

**Book Review**

**Steven Chung, *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), pp. vii, 262**

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Steven Chung's *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema* is not, as its title might imply, merely a monograph on Shin Sang-ok; rather, it is a collection of critical inquiries into the complexities of Korean modernity as reflected on and refracted by Shin's sensational and contradictory cinematic career. *Split Screen Korea*, thus, moves beyond the parameters of auteur and national cinema studies to challenge our presumptions about such categories as art, politics, film, and the nation. Chung combines archival documentation, textual interpretation, and theoretical contemplation to artfully negotiate subtle tensions—between continuity and rupture, visibility and invisibility, art and entertainment—and excavate the forces that govern the aesthetic and political values of Shin's oeuvre.

The introduction traces Shin Sang-ok's life in broad strokes—from his art education in Tokyo during the colonial period to his film apprenticeship upon liberation; from his success in the 1950s to the founding and eventual demise of Shin Films in the 1960s and 1970s; from his crossing-over to North Korea and brief stint in Hollywood to his lackluster return to South Korea—to reveal the ways in which the filmmaker continuously engaged, however unevenly, with the cultural, economic, and political transformations of twentieth-century Korea. Using the titular “split screen” as a heuristic device (for Shin never used split screens), Chung explores the manifold divisions and suspensions imbued in Shin's career while resisting any interpretative closure to

Shin's aesthetics and politics.

Chung opens *Split Screen Korea* by providing a theoretical framework with which to consider Korean cinema. Against conventional film criticism that casts aside “enlightenment” as a premodern genre, Chung reconfigures enlightenment as a “mode” that embodies the core of cinematic representation in Korean cinema. Taken as a mode, enlightenment expands beyond narrative or genre and translates into a dramatic means of evoking national consciousness. Here, Chung utilizes Jacques Rancière’s claim that what makes art political is its capacity to renovate the very limits of the political. For Chung, it is the “enlightenment mode” that rescues “ideas about the role of art in political life and human subjectivity”<sup>1</sup> within Korean cinema, so as to render its continuity amidst the wild discontinuities of Korean modernity.

Easily the most interesting and readable chapter in *Split Screen Korea* is the second, where Chung situates Shin Sang-ok’s works amid the interplay of image production in film, fashion, and print in the 1950s. Chung examines how the three nascent industries of the time worked together in shifting mass cultural sensibility towards a polished and sophisticated visual. Building upon the mode of enlightenment, Chung demonstrates that the *seoyŏn doen* (refined) films of Shin—with actress, muse, and life-partner Ch’oe Ŭn-hŭi at the fore—constituted a form of political expression. Shin’s adept play with surface was “a palimpsest visualization of Japan and America, old and new, and East and West—one that could condition the imagination of a new Korean modernity.”<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 3 provides a critical history of Shin Films by investigating the ways in which Shin Sang-ok navigated South Korea’s underdeveloped film industry and arbitrary motion picture laws in the 1960s and 1970s. Chung refuses to categorize Shin as either artist or entrepreneur; he recognizes Shin’s corpus as “heterogeneous and contradictory”<sup>3</sup> and suggests that such incoherencies simultaneously conditioned and were conditioned by economic, historical, and socio-political contingencies. Neither affecting high art nor chasing commercial success, Shin flexibly and creatively negotiated a volatile filmmaking system that still relied on the antiquated regional investment and distribution system, even as it aspired to be a bona fide industry. Accordingly, as a compromise to

be able to make *seryŏn doen* films, Shin produced a host of conventional family melodramas—“mass art with national significance.”<sup>4</sup>

The fourth chapter of *Split Screen Korea* offers a keen and insightful reading of two melodramatic films in the enlightenment modality, *Evergreen* (1961) and *Rice* (1963), to elucidate the concept of politics in Shin Sang-ok’s oeuvre. Chung contextualizes these films within the ruthless utilization of the nationalist-developmental policies of the Park Chung Hee regime and the “global cinematic traffic”<sup>5</sup> of that period. Chung identifies numerous ambiguities in supposedly the most political of Shin’s films, such that it becomes impossible to view them as merely indicative of the regime’s developmentalist ideology. For example, *Evergreen* narrates a story of mass national reconstruction but plays uncannily with tropes formalized in Soviet socialist realist, Mao-era Chinese, and North Korean films. Thus, content and form merge at once to construct and unsettle any monolithic ideology.

In Chapter 5, Chung assays Shin Sang-ok’s prolific career in North Korea to question how he was able to function successfully in two ostensibly opposed ideological state structures. Chung contends that the antagonistic states shared “identically authoritarian developmentalist regimes”<sup>6</sup> with similar mass cultures, which, in turn, facilitated Shin’s fluent translation of South Korean films in the enlightenment mode into North Korean films in the *chuch’è* (the official ideology of self-reliance) style. He further argues that it was Shin’s dogged insistence on refinement, in scene, effect, and style, that ultimately reconfigured the axes of politics and affect in North Korea—exposing the relationship of mass culture and ideology, within even authoritarian regimes, to be tenuous at best.

Chung concludes *Split Screen Korea* with an overview of Shin Sang-ok’s career in Hollywood and South Korea after his escape from North Korea. Considering the affection shown for his subject throughout the book, it is almost heartbreaking to read Chung’s account of Shin’s falling out of step with the new film culture of a democratic and neo-liberalizing South Korea. The postwar system of regional investment and distribution had completely died out by this time, and private capital was heralding a turn toward a postmodern “becoming cultural of the economic and the

becoming economic of the cultural.”<sup>7</sup> Chung asserts that Shin became “outmoded”<sup>8</sup> within this structure, but it remains unclear why Shin, so dexterous in adapting to his environs, was unable to put his *seryŏn doen* filmmaking technique to use in post-1986 South Korea.

*Split Screen Korea* is an engaging and impressive scholarly achievement. Chung presents his arguments beautifully in jargon-free, concise language and offers a pleasurable sense of discovery at every turn. Yet a few elements do beg for more explanation. For instance, Chung threads the enlightenment mode throughout Korean cinema, but he does not sufficiently explain how, or if, the enlightenment mode continues to inform contemporary cinema. It is also unclear why Chung borrows this “mode” from Linda Williams’ revision of the concept of melodrama, when, as Chung’s very tracing of the sedimented layers of “enlightenment” attests, the connotations of “melodrama” in the United States and “enlightenment” in (postcolonial) Korea seem so vastly different.

The book is at its strongest when Chung intricately weaves his nuanced analyses of Shin Sang-ok’s films against and into the larger cultural history of modern Korea. Refusing to see Shin and his work as transparent or closed, Chung rescues him from conventional claims that construct and bind him—as artist/entrepreneur, political/apolitical, regional/transnational—by exposing the lacunae in between such ostensibly opposed categories and emphasizing the dialectical negotiations made in these gaps. Chung’s most original contribution must be in situating the postwar space of the market—and the state that regulated it—as central to his career. *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema* is a formidable work and a crucial contribution to the field of Korean studies, film studies, and mass media studies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Steven Chung, *Split Screen Korea: Shin Sang-ok and Postwar Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>7</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue," *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 54-77, quoted in Chung, 207.

<sup>8</sup> Chung, 207.