexual materials, I include my interviews with two directors who produced hostess films, Kim Ho-sŏn and Lee Jang-ho. Finally, I analyse a hostess themed film produced under Park’s military censorship, *The Rose that Swallowed Thorn* (Cheong, 1979), as a case study to show how this film strategically orchestrates visual and thematic elements to circumvent state censorship enforcement.

### **Park Chung-hee’s film politics (1962-1978) and the enactment of the Yushin film censorship (1973)**

With his military coup d’état on May 16, 1961, General Park Chung-hee seized control of South Korea. Park revised the Constitution which enabled him to suppress rights and the freedom of expression.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in order to prevent possible resistance against his unjust achievement of political power, he immediately declared “Modernization of the Nation” [chogukgeundaehwa] as a national agenda to appeal to the public. The Park regime vigorously used the media to impart his modernization project, for instance by “setting up amplifiers and

<sup>5</sup> See Park’s “The Study of Dynamics of Film Censorship” This case is a Lee Man-hee’s film, *Holiday* (1968), a socially critical, realist film that depicts a poor couple striving to make a living.

<sup>6</sup> The Reconstituted Law (5<sup>th</sup>) No. 18-1. See Bae Su-kyung (2005)’s *The Study of Korean Film Censorship* for more detailed censorship records.

distributed speakers and radio sets to even the remotest villages... the state's broadcast network eventually reached the entire country, and so, therefore, did the administration's anti-communist propaganda and educational messages to the citizens of the republic" (Jeong, 2010, p. 132). Even from the early days of his rule, Park was aware of the potential of film, through which he attempted to earn public control and foreign currency simultaneously.

Soon after his coup d'état, the Park government distributed a press release to major newspapers titled "Recommendation Policy of Superior and Enlightening Films," which stated that the Park government would fully support citizens in watching "publically enlightening" films (Yu, 2004, p. 340). This statement demonstrates how determined Park was to employ film to facilitate state goals. It did not take long for Park to acquire total control over film production, distribution and exhibition by setting up a series of laws and infrastructure, including the Ministry of Public Information (1961), the National Film Production Center (1961), and the Motion Picture Law (1962). On January 20, 1962, the military government ratified its first film policy through the Motion Picture Law, which contained "twenty-two wide-ranging measures regarding the censorship fees, screening permits, producer registration, and importing, exporting and exhibiting films" (Yecies and Shim, 2012).

Park's film policy can be characterized by two major objectives. First, Park attempted to expand the Korean film industry into the global market in accordance with his goal of nation-building and modernization. Second, Park heightened government control over the process of film production through various means of regulation and reinforcement, including double censorship and a studio reward system for making propaganda films.

In systemizing the Korean film industry, the Park government emulated the successful models of Hollywood and Japan. Park mixed the "Japanese ethos of top-down mobilization and the US ideas of technocracy with Korean nationalism to build a national film studio system" (Yecies and Shim, 2012, p. 7). Under this premise, the Park regime demanded very strict standards for film studios. For instance, studios had to be equipped with "more than three 35-mm cameras, a lighting system of more than 60 kW of power, sound recording capabilities, two full-time exclusively employed film directors and more than two contracted actors and actresses" (Min et al., 2003, p. 47). These requirements were unrealistic, especially for mid-sized, independent studios. Eventually, the law forced the studios to merge with each other; 65 small film studios were merged into 16 larger companies and again into 6 major companies until the revision of the law in 1963.<sup>7</sup>

This reduction of the number of studios enabled the government to control films more readily: now with fewer and bigger film studios, the Park administration was able to efficiently intervene in film production, wielding more power over the industry. This also meant that the government worked more closely with the producers and directors of these studios, often making both official and unofficial requests concerning film contents.<sup>8</sup> In my interview with Kim Ho-sun, one of the most prolific Korean directors of the 1970s, he stated, "one phone call

<sup>7</sup> In addition to these requests, the 1963 revision added even more requirements including the minimum studio size of 661.15 m<sup>2</sup> and contracted technicians.

<sup>8</sup> This "unofficial" operation was common under the Park reign. Howards exemplifies the government's retaliation against *Dong-A Daily* in 1975 for criticizing government. "Park pressured businesses to withdraw their advertising contracts with the daily. Park's representatives sent to these businesses were often from the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA)". "Korean Media Bias and Government Intervention in Media." [http://uskoreainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/2009\\_Yearbook\\_Howard.pdf](http://uskoreainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/2009_Yearbook_Howard.pdf).

from the Ministry of Public Information (where the censorship bureau belonged) could change one film into a whole different other one.”<sup>9</sup>

According to the Motion Picture Law, there were four major criteria under the section covering censorship measures:<sup>10</sup> (1) Films shall not depict anything that damages national authority or disrespects the Constitution; (2) films shall not disrupt national security, public morals, tradition and social orders; (3) films shall not damage the image of any countries that have diplomatic relations with Korea; and (4) films shall not discourage the spirits of citizens. As these terms of censorship highlighted, the foremost concern in regulation of films was to determine whether a given film conformed to the national agenda and if it also sufficiently functioned as a cultural imperative that “cultivates loyalty and a sense of belonging to the nation” (Park, 2010). Indeed, as Yecies and Shim put it, the film industry during this time was reduced, “both literally and figuratively, to the status of a propaganda factory in which all productions were classed as either ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ propaganda” (2012, p. 4).

With the second revision of the Motion Picture Law in 1966, the Park regime strengthened “double censorship” of films. In addition, the censorship viewing of the scripts had to be done twice: first by either the Korean Motion Pictures Producers Association or the Board of Korean Art and Cultural Ethics, and finally by the Ministry of Public Information. This rule may seem “generous”, with the government at least giving priority to producers in assessing films, but in reality, it was nothing more than the government’s strategic attempt to reinforce the industry’s self-regulation before their actual viewing. In any case, final censorship was done and confirmed on the government end, which could nullify the results of the prior censorship by the producers or the Board of Korean Art and Cultural Ethics. Therefore, the term “double censorship” actually meant multiple censorship viewings, ultimately supervised by the government.

In October 1972, Park Chung-hee decreed the Yushin System and issued a Yushin Constitution, which involved the renovation of the existing systems and laws. The Yushin system was established in order to guarantee Park’s lifelong dictatorship and to suppress rising labor demonstrations and public democratic movements against his military dictatorship. Based on Japan’s Meiji Restoration (meiji-ishin), the Yushin system “increased the sense of an impending communist threat among South Koreans, and thus allowed the state to tighten its grip on national discourse, residence records, and the media” (Park, S. 2010, p. 76).<sup>11</sup>

By elevating the bar of regulation, the Park regime actively repressed press media, broadcasting, and film. Shortly after its announcement of the Yushin system, the Park government announced the “First Five-Year Plan for Reviving National Culture and Arts” [munyejoongheung 5 gaenyungaehoek] (1974-1978). This plan included the following goals: “(1) promotion of national studies, (2) propagation of culture to the populace, and (3) introduction of Korean culture overseas” (Park, 2010). On February 2, 1974, *Dong-A Daily*

<sup>9</sup> This interview was conducted by myself on June 15, 2013. Kim Ho-sŏn is also a director who produced a number of hostess films, including *Young-ja’s Heydays* (1975), *Women’s Street* (1976) and *Winter Woman* (1977).

<sup>10</sup> Translation of these terms was done by myself. The actual materials were excerpted from the Korean Film Archive online database on state censorship. They are also available from Bae Su-kyung’s thesis (2005), *The Study of History of Korean Film Censorship*.

<sup>11</sup> Many scholars pointed out that Park’s ideologies were derived from his previous military service in the Japanese army (Yi, 2006; Kim and Vogel, 2011). Park designed the Yushin based on the Meiji Yushin (Reform), the political revolution occurred by the Meiji Emperor.

reported that the Park government had announced the release of 31.2 billion won (approximately 29.1 million US dollars) for the first year, with 72 million won (approximately 40% of the total) to be spent on the film sector.<sup>12</sup> The fund was mostly spent on the production of national films or government-supported propaganda films [gukchekeyounghwa], and also for rewarding scenarios that had pro-government themes.<sup>13</sup>

The criteria that the government set up for the state-sponsored propaganda films elucidate the primary motive behind the Park regime's agenda for films. The criteria were: (1) Films must contain the spirit of "Yushin;" (2) films must be infused with patriotism; (3) films must motivate the public to participate in the New Village Movement; (4)<sup>14</sup> films must encourage the increase of exportation; (5) films must inspire citizens to be efficient and skilful; and (6) films must be cheerful and artistic. During the year 1974, the number of 'gukchekeyounghwa' soared to 38 (27%) from 12 (9.6%) the prior year, and remained around 20% until 1979 (Park, 2010, p. 60).

Although Park's reward system and development plan seemed to aim for the overall growth of culture, it was no more than a systemized attempt by which Park efficiently orchestrated support and control, all of which was intended to force public compliance with the government's agenda. The government also revised the Motion Picture Law (the fourth amendment) in 1974. This newly constituted Yushin Film Law was distinctive in two ways.<sup>15</sup>

First, it administratively maximized government power over films. Under this law, the Park government appointed a Minister of Public Information and Culture, who was in charge of implementing most film-related rules. The revision of the law provided full authority, enabling the minister to permit, prohibit, or cancel an application for a film business. The Minister also had total control over ongoing film productions and could stop a film at any time even if it had passed the initial censorship.

Secondly, the censorship rules were not necessarily modified or added to, but enforcement became more severe. Prior censorship became strengthened; the number of returned scripts was at a mere 3% in 1970 but skyrocketed to 80% in 1975. Some of the concepts that script censorship adhered to, such as "artistic quality" and "ideology," were not clearly described, so these depended on each censor's personal insight.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the censorship around this period was highly subjective and arbitrary; the outcome of the censorship was different depending on each censor and the social mood at a given time. Consequently, it negatively

<sup>12</sup>*Dong-A Daily* (1974, February 2). The Five-Year Plan for the Revival of Culture and Arts: Budget for the First Year.

<sup>13</sup>Gukchekeyounghwa [Government Supported Propaganda Films] were produced from 1974 to 1976. These films' themes were usually anti-communism, war and national development projects.

<sup>14</sup>The major idea of the New Village Movement was to modernize villages and educate villagers through state-sponsored campaigns and assisted by a massive reallocation of government funds as well as by "spiritual guidance." Lankov, A. (2010, Apr. 16) SaemaulUndong Sets Model for Developing Countries" *The Korean Times*.  
[http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/biz/2012/03/291\\_64301.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/biz/2012/03/291_64301.html).

<sup>15</sup>Film scholars occasionally referred the 4<sup>th</sup> revision as The Yushin Film Law implying that the revision took place in accordance with the (political) Yushin system.

<sup>16</sup>See YuSeonHyung (2004)'s "KwaminjokhwaP'urojekt'üwaHosüt'isüYöngghwa" [Kwaminjokhwa Project and Hostess Film] in *KukkawallsangPakchöngghüiShidae* [State and Everyday Life: The Park Chung-hee Period] Seoul: Hanwool Publication; other criteria for script the censorship include plagiarism, copyright and historical validity (p. 366).

affected the film industry. Table 1 demonstrates the dramatic decline in film productions after the enactment of the Yushin Film Law.

Year	Number of Film Studios	Number of Films	Number of Theaters	Number of Film-Goers
1970	23	209	690	166,349,541
1971	23	202	717	146,303,355
1972	20	122	694	118,273,789
1973	12	125	662	114,625,241
1974	14	141	630	98,375,813
1975	15	83	602	75,597,977

Table 1: The decline of the Korean film industry during the early to mid-1970s<sup>17</sup>

### Popularity of hostess melodramas during the Park Chung-hee regime

While the total number of film productions plunged, this period witnessed a stream of hostess films. The emergence of these films was remarkable not only for their number but also for the size of the audiences they drew. Out of the 10 highest-scoring box office films from 1970 to 1979, 8 were hostess films. *Kyung-hyang Daily* (October 1, 1975) published an article titled, “A Boom of ‘Young-ja’ films.”<sup>18</sup> The article reports that out of a total of 75 films produced in 1975, only 3 scored more than 100,000 audience members and these were all hostess-themed Young-ja films.<sup>19</sup> As mentioned earlier in analyzing this pervasion of hostess films, some scholars have argued that the Park administration adapted a new approach that implicitly boosted less socially concerned films by loosening restrictions on sexual materials, which in turn contributed to the emergence of hostess films (Park, 2012; Chung, 2003; Yu, 2004).

Although it would be reductive to read hostess films as a direct symptom of the Yushin Film Law and the censorship practice, it would not be unreasonable to think that censorship provided an environment in which these kinds of films could be engendered. Around the time the Yushin Film Law emerged, hostess and other erotically charged films with female protagonists prevailed at the box office (Table 2).

<sup>17</sup> The table is redesigned based on the data excerpted from Lee Young-il (1988)’s *History of Korean Cinema*. Seoul: KOFIC.

<sup>18</sup> The writer must have used this term, “Young-ja Films” in referring to the prior success of *Young-ja’s Heydays* and other similarly themed films released afterwards.

<sup>19</sup> Author unknown (1975, October 1), “Repeated Failures, Domestic Films Succeed” *Kyŏng-hyangilbo* [Kyung Hyang Daily].



Box Office Ranking/Year	1	2	3	4	5
1972	<i>Animal Woman</i> (Erotic Thriller)	<i>Dark Guest</i> (Action)	<i>Female Teacher</i> (Comedy)	<i>Shaman Island</i> (Horror)	<i>Good Driver, Gap Suni</i> (Comedy)
1973	<i>Witness</i> (War Film)	<i>Farewell</i> (Melodrama)	<i>Female Prison</i> (Drama)	<i>Wedding Dress in Tears</i> (Melodrama)	<i>When Taekwondo Strikes</i> (Action)
1974	<b><i>Heavenly Homecoming to Stars</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<i>Rain of Yesterday</i> (Erotic Thriller)	<i>The Earth</i> (Literary Film)	<i>Kim Doo-hwan</i> (Auto-biography/ Action)	<i>The March of Wives</i> (National/ Propaganda Film)
1975	<b><i>Young-ja's Heydays</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<i>The March of Fools</i> (Youth Film)	<i>Insayeomoo</i> (Fantasy/ Mystery)	<i>Promise of Flesh</i> (Melodrama)	<i>Yong Ho Mun</i> (Action)
1976	<i>Suzanna of Love</i> (Melodrama)	<b><i>Women's Street</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<i>Secret Guest II</i> (Action)	<i>Never, Never Forget</i> (Melodrama)	<i>Run, Don't Walk!</i> (Youth/Drama)
1977	<b><i>Winter Woman</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<i>A Joker in High School</i> (Youth Film)	<i>MaruchiArachi</i> (Animation)	<i>Mischief's Marching Song</i> (Youth Film)	<i>Night Travel</i> (Erotic/Drama)
1978	<b><i>The Woman I Threw Away</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<b><i>Ms. O's Apartment</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<b><i>I am a No. 77 Girl</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<i>Scar</i> (Melodrama)	<i>Sa Hak Bi Gwon</i> (Action/Martial Arts)
1979	<b><i>Heavenly Homecoming to Stars II</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<b><i>The Man I Threw Away</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<b><i>Do You know Ggotsooni?</i></b> (Hostess Film)	<i>Last Cup</i> (Melodrama)	<i>Byungtae and Young-ja</i> (Youth/ Drama)

Table 2: Popular film genres during the 1970s: Hostess films are indicated in bold<sup>20</sup>

As this table demonstrates, hostess films were high-ranked starting in 1974, when the Yushin Film law was instituted. These films were most prominent in popularity and were a cultural force across literature, magazines, and films. Statistically, from 1970 to 1985, the number of novels dealing with prostitute characters was 102 out of a total of 2,918 fictional works published in major literature periodicals and magazines (Yong, 2012). Hostess or sex workers accounted for 87.5% of all female characters in films produced from 1971 to 1979 (Yu, 2003). Reflecting this phenomenon, the press media began to cover the growing popularity of the “hostess woman” around the mid-1970s. One of the most popular industry magazines at the time, *Film Magazine* [YounghwaJapji], serially covered the rise of hostess films and directors as a major historical case of Korean cinema, with articles such as “New Era, New Directors” (August and December 1974), “Screen’s Young Power” (May 1975), and “A Recent Boom of Hostess Films” (June 1975).<sup>21</sup> These articles celebrated the fact that the success of hostess films largely contributed to the rejuvenation of the Korean film industry.

While the commercial contribution that hostess films had established was evident, the critical quality of the films generated polarized reviews. Some critics positively evaluated the films for touching upon relevant social problems such as working-class poverty and social marginalization of peasant women (Yong, 2012; Kim, S., 2010). On the other hand, others

<sup>20</sup> The box office records are available from the KOFIC’s *Korean Film Year Book* from 1972-1978. Seoul: KOFIC.

<sup>21</sup> Except for Hong-pa, all three directors produced hostess films.

problematized hostess films' exploitation of female sexuality, labelling hostess films as "undesirable," "unethical," "obscene," and claimed that they "negatively affect the moral values of the public."<sup>22</sup>

These dichotomized views towards hostess films – whether focusing on obscenity or on socially sensitive issues – lead to one important fact that despite hostess films' problematic elements that conflict Park's censorship criteria, they were cleared for public viewing without much alteration. According to the censorship records for hostess films, such depictions were more than sufficient to violate at least one item under the Motion Picture Law No. 9, clause 14, which indicates, "Prostitution should not be justified on screen." However, none of these films were restricted from public viewing for their explicit portrayal of prostitutes and prostitution.

Furthermore, the apparently problematic issues that these films dealt with, for example, rape (*Young-ja's Heydays*, 26x365=0), adultery (*Women's Street*, *Do You Know Ggosuni?*, *The Rose that Swallowed Thorn*), and poverty (*Young-ja's Heydays*), remained intact despite the fact that these issues had led to major censorship cases with dozens of other realist films including *March of Fools*, *Holiday* and *Night Travel*. The gravest penalty imposed upon hostess films was to not be recommended for exportation (*Heavenly Homecoming to Stars*, *Young-ja's Heydays*).<sup>23</sup> Out of ten major hostess films produced from 1971 to 1979, only two were cautioned for dealing with the theme of prostitution while not being prompted for deletion.<sup>24</sup>

The most frequent comments were class-related, although the producers were not required to reshoot or delete, only advised to exercise "caution" or to be "implicit" at best. Some examples of comments include: "too overt depiction of class difference" (*I Am a No. 77 Girl* and 26x365=0); "poverty should not be seen too explicitly; it might provoke class conflicts" (26x365=0 II); and "it is not appropriate to portray a college girl going into prostitution; drop the name of the heroine's university" (*The Rose that Swallowed Thorns*)."<sup>25</sup>

Among these cases, a 1979 major-hit hostess themed film, *The Rose that Swallowed Thorn* (Cheong, 1979) is a significant example that encapsulates the inconsistencies of the Park administration's censorship operation and the film's attempt to accommodate the terms of the state censors. *The Rose that Swallowed Thorn*, like other hostess films, presented some problematic issues that could have conflicted with the state censors, such as adultery and sexual promiscuity, not to mention prostitution. However, the film strategically circumvents these issues by negotiating the conditions of ideology, visuals, and narrative that would work in its favor in the view of the censors.

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<sup>22</sup> *Young Hwa Jap Ji* [film magazine] 1975. June issue and Dong-ah ilbo [*Dong-Ah Daily*] (1982, April 16) "Stripping Competition of Korean Films".

<sup>23</sup> These records are not open to the public as of the writing of this dissertation (2013). The records were personally retrieved by the author from the Korean Film Archive (KOFA) from June to August 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> The university attended by Rose, the heroine, was originally Ehwa Women's University, which was one of the most prestigious women's colleges in Korea at that time.

## A case-study of *The Rose that Swallowed Thorn* (Cheong, 1979)<sup>26</sup>

The main character, Rose (Jang-mi), is a college student from a wealthy family. She is bored with her life and spends most of her time drinking and enjoying random sexual encounters. One day, on a train on her way home, she meets a married, middle-aged man and falls in love immediately. However, their love does not last after his wife discovers the affair and calls Rose's father to send her away. In order to cope with her loneliness, Rose begins working as a "pro bono" hostess, choosing not to get paid in order to keep her pride. After some time, she meets a man named Se-ho and becomes pregnant by him. Soon Rose discovers that he was a quasi-gigolo himself, living with an older woman for money. Rose, devastated, wanders around the city and is eventually hit by a train.



Figure 1: Still from *The Rose that Swallowed Thorn*

One possible factor that might have contributed to *The Rose* passing state censorship is that it features a considerable number of scenes that contain explicit symbols directly relating to major accomplishments achieved under Park Chung-hee's state project, "Modernization of the Nation" (chogukgeundaehwa), during the period of state-led industrialization. Throughout *The Rose*, modern apartments, trains, and bridges (e.g., *Busan Daegyo: Busan Bridge*) that were newly built during the Park regime are frequently seen in panoramic views and/or as backdrops.<sup>27</sup> This kind of strategy was mentioned by Kim Su-yong, one of the major directors of the 1960s. Kim has stated that film directors during the Park regime used to make many "sacrificial shots" or "pleasing shots" for the state censors in order to save risky scenes from deletion (Park, 2010, p. 83). I think that such monumental scenes in *The Rose* could be

<sup>26</sup> I adopt the English title, *The Rose that Swallowed Thorn*, from the Korean Movie Data Base (KMDB).

<sup>27</sup>The Busan Bridge was built in 1976 under the Park Chung-hee government. This bridge makes occasional appearances throughout Rose's visitation in Busan.

considered in a similar context and that they were posited to compensate the potentially problematic issues dealt with in the film.

Furthermore, *The Rose* utilizes these traces of modernization as morally charged metaphors that refer to justifiable punishment for the sexually fallen woman. For instance, the opening sequence begins with a bird's-eye view of modern apartments. The camera flies around the apartment complexes in Echon-dong, the area where Korea's first apartment building was built as a national project in the early 1970s. After showing a lengthy sketch of various apartment buildings, the camera goes into Rose's home. As opposed to the somewhat documentary-like opening scene of apartments, the way the camera shows the inside of Rose's apartment is highly eroticized. Accompanied by the ringing sound of a telephone, the camera slowly traces the phone cord from the living room until it reaches Rose as she picks up the phone, semi-nude in bed. The camera intrusively scans Rose's entire torso from a low angle.

Rose's apartment later becomes a "hub" where most of her sexual relationships take place and where she eventually gets impregnated by a con man.<sup>28</sup> While the introduction sequence that explicates monumental, phallic apartment buildings offers a celebratory depiction of the "development of nation," it also symbolically signals a prelude to Rose's tragedy, which results from her sexual decadence.

This kind of strategy appears again when Rose encounters the man she falls in love with on a train. A majestic view of the running train is seen in the foreground in the establishing shot, with the sun falling behind it. This scene is followed by Rose's appearance, and it becomes a critical motif for Rose's downfall and death, which occur later on. The sequence begins with Rose sitting next to a middle-aged man on a train. She deliberately leans onto the man, pretending to be asleep. The man tries to avoid her by distancing himself from her, and Rose "wakes up" and asks him to buy drinks. The man reveals that he is married, but Rose does not seem to care. He buys the drinks, and Rose more actively seduces him by making him light her cigarette. Soon, the man falls for Rose and they become sexually involved.

After this train sequence, Rose's life dramatically deteriorates. Her sexual relationship with the man is forcibly terminated by his wife and Rose's father. She begins working as a hostess at a bar to escape her loneliness, but her father discovers this and incarcerates her in a mental hospital. Rose's deteriorating life becomes even worse when she learns that she is pregnant by a con man who turned out to be a gigolo. She half-consciously walks around the city, buying toys for her unborn child. The last sequence takes place on a railroad. Rose, holding the toys in her arms, slowly walks along the tracks. She drops the toys and tries to pick them up. She suddenly hears the sound of a train and looks up. The camera shows her emotionless face in extreme close-up, intersecting it with a shot of the train coming toward her. The last shot stops on Rose's emotionless facial close-up and freezes, while the sound of the train continues to flow over the shot.

Cinematically, the train has been a ubiquitous emblem that represents the tension of modernity (Bottomore, 1999; Kirby, 1988). In the social context of South Korea, railroads played a pivotal role in facilitating Park Chung-hee's efforts at rapid industrialization under the modernization project of the 1960s and 1970s. Park installed more than sixteen railways throughout the

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<sup>28</sup> Rose finds out that she is pregnant after she had sex with Se-ho, who previously had come to her apartment.

country to supply raw materials to factories.<sup>29</sup> In addition, expanded railroads greatly contributed to the labor migration from rural villages to urban areas, which involved a large population of young women and men relocating to cities. A number of Korean films, including Kim Ki-young's *Fire Woman* (*Hwa Nyeo*, 1971), reflected this phenomenon by signifying the train as a prelude to the tragic journey that the peasant female protagonists are to face.<sup>30</sup>

In *The Rose that Swallowed Thorn*, representations of apartments and trains perform a double duty – as a safety valve for state censorship and as ideologically-charged motifs that would please the moral codes of the censors. On the one hand, they stand for the “development of the nation,” which was one of the foremost campaign agendas pushed by the Park administration. Such visual presentations of major achievements acquired during the state-led industrialization period were predominant enough that they must have pleased the censorship assessors. On the other hand, the film strategically utilizes such traces of modernity to justify the victimization of the “sexually fallen woman.”

Rose's occupation of these modern places – apartment and train – simultaneously establishes her as a full recipient of modernity and at the same time, as a victim of it.

## Conclusion

Hostess films were engendered and thrived when the Park regime's irrational film policy and censorship laws nearly decimated the Korean film industry. These films persevered the military government's inconsistent and arbitrary censorship operation by simultaneously negotiating the terms of censorship and state ideologies. Such negotiation took place at the expense of women; while the filmic attempts were fruitful at least for the fact that hostess films touched upon relevant issues of society and class, they also potentially solidified the conceptualization of women and of female sexual activity. The generic employment of the sexually fallen woman or the victimized woman was offered to circumvent the censorship intervention under the totalitarian regime. Key hostess films directed by Lee Jang-ho and Kim Ho-sŏnare are extraordinary examples of how these films negotiated forced censorship, particularly through their cinematic constructions of women. The study on these particular directors and their film movement, *The Era of Image*, which imparted the new wave aesthetics and social realism, will be another valuable subject for the field of Korean history, culture and gender studies.

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<sup>29</sup> See “KaniyŏkkwaSaramdŭl” [Stations and People (1082)] for a full article. Retrieved August 8, 2016, [www.culturecontent.com/content/contentMain.do?search\\_div=CP\\_THE&search\\_div\\_id=CP\\_TH E010&cp\\_code=cp0803](http://www.culturecontent.com/content/contentMain.do?search_div=CP_THE&search_div_id=CP_TH E010&cp_code=cp0803). See also the article from *Dong-A Ilbo*, “Park Chung-hee's Railroad Modernization”, December 7, 1965.

<sup>30</sup> *Fire Woman* (Kim, Ki-young, 1971) is an erotic thriller that depicts a peasant woman's sexual falling after her arrival in the city.

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