

## **“The Truth Shall Not Sink”: Korean Documentary Film and the Fall of Park Geun-hye**

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### **Abstract**

From their earliest beginnings during the years of the Korean War, Korean independent documentaries have attempted the bold task of illuminating, analysing, and defining the public issues that relate to social groups excluded or overlooked by official power rather than attempting to reflect on private anxieties or concerns. In its early history, however, it had to contend with obscurity and a severe lack of funds. Following the renaissance of Korean film production in the late 1990s, the Korean documentary has taken on a newly significant status. After an extended introduction to the history of this important genre, this paper will deal with the controversy surrounding the screening of the documentary *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol* at the Busan International Film Festival. It will examine the way in which the major issues raised by this documentary became entwined in the growing scandal and eventual public disgrace of the first female president of the Korean republic, Park Geun-hye.

**Keywords:** Korean documentary film, movie journalism, fighting spirit, BIFF, Park Geun-hye, *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol*

### What Is a Documentary Film?

Over the years, film critics have used a number of definitions to try to spell out the essence of the documentary form. This film genre has been variously defined as “a dramatized presentation of man’s relation to his institutional life,”<sup>1</sup> a “film with a message,”<sup>2</sup> “the communication, not of imagined things, but of real things only and as films which give up control of the events being filmed.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most famous, and still the most serviceable definition, however, is the one put forward by John Grierson in the mid-1960s. Grierson defined documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality.”<sup>4</sup> From Grierson’s fecund phrase, a number of film critics have ventured a variety of alternative meanings with respect to this basic theme, even if no one of these definitions is sufficient to express the character of this genre completely. For example, Dirk Eitzen points out the difficulties of a single definition that would hope to encompass a filmic form that includes character studies, city symphonies, and fictional narrative cinema like Spike Lee’s *School Daze* (1988). It also raises the question of what part of a complex documentary like Fred Wiseman’s *High School* (1968) is “real” and what part fictionalized, and so on.<sup>5</sup> The documentary as a genre attempts to show the truth about certain events to viewers using recorded images; it aims to raise questions and provoke disputes about the subject under consideration.

According to John Ellis, the experience of watching a documentary involves the spectator participating to some extent in three different experiences at the same time: “The audio-visual experience of documentaries is a distinct form of experience, sharing some characteristics of direct experience and bystander, but also involving a privileged, synthetic view of events that is always the product of a particular organisation and the individuals working within (or against) it.”<sup>6</sup> As the range of topics treated within the documentary form have become wider, and as the techniques and technologies for making documentaries have advanced, the framing of these three essential aspects of documentary spectatorship have also changed. These changes have led to a debate about whether or not documentaries present the truth directly or merely try to represent truth.

### The Documentary Film in South Korea

Within the Korean documentary form, the debate over truth or fiction first arose in the early days of the genre. During the Korean War, the main purpose of documentary film was to instill in the cinema audience a belief in the rightness of the South Korean cause: the need to achieve ultimate victory and preserve national unity. A good example of a documentary film taking this perspective is *The West Front* [서부전선] (Yon Bong-cheon, 1951). After the Korean War, documentary films like *Nakdong River* [낙동강] (Kim Hang-oh, 1965), made under the auspices of the state, were again utilized as a means to disseminate the perspective of the government and justify its main policies.<sup>7</sup> During these early years, documentaries were seen as a central means for telling a real story, but one which defended internal government priorities or attacked the external North Korean enemy. For a period of about twenty years, South Korean documentaries, made under the rule of the military government, were used to inculcate a conservative education and anti-communist propaganda.<sup>8</sup> Among the more significant titles made during this period are the films *Korea* [코리아] (Shin Sang-ok) and *Women of Yi-Dynasty* [이조여인 잔혹사] (Shin Sang-ok, 1969).

During the 1980s, as the military government of Chun Doo-hwan began to consolidate itself, there was a wave of illegal street protests, some of which eventually turned violent.<sup>9</sup> It was at this point that independent Korean documentaries finally emerged as a symbol of anti-government resistance.<sup>10</sup> A number of important documentary films, including *Blue Bird* [파랑새] (Hong Ki-seon; Lee Hyo-in; Lee Jung-a, 1986), were produced by individual socio-critical students or civic organizations on socio-critical issues.<sup>11</sup> Around this time too, the independent documentary form began to develop as a method of social critique.<sup>12</sup> Although definitions of genres are constantly changing, and are understood differently across different time periods, the fundamental nature of independent Korean documentary films—namely, their politically-engaged “fighting spirit”—was first laid down during this period.<sup>13</sup> According to Ahn Hae-rong, the genre of the Korean documentary film arose from the struggles of the major social movements. As a genre, independent documentary film attempts to

“illuminate, judge, analyse, and define the problems and the rights of groups rather than [to reflect or express] personal reflections and anxieties.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps as a result, the mainstream perception of many of these films was that they could easily be dismissed as unimportant and amateurish, particularly by those in power. What is more, the very small numbers of individuals directly involved in this early movement ensured that most of these documentaries were successfully banned. A lack of funds for preserving and archiving as well as producing and distributing these works has meant that many of the documentaries no longer exist or are very difficult to find.

### The Korean Film Renaissance of the Late 1990s

The late 1990s saw a rebirth of South Korean film production. During a brief period of about a decade, running from 1997 to about 2006, South Korea witnessed a veritable film renaissance. Virtually overnight, Korean film came to be regarded as both an important economic commodity and as a socially significant art form. As Ju Chang-kyu notes:

“During this time, film productions were activated, thereby rapidly developing the film industry. With this economic development, Korean films soon gained attention in the international film world. The new generation not only produced Korean blockbuster films like *Shiri*, *JSA*, *Silmido*, *Taegukgui* and various film genres like comedy and thriller series—*My Wife Is a Gangster* and *Whispering Corridors*, but also independent films and launched various film festivals.”<sup>15</sup>

During this period, there was also a newly-enlivened sense of public discussion. Newspapers published significant articles on culture, and new film magazines, such as *Cine 21* and *Film 2.0*, were founded. What is more, a number of important film festivals were established, the most notable of which is the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF). These developments motivated ordinary members of the cinema-going audience to take an interest in discussions about films and film-making.

As more active audience began to make their voices heard, producers and directors began to listen more closely to what was being said by the audience.<sup>16</sup>

Within this wider florescence of Korean film production, documentary film also witnessed a renaissance. The film *Repatriation* [송환] (Kim Dong-won, 2004) became the first documentary to focus on the issue of North Korean political prisoners still imprisoned in South Korea. Hitherto, these prisoners had always been ignored by the South Korean media and remained widely unknown to the public. Indeed, their very existence had been concealed for many years by both the South Korean and North Korean governments. The “long-term political prisoners” shown in the film are “North Koreans in prison in South Korea who were held there because they were unwilling to change their ideology.”<sup>17</sup> These prisoners either had been taken captive during the Korean War or had later infiltrated South Korean society as spies for the North Korean government. With the turn toward democracy in the South, these prisoners no longer had to endure the high levels of violence that they had experienced during the reign of Park Chung-hee. Nonetheless, each prisoner had spent an average of 30 years in confinement. Neither the South nor the North Korean governments had previously admitted that they had been engaged in espionage, even though numerous North Korean spies have been uncovered in South Korea after the armistice that brought an end to active hostilities between North and South in 1953.

*Repatriation* explores three main perspectives: those of the long-term political prisoners, of the citizens of South Korea, and of the filmmaker himself. During the course of the film, the camera mostly shows the political prisoners talking about themselves, their colleagues and their past. The documentary took twelve years of shooting to complete and involved 800 hours of recording time.<sup>18</sup> The predicament of these long-term political prisoners is a crucial issue that exemplifies the perpetually uneasy relationship between North and South Korea; it also helps to explain why the documentary took so long to be completed. A second reason for the long production period involves the relationship between the director and the long-term political prisoners themselves. For many years, official ideology decreed that these prisoners were an enemy

faction within South Korean society, which made it very difficult for South Korean audiences to view their plight without prejudice. Over the course of the twelve years of filming, however, the director was able to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and friendship that allowed him to make a more meaningful film. Despite its stance, which is openly critical of the policies of the South Korean government, *Repatriation* garnered an audience of more than 40,000 viewers, becoming the first commercially successful critical documentary in South Korean film history, which caused some to hail its success as “a miracle.”<sup>19</sup>

After the inauguration of the Association of Korean Independent Film and Video in 1997, attempts to expand the distribution of alternative or critical documentaries took a large step forward. Eventually, the documentary movement won the support of the Korean Film Council, which began to extend financial sponsorship to a number of independent film venues.<sup>20</sup> The support of the Korean Film Council meant that Korean independent documentaries could now benefit from the existence of a larger and more stable distribution network. These changes were the direct result of the major changes taking place within the Korean political establishment, culminating in the democratic election of Kim Dae-jung as the president in 1998. As the director of *Repatriation*, Kim Dong-won stated: “In retrospect, it was possible only under the Kim Dae-jung government (1998-2003) to release this film. Without him, it would not have been possible to repatriate long-term political prisoners from North Korea, or even release this film.”<sup>21</sup>

The success of *Repatriation* marked a turning point in the history of Korean documentary film. Its success made other Korean directors see that it was possible to explore hitherto hidden or potentially taboo subject matter. In particular, documentaries focusing their attention on the exploration of unusual or interesting personal life stories soon began to win acclaim with both critics and audiences. These films included such titles as *Dear Pyongyang* (Yang Yong-hi, 2005) and *Goodbye Pyongyang* (Yang Yong-hi, 2006); *Our School* [우리학교] (Kim Myeong-joon, 2006); *Old Partner* [워낭소리] (Lee Chung-ryoul, 2008), *Don't Cry for Me Sudan* [울지 마 톤즈] (Ku Su-hwan, 2010); and *My Love, Don't Cross That River* [님아, 그 강을 건너지 마요] (Jin Mo-young, 2014).

For example, in both *Dear Pyongyang* and *Goodbye Pyongyang*, Yang Yong-hi, a Japan-born filmmaker of Korean ethnicity, filmed her trips to Pyongyang, where her three elder brothers have lived since 1971. These films depict the story of her family, focusing on her father, who decided to send his three sons from Japan to North Korea under a repatriation campaign sponsored by an organization of ethnic activists. The documentaries deal with the daily lives of the brothers seen against the backdrop of modern Korean history. The film *Our School* focuses on the lives of a group of ethnic Korean students who attend Chongryon High School in Hokkaido, Japan. In 2006, at the eleventh Busan International Film Festival, Kim Myeong-joon, the director of *Our School*, received the Kim Yong-gun Memorial Society Prize. In the same year, *Dear Pyongyang* was awarded the prize for Best Asian Film at the Berlin International Film Festival and the prize for World Cinema Special Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival.

*Old Partner*, the directorial debut of Lee Chung-ryoul, deals with the everyday life of an 80-year-old farmer and his 40-year-old cow, living together in a small town. The simple and slow-tempo story of an “elderly couple’s relationship with the animal who has shared their lives” went on to become the most successful documentary film in South Korea.<sup>22</sup> In all, 2,980,000 members of the cinema-going public watched this documentary.<sup>23</sup> *Don’t Cry for Me Sudan* follows the life story of a Korean Catholic priest who devoted his life to the Sudanese people and who died at the relatively young age of 48 in 2010. The priest’s life story first became widely known when KBS broadcast “The Schweitzer of Sudan” in April 2010. The TV program was a major hit, and resulted in both a film and the documentary itself being released six months later.<sup>24</sup> Finally, *My Love, Don’t Cross That River* deals with the lives of an old Korean couple who have been married for 76 years, living in a small mountain village, and their last few months together before one of them passes away at the age of 98. The film documents the activities in their ordinary daily lives, focusing on the way they have grown to rely on each other, as well as on their preparations for their eventual separation in death. The film evoked a great deal of empathetic reaction in South Korea, since it appeared to offer a signal example of the meaning of true love in

contemporary society. Watched by a total of 4,801,527 cinemagoers, *My Love, Don't Cross That River* became the second documentary to top the Korean box office, following the pioneering success of *Old Partner*.<sup>25</sup>

In 2011, with the advent of a new conservative political administration, the first signs of a new phenomenon within the genre of the South Korean documentary began to make itself felt. In response to the troubling new forms of autocratic media control exercised by the incoming administration of President Lee Myung-bak, a new genre of so-called “cinematic” or “movie” journalism, an intricate blend of art and reportage, began to explore a wider series of hitherto taboo subjects within Korean society.<sup>26</sup> Among the new subjects explored by cinematic journalism were the lives of North Korean refugees and their families in *The Journals of Musan* [무산일기] (Park Jeong-beom, 2010), the plight of guest workers from other Asian countries in films like *Winter Butterfly* [겨울나비] (Kim Kyu-min, 2011), life in North Korea in *Yodok Stories* [요덕 이야기] (Andrzej Fidyk, 2009), inequality and social mistrust in *Silenced* [도가니] (Hwang Dong-hyuk, 2011), and explorations of historical events in *Unbowed* [부러진 화살] (Jung Ji-young, 2011), as well as current events in *Namyeong-Dong 1985* [남영동 1985] (Jung Ji-young, 2012) and *Nonfiction Diary* [논픽션 다이어리] (Jung Yoon-seok, 2013).

### Independent Film and the Election of Park Geun-hye

In December 2012, building on the support of older regionally-based voters, the conservative party candidate, Park Geun-hye, the daughter of former Korean strongman Park Chung-hee, was elected as South Korea's eighteenth president. Park won the election by gaining 51.6% of the vote, beating her center-left opponent Moon Jae-in, who was supported by 48.0% of voters.<sup>27</sup> Widely acclaimed for becoming South Korea's first female president, Park pledged she would govern as the president of the entire nation, keep her promises, and inaugurate “an era of happiness.”<sup>28</sup> But the era of happiness did not last particularly long. Almost immediately, controversy erupted over whether or not the National Intelligence Service (NIS) had manipulated public opinion polls reporting on the levels of electoral support of the main rivals for the presidency.

A female National Intelligence Service agent came under suspicion of having tampered with these surveys on the orders of the director of the NIS in order to make Park seem more popular than she actually was. Perhaps inevitably, during the comparatively short duration of the Park administration, there were no real efforts to uncover the truth of this scandal, even though strong suspicions persisted concerning the manner in which Park had come to power. However, following Park's impeachment and removal from office, the NIS finally admitted that it had undertaken an illicit campaign aimed at influencing the vote. According to the UK-based *Guardian*, the NIS's in-house investigation found that, in the two-year run-up to the 2012 presidential election, its cyberwarfare unit formed as many as thirty "extra-departmental" teams composed of officials and internet-savvy citizens whose job it was to upload or text posts in support of conservative politicians.<sup>29</sup>

From an artistic and filmic point of view, however, the most significant negative aspect of Park's administration was yet to be revealed. As Park began to consolidate her power, a systematic campaign designed to infringe on the rights to free expression and creativity of all artists deemed to be opponents of the government got underway.

The first signs of this campaign emerged during the eighth Korean Film Festival that was held in London between 7 November and 22 November 2013. Initially, plans had been made for the film *Face Reader* [관상] (Han Jae-lim, 2013) to be screened at the opening ceremony, with President Park in attendance. At the last minute, however, this plan was abandoned, and the film *Hide and Seek* [숨바꼭질] (Huh Jung, 2013) was substituted instead. The main sponsors of the 2013 London Korean Film Festival were the Korean Film Council and the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism. Commenting on the unusual last-minute change, one filmmaker stated: "Someone contacted me to ask for the screening of my film. He told me that he had tried to confirm the screening of *Face Reader* and *Snowpiercer* [설국열차] (Bong Jun-ho, 2013) as the opening films. However, because of the opposition by Cheong Wa Dae (the office of the Korean president, known in English as the Blue House), he had to change it. I felt bad and so refused to submit my film to the festival." A number of theories exist within Korean film

circles for why the government objected so strongly to the screening of the film *Face Reader* at the London Korean Film Festival. One view holds that the hostility can be explained according to the film's criticism of the role of the authorities. A second explanation is that the film's central protagonist, the actor Song Kang-ho, had also played the lead in the historical drama *Attorney* [변호인] (Yang Woo-seok, 2013). This film attempted to reveal the truth behind a historical event widely referred to as the "Burim Case", a case in which Roh Moo-hyun, at the time a human rights lawyer, took on the case and defended the wrongly accused. That is why Park and the conservative politicians were against this movie. The Burim Case has to do with a series of events that took place during the military regime of Chun Doo-hwan during the 1980s. At this time, twenty-two members of a book club, including teachers, students, and office workers, were arrested without warrants on the spurious charge of being North Korean sympathizers. With the release of this film, the mostly long-forgotten Burim Case again garnered wide notice from the public. What is perhaps even more interesting is that in the summer of 2014, six months after the film's release, the members of that victimized book club all had their convictions overturned. A third possible explanation is offered by the journalist Sung Ha-hoon. Quoting an anonymous official, Sung has stated: "The people in power at the moment hate Beautiful Foundation." Beautiful Foundation is a non-profit volunteer organization established in August 2000 by Park Won-soon, the mayor of Seoul, with the goal of creating a culture of philanthropy through supporting neighbourhood communities and other activities that benefit the public. The producer of *Face Reader* had become a fan of the organization and decided to offer it part of the film's profits. This donation had apparently come to the attention of the authorities who did not share the producer's good opinion of the organization.

During the Korean Film Festival that was organized in 2013 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the diplomatic relations between South Korea and Switzerland, the South Korean embassy suddenly objected to the screening of the film *Jiseul* [지슬] (Oh Muel, 2012). This film details the events surrounding the Jeju Uprising of 3 April 1948, an event that still provokes passionate debate within Korean society. As

a consequence, the promised financial support from the embassy and certain Korean corporations did not materialize. Naturally upset by this sudden turn of events, the Swiss filmmakers involved decided to pool their own money to pay for the screening, and the event went ahead anyway, although without Korean corporate or political sponsorship.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, in 2013, the first year of Park Geun-hye's presidency, the documentary *Project Cheonan Ship* [천안함 프로젝트] (Back Seung-woo, 2013) was suddenly removed from theatres, just three days after its opening. To this day, it has not returned to the Korean movie screen.

Despite positive reviews by film critics and initial strong public interest, *Minority Opinion* [소수의견] (Kim Sung-je, 2013) experienced severe difficulties in finding theatres willing to host its screening. As a consequence, it proved a commercial failure. The fate of the film raised suspicions that many theatre owners, concerned by the film's content, sought to appease the Park administration. *Minority Opinion* was a film based on the "Yongsan Tragedy", an incident that took place on January 20, 2009, in a neighbourhood in Yongsan, Seoul. During the full-scale riot that erupted, pitting 40 tenants against the riot police, five people and one police officer lost their lives. The tenants had been protesting the insufficient amount of compensation paid by the authorities in return for their consent to the urban renewal redevelopment of their neighbourhood.<sup>31</sup> The film *Minority Opinion* took the view that the Yongsan tragedy was an act of violence perpetrated by the state against the poor and outcast, painting an unflattering picture of the process of gentrification and renewal taking place under the Lee Myung-bak administration.<sup>32</sup> It took more than two years for the film to be released.

Perhaps the most dramatic change of all, however, was the one that overtook the independent art theatres. Unlike the multiplex theatres, which stuck to screening films that were likely to be both widely popular and to raise little controversy, the independent arts theatres had a policy of welcoming politically engaged cinema. As a consequence, the Park administration decided to stop funding them, and many of them were forced to close.<sup>33</sup>

### Scandal at the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF)

In 2014, the documentary film *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol* (a.k.a. *Diving Bell* [다이빙벨], Lee Sang-ho and Ahn Hae-rong, 2014) premiered at the nineteenth Busan International Film Festival (BIFF), which attracted movie directors and film stars from around the world. That year's festival took place just five months after the tragic sinking of the Sewol ferry on April 16, 2014. On that dark day, the Sewol ferry, which was supposed to run from Incheon, near Seoul, to the tourist island of Jeju in the south, capsized and sank in the sea near Jindo. The loss of life on that day was horrific, with 295 deaths, 172 survivors and further 9 persons officially reported as missing—a significant number of the dead being high school students on a school trip.

On November 11, the official search operation for the missing persons was suspended, still leaving unresolved a number of vital issues relating to the emergency response of the government. Indeed, it was not until March 22 of 2017 that salvage operations were begun. In the meantime, there were additional deaths related to the horrific accident and the botched response. A number of officials, who had initially sought to help the members of the bereaved families, committed suicide because of depression and guilt stemming from the incompetence and inefficiency associated with the failed rescue operation. The disaster gripped South Korea and permanently cast a shadow over Park's increasingly beleaguered presidency, as rumours circulated that she had simply remained at her residence, apparently incommunicado, during the crucial first few hours following the capsizing of the vessel.

*The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol* took a sharply critical view of the incompetence of the entire Park administration for failing to protect its citizens at a crucial moment as well as for later trying to cover up the evidence for this incompetence. Given its explosive revelations, the attempt to screen the documentary was met by stiff resistance from a number of individuals and organizations that wanted to protect the Park government from criticism. For example, the mayor of Busan, Seo Byung-soo, who was known to be a close confidant of Park, went on record demanding that the film festival simply withdraw the film.<sup>34</sup> The opposition to the screening of the film actually began a couple of

months before the festival when the Board of Audit and Inspection unexpectedly undertook an investigation of the funds associated with the film festival. Delivered to the Busan City Administration one month before the festival's opening, the audit accused the organizers of the film festival of having unfairly acquired state subsidies. As a consequence of this unexpected audit, the Korean Film Council then decided to provide only 800 million won for the twentieth staging of the film festival in 2015, cutting 40% of the total budget of 1.5 billion won. Moreover, the Busan city administration then decided to file a complaint for public prosecution against the chairman of the film festival's executive committee and to cease subsidizing the festival organizing committee. As they watched this process unfold, both filmmakers and concerned NGOs accused the auditor of deliberately spreading falsehoods.

The BIFF scandal soon led to further revelations. It came to public notice that the Park administration had drawn up a blacklist containing the names of almost 10,000 intellectuals and artists whom it deemed unsympathetic or actual enemies of the new administration. This black list included a number of internationally-acclaimed artists, including film director Park Chan-wook, winner of the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004, and the novelist Han Kang, winner of the 2016 Man Booker International Prize.

In September 2015, the film festival began as planned, and the screening of the documentary about the Sewol ferry disaster went ahead, albeit amidst unprecedented controversy. After the festival had concluded, however, Lee Yong-kwan, the Chairman of the executive committee, resigned. There were many people who suspected that the main sponsor of the film festival, Busan Metropolitan City, had asked him to step aside. Moreover, in March 2016, a group of nine film-related associations, including the Korean Film Producers Association, issued a statement that they would not participate in the BIFF if the Busan Metropolitan Government insisted on compromising the festival's independence.<sup>35</sup> Facing opposition from within the festival as well as from outside, the mayor of Busan handed over the chairmanship of the festival organization committee to the private sector. In June 2016, Kim Dong-ho, the former chairman of the executive committee, was

named the new chief director.<sup>36</sup> This change raised expectations that the BIFF would henceforth regain its nominal independence from political interference. However, on 7 July 2017, the entire staff of the Busan Film Festival Secretariat announced that the future of the film festival was in doubt, as they were finding it difficult to proceed with the organization of the twentieth film festival. Kim Dong-ho and Kang Soo-yeon, the temporary chairman of the executive committee, then announced that they intended to resign as the festival's lead organizers.

The scandal surrounding *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol* soon garnered a range of international reactions. For example, Joshua Oppenheimer, the director of the Oscar-winning documentary, *The Act of Killing* (2012), openly criticised the poor rescue efforts of the Korean government. Directors Michael Moore and Béla Tarr also raised their voices in support of the willingness of filmmakers to resist the dictates of government.<sup>37</sup> A number of directors attending international film festivals also voiced their support for the right to free speech and artistic expression in the wake of the BIFF scandal. On the surface, the BIFF scandal looked like a simple confrontation between the administration of the city of Busan and the organizers of its film festival, but filmmakers saw it in terms of a wider confrontation between the Park administration and the entire Korean film industry. Notwithstanding the controversy, and in marked contrast to the current fate of *Project Cheonan Ship*, *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol* was eventually screened before public audiences.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Fall of Park Geun-hye**

On 31 March 2017, President Park Geun-hye was placed under arrest. It was alleged that the president, together with her long-time associate, Choi Soon-sil, had conspired to pressure companies to donate large sums to two non-profit foundations set up by Choi. It quickly emerged that, for more than 40 years, Choi has had access to Park's personal and work life and had used her presidential connections to pressure conglomerates into donating large sums of money. For example, Samsung had donated close to US \$70 million. During the time that Park was president, Choi

had also been giving advice to the president, although Park's associate had neither security clearance nor an official government position.

The gradual revelation of this massive political and corporate corruption scandal, centering on the secret and somewhat bizarre relationship between Park and Choi, provoked a series of mass demonstrations demanding the resignation of the President. From 26 October 2016 to 15 April 2017, these massive, peaceful protests, dubbed "the Candlelight Struggle" by participants, took place throughout the republic. Many of those who attended the mass rallies held out the hope that the revelation of this huge scandal would serve as a catalyst for sweeping domestic reforms that would rein in the influence of the major business conglomerates. A large group of Park's senior staff members, including Cho Yoon-sun, the Culture Minister, and Kim Ki-chun, the former Presidential Chief of Staff, were also arrested for abuse of power and for aiding and abetting Choi. The widening scandal also served to ensnare some of the heads of South Korea's major conglomerates, including Lee Jae-yong, Samsung's vice-chairman.

On 10 March 2017, the impeachment of Park Geun-hye was unanimously approved by the nine justices of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Korea. As Justice Lee Jung-mi declared: "This scandal has left an indelible stain on our country's history. However, it also gave rise to a meaningful movement among its citizens to reestablish democracy and the rule of law."<sup>39</sup> The judges did dismiss a number of significant charges, including that Park had infringed on the freedom of the press by creating a media blacklist of cultural figures. The judges also dismissed criticism of Park's response during the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster.<sup>40</sup>

On February 13, 2018, the Seoul Central District Court found Choi Soon-sil guilty of bribery, abuse of power, and interference in government business. She was fined a sum of US \$16.6 million and sentenced to 20 years in prison.<sup>41</sup> On April 6, former President Park herself was sentenced to 24 years in prison. For the first time ever, due to intense public interest, the sentencing was broadcast live on television.

Kim Ki-chun, the chief presidential secretary who had ordered cuts to the budget for the Busan International Film Festival, was sentenced to three years in prison on charges of perjury and abuse of power for

blacklisting thousands of artists considered unfriendly to Ms. Park.<sup>42</sup> Cho Yoon-sun, the then-culture minister who had drawn up the list of thousands of artists and cultural figures to be excluded from government arts subsidies on political grounds, was put on trial and eventually given a one-year jail sentence, which was suspended for two years. The BBC reported that Cho was the first sitting cabinet minister to be arrested in South Korea. Although Cho was released in July 2017, she and Park's former chief of staff, Kim Ki-chun, are still facing charges of abuse of power and perjury.<sup>43</sup>

Within 60 days of Park's impeachment, a new election was organized; and on May 9, 2017, Moon Jae-in was elected as the new president of the Republic of Korea. Under Moon's political leadership, the film industry was allowed to begin its recovery, free from government inference.

### **BIFF and the Renewal of Korean Film**

On 31 January 2018, it was announced that Lee Yong-kwan would return as the Chair of the Busan International Film Festival for a fresh term of four years and that Jeon Yang-joon would return as Festival Director for three years. Both had been founding members of the film festival. Lee had been serving as BIFF Festival Director and Jeon as BIFF Deputy Director before they had been forced to step aside because of political pressure from the Park administration.<sup>44</sup> With these appointments, the hard road to renewal and normalization of the film festival had begun. As Lee Yong-kwan stated: "We are hoping that the situation will get better, as many in the Korean film industry have pushed for the reinstatement of Mr. Lee Yong-kwan and recovering his honor."<sup>45</sup> What is more, Oh Seok-geun, who had become the new chair of the Korean Film Council in January 2018, officially apologised for the creation of the cultural and artistic blacklist in the years between 2009 and 2016. Basing his comment on the 56 cases in which damage was caused by the blacklist, Oh said, "Under the last two governments of Lee and Park, the Korean Film Council made a big mistake by making a blacklist in the culture and arts and by acts of discrimination and exclusion directed by those in power."<sup>46</sup> In this interview, Oh also revealed that in 2009, the

Korean Film Council committee had unfairly intervened in the business of independent movie theatre consignment. It had also acted to exclude from support those arts and independent movie theatres that had opted to screen both *Project Cheonan Ship* and *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol*. He also revealed that the subsidy for the Busan International Film Festival had been cut in half, following the decision to screen *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol*.<sup>47</sup>

The scandal at the Busan International Film Festival has had far-reaching consequences not only for the festival itself but also for the entire South Korean culture industry. Perhaps inevitably, the first casualty of the scandal was public attendance. In 2016, the total number of visitors to BIFF had been 165,149. This represented a 27.4% decrease from the previous year's total of 227,777. Many critics voiced the fear that the world's fifth-largest international film festival, which had been attracting more than 200,000 people every year, was set to become a much more ordinary affair, perhaps one without major global appeal.<sup>48</sup> There are a number of explanations for the reduced attendance. First, many movie companies and other organizations had pulled out as a direct consequence of the conflict between the city of Busan and the festival's organizers. A second reason was the sudden implementation of a new national law. "The Improper Solicitation and Graft Act and The Acceptance of Financial or Other Advantages" was a legal measure designed to curb the giving of gifts and other favours that might be construed as attempts at bribery or currying favour. As a consequence, the number of invitations extended to actors had been sharply reduced. A third reason was that Haeundae Beach, the main venue of the film festival, had been damaged by Typhoon Chava, causing at least some potential visitors to stay away.

## Conclusion

In light of these developments, the struggle of the filmmakers of *The Truth Shall Not Sink with Sewol* to shine a critical light on the Sewol incident became a flashpoint in the effort to heal a shocked and grief-stricken nation. Reassuringly, the struggle in the face of political and

financial intimidation has helped to motivate the production of other films on the subject. For example, *Cruel State* [나쁜 나라] (Kim Jin-yeol, 2015) is a film that deals with the stories of the bereaved families. Using a voiceover narration, the film documents the struggles of these families to find out what really happened to their loved ones on that terrible day.

From a sociological perspective, the greater confidence placed by the public in politically-engaged documentaries suggests a momentous shift in the media landscape. Moreover, audiences were drawn to the *fighting spirit* against social and political injustice that has been a central characteristic of a number of South Korean documentaries since the beginning of this genre. Since 2011, and the rise of the phenomenon of “movie journalism,” Korean documentary films have begun to investigate new topics and to seek out new social problems. Many documentaries try to reveal social injustice, using their cameras in an effort to counter the general conservative tendencies within the Korean government. Mainstream cinema in Korea has been supported financially and distributed by people in positions of authority; in sharp contrast, documentaries have often exhibited an alternative “fighting spirit” that may be associated with the labouring masses in the country.

What is more, Korean documentary film would appear to have a continuing relevance, especially in the age of digital cinema. Cinema can be used as an effective method to inform the public about important issues, especially by taking advantage of the new forms of alternative distribution and viewing platforms.

## Notes

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