

**From Periphery to Center:
The Rise of the Korean Film Industry Since the Late 1990s
and Ironies of Its Success**

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I. Introduction

According John Tomlinson, the key to the cultural impact of globalization lies in the idea of “deterritorialization” – the weakening ties of culture to place (1999, p. 29). He argues that while the focus on communication technologies or “people on the move” often narrowly views the cultural impact of globalization, the concept of deterritorialization captures the broad transformation of localities – the penetration of distant global forces even in mundane lives (pp. 27-31). Indeed, even though the vast majority of the global populations are still excluded from the Internet and situated in specific localities, they are certainly touched by deterritorialized forces which increasingly wrest their daily experiences from immediate local contexts.

If deterritorialization is an indisputable expression of the globalization of culture, its implications for local cultures are, however, far from clear. Many of the most visible expressions of deterritorialized culture are Western or, more specifically, American – McDonald’s, Nike, Disney, Coca-Cola, Hollywood, and MTV, just to name a few. Indeed, as Todd Gitlin points out, “if there is a village, it speaks American” (2001, p. 176). In this context, globalization of culture is often seen as the advance of American popular culture across the globe, which raises a specter of a global monoculture emanating from a single center. Reflecting this, the notion of Americanization and cultural imperialism has often informed the discourse of globalization and culture.

Seen from this perspective, something quite anomalous is happening in the South Korean popular culture scene. Much like “compressed modernity” of Korea (Chang, 1999), its popular culture has emerged from nowhere in less than a decade and is raging across Asia. Dubbed as the “Korean Wave,” Korean popular culture, ranging from music to TV dramas and films, has become “Kim Chic” in neighboring countries

(Visser, 2002, p. A23). Korean stars are mobbed like big Hollywood stars in Asia, and people flock to Korea to visit locations where their favorite TV dramas are filmed. Thus, it is even observed that the “South Korean creative industries are staging their own version of cultural imperialism by expanding into neighboring Asian market” (Ward, 2002, p. 12).

These developments have left many Koreans in a state of pleasant surprise and puzzlement, searching for answers to explain the sudden craze for their popular culture. This reaction is hardly strange, as the opening of the Korean market to global forces had long been accompanied by the fear of foreign cultural invasion of Korea, a fear often amplified by the uncertainty of the competitiveness of Korean popular culture. Indeed, Korea has had its share of concern with American cultural influence. In addition, Japanese popular culture—even though it was banned in Korea until 1998 due to colonial history between two countries—has been equally feared, as Japan was seen as “America of Asia” (Choi, 1994, p. 146). Accordingly, globalization, symbolizing the market opening, is experienced by Koreans as “posing the gravest danger to the self, the danger of becoming other to one’s self, self’s stranger.” Even when “Koreans appear to embrace globalization,” it is to “keep globalization at bay” (Alford, 1999, p. 12). However, the Korean Wave phenomenon has proven this fear largely unwarranted, thus questioning common assumptions on globalization and culture.

Against the described backdrop, this paper grew out of the same sense of surprise, especially from witnessing the dramatic transformation of the Korean film industry. For example, with the opening of the Korean film market in the late 1980s, the Korean film industry seemed to be almost dead amid onslaught from popular Hollywood films, taking 15.9% of the national market in 1993, which is down from

34.2% in 1985.¹ Thus, the fear of cultural invasion, often made self-evident with the global dominance of Hollywood, was especially pronounced within the Korean film industry. However, the Korean film industry is now one of the most thriving industries in the world, successfully challenging the Hollywood's dominant position in Korea and winning critical and commercial recognition abroad. This change, coupled with the Korean Wave, has prompted me to question the seeming anomaly of this development, when globalization is often viewed as the advance of American popular culture.

In such context, this paper aims to delve into the question of globalization and culture by examining the developments within the Korean film industry, especially since the late 1990s. For this purpose, it will present a brief overview of the transformation of the Korean film industry from peripheral backwater to a prosperous regional center. Then, the paper will examine what the case of the Korean film industry, along with other examples, implies for globalization and culture. In this context, it will argue that the current vitality of the Korean film industry should be seen as both reflective as well as constitutive of changes, such as decentering cultural production and multidirectional cultural flow within global circuitry.

While this casts doubt on the view of globalization as an all-encompassing Americanization, it is my belief that the current success of the Korean film industry should not be uncritically celebrated as the case for local resistance to Hollywood's global hegemony. Thus, by looking at the ironies of the current success of the Korean film industry, the paper will argue that challenges posed by the Korean film industry to Hollywood are fundamentally limited and ambivalent. However, it will also point out

¹ Statistics on Korean films in this paper, otherwise mentioned, are all from either the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism (www.mct.go.kr) or the Korea Film Council, a government institute devoted to the promotion of Korean films, at www.kofic.or.kr.

the impossibility and ultimate futility of determining whether the Korean film industry represents a case of local resistance or a triumph of global hegemony. Based on this observation, the paper will present an alternative way to understand globalization, deterritorialization, and the Korean film industry.

II. From Periphery to Center: The Rise of the Korean Film Industry

A decade ago the prospect for the Korean film industry was anything but promising. Korean audiences turned their back against local fares, since watching low-budget and low-quality Korean films compared to slick Hollywood titles was considered a waste of money and time. Indeed, like most film industries of other countries, the Korean film industry existed in the shadow of popular Hollywood films. Throughout most of the 1990s, Hollywood titles took up over 70% of the box-office receipts, while Korean films were marginalized at the box office, comprising only about 20%. Even this share was largely made possible due to the screen quota that requires the mandatory screening of Korean films for 106 days a year. Thus, even in the domestic market, the Korean film industry was operating in the “space of the other” (Berry, 2003, p. 222).

Two factors in particular were to blame for the lackluster situation for Korean films and the unsurpassed popularity of Hollywood titles: Korean government policies of the past decades and the onset of direct distribution of Hollywood films in the late 1980s. Arguably, the Korean film industry had suffered from one of the most rigorous regimes of government censorship in the world. For example, the Motion Picture Law of 1973 not only banned criticism of government in films, but also required a double censorship, which meant that all films had to be censored before production and before being released to the public. In addition, production could be stopped if a film’s content

differed from the original synopsis submitted the government beforehand, or “if social discussion is provoked during the course of making the film” (“South,” 1985, p. 99).

If censorship severely limited the creativity of Korean films, another factor further crippled the development of the Korean film industry. The aforementioned Motion Picture Law required the production of four Korean films in return for an import license of one foreign film as a way to protect the market. At the same time, the Korean government limited the production licenses to only about 20 companies (Lent, 1990, p. 130). This not only stifled the independent filmmaking tradition, but also ironically contributed to the popularity of imported films as the restrictions on imports meant that only high-quality, principally American, films were imported. For example, 25 imported films took up 61% of the Korean market in 1984, while 81 Korean films accounted for the rest. In this situation, the Korean film industry “remained in business only in order to import movies,” thus churning out so-called quota quickies to meet the import requirement (“South,” 1985, p. 98).

The revision of the Motion Picture Law in 1985 was intended to improve this situation by separating film production requirement from film import and easing censorship somewhat. Thus, instead of the license system, the new law required the registration for film production to encourage production of Korean films. In addition, while film imports were also liberalized with the registration requirement, various measures—including a ceiling on royalty payments, the screen quota, and requirement for importers to deposit about \$800,000 into the Korean Motion Picture Promotion Corporation and to contribute \$170,000 to the same entity for each imported film—were used to protect the market from imports (Lent, 1990, pp. 122-23).

However, these protective measures were soon challenged by the Motion Picture Exporters Association of America, the export arm of Hollywood studios. They were particularly grieved by the fact that the Motion Picture Law banned the participation of foreigners in film imports and direct distribution of foreign films in Korea. Up to this point, Hollywood films reached exhibitors through LA-based Korean buyers, Korea-based importers, and regional distributors and were paid on a flat fee basis. However, with growing economic prosperity, Korea was expected to generate between \$25 and \$40 million a year from film rentals alone (Segers, 1988, p. 32).² In this context, Hollywood studios wanted to bypass middlemen and deal directly with exhibitors, with whom box-office receipts were split on a percentage basis.

Against the threat of trade retaliation from the U.S. on Korean videocassette recorders (Darlin, 1989, p. 1), the Korean government acquiesced to Hollywood's demand by allowing the participation of foreigners in film imports and direct distribution of foreign films.³ In addition, the Korean government agreed to eliminate import quotas and ceiling on royalty payment and significantly reduce the amount of the deposit. As a consequence, by the end of 1988, any significant measure designed to regulate imports was practically eliminated (except for the screen quota, which was only to be challenged later by the U.S.). To the Korean film industry, these changes meant a further influx of already popular Hollywood films, a serious blow to any hope of revitalizing the industry, an expectation kindled by the revision of the Motion Picture Law in 1985. Thus, the Korean film industry fiercely resisted direct distribution,

² For example, *Jaws II* was paid only \$300,000 on the flat fee basis, while directly distributed *Rain Man* earned about \$2 million in the box office (Darlin, 1989, p. 1).

³ Also, against the MPEAA's complaints on the slow censorship process, the Korean government agreed to shorten the period of censorship review and increase the number of films on its censorship list, while simplifying the censorship process.

denouncing what was seen as “U.S. cultural invasion” (Darlin, 1989, p. 1) and boycotting *Fatal Attraction*, the first directly distributed Hollywood film (Farhi, 1988, p. D14).

If this resistance slowed the initial advance of Hollywood films in Korea, Hollywood nevertheless came to make significant strides with the success of *Ghost* in 1990, which further consolidated its hegemonic position. Indeed, Korea soon emerged as one of the top ten foreign territories for American films (Grove and Lee, 1999, p. 21), with Hollywood blockbusters frequently attracting more than 1 million viewers (whereas Korean films drawing over 100,000 viewers were considered successful). In this situation, big conglomerates, or chaebol, entering the film industry in the early 1990s with the stated purpose of reviving the Korean film industry, could ignore the market power of imported films only to their own peril.⁴ Thus, chaebol came to sign various output deals with Hollywood independent producers, guaranteeing 5% or more of the total production costs in order to secure distribution rights to blockbusters that they could not get from Hollywood majors.⁵ In addition, Korean buyers in the international film market came to be known for outbidding each other in order to get American films at any cost (C. Alford, 2000, p. 116). Taking advantage of this situation, some Hollywood majors sold their films to chaebol instead of distributing them through their own subsidiaries in Korea (Shim, 2000, p. 238).

⁴ In the late 1980s, chaebol such as Daewoo and SK entered the home video market by making deals with Hollywood studios. In the early 1990s, chaebol with electronics division such as Samsung, Hyundai, and Daewoo, inspired by Sony’s takeover Columbia, began to set up the media division to take advantage of synergy between electronics and media contents. Finally, in the mid-1990s, chaebol extended its media reach by entering the cable TV industry (Shim, 2000, pp. 227-28).

⁵ For example, Samsung invested \$60 million in Hollywood independent New Regency in return for Korean distribution rights to films made by the studio. Daewoo signed output deals with New Line Cinema, guaranteeing 5-6% of production costs in return for the distribution rights in Asia markets. SKC made a production contract with Hollywood independent Mandalay Entertainment, providing 5% of total budget (Shim, 2000, p. 237).

However, all of this suddenly changed in 1999 when the Korean film industry made a strong and surprising comeback, thus reclaiming the local market from Hollywood and garnering regional and international acclaim. Even before 1999, there was a buzz around the “New Korean Cinema” (Rayns, 1995) in the mid-1990s and some Korean films such as *Contact* (1997) and *Christmas in August* (1998) attracted the audience’s attention with new sensibilities. However, they did not lead to any significant breakthrough in overturning the market power of Hollywood. Indeed, it was 1999 which proved to be a watershed year, as the market share of Korean films was suddenly shot up to 39.7% from 25.1% in 1998. While this decreased to 35.1% in 2000, it strongly rebounded to 49.7% in 2001 – overtaking the market share of American titles for the first time since the direction distribution was allowed in the late 1980s. The share went up again in 2003 to 53.3%, demonstrating that the sudden outburst in 1999 was not a mere accident. Thus, all of sudden, Korea came to represent not only one of the highest market shares of domestic films in the world, but also “the only nation during the post-Vietnam history that has regained its domestic audience after losing them to Hollywood” (K. Kim, 2004, p. 270).

The sign for resurgence of the Korean film industry is also shown in the constant re-setting of the record of the highest grossing film since 1999. For example, *Ghost* (1990) remained as the highest grossing film, with 3.5 million ticket sales in Korea (Shim, 2000, p. 222), until 1998 when *Titanic* stormed the box office with 4.7 million ticket sales. However, after 1999 Korean films came to dominate the top position, starting with *Shiri*, which sunk *Titanic* with 5.78 million ticket sales. Yet, this record was only to be topped by another Korean film, *Friend*, in 2001 with over 8 million ticket sales. In 2004 this record was once again reset with the release of *Silmido* and *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of*

War (hereafter *Taegukgi*), as each film attracted over 11 million viewers respectively out of the 49 million population. The magnitude of these numbers can be gauged by the fact that the highest grossing Korean film until 1999 was *Seopyonje* (1993) with just over 1 million ticket sales.

This dramatic upturn of Korean films has been accompanied by the continuing growth in theatrical revenue, which was in turn supported by the increasing number of screens nationwide. The number of tickets sold in Korea in 2003 reached nearly 120 million, more than double the 58 million tickets in 1999, and the box office revenue showed a similar increase from 286 billion won (about \$276 million) in 1999 to 717 billion won (about \$671 million) in 2003. During the same period, ticket sales for Korean films tripled from 21 million to 63 million, while ticket sales for foreign films increased from 33 million to 55 million, indicating that the growth of the market has been driven largely by Korean films. The rise in theatrical attendance and revenue is often credited to state-of-the-art multiplexes, which were first introduced to Korea in 1998. Before multiplexes were built, Korea was one of the most underscreened nations in the world, with the number of screens being 497 in 1997, down from 789 in 1990. Now there are over 1,200 screens nationwide, and over half of them are multiplexes.

It is often argued that the sudden resurgence of the Korean film industry since 1999 was ironically helped by the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Indeed, devalued Korean currency due to the financial crisis made it prohibitively expensive to purchase foreign films, so the Korean film industry had to rely on the Korean talent. For example, besides directly distributed Hollywood films, there were 17 imported films (12 American) in 1996 and 15 imported films (10 American) in 1997 which cost over \$1 million. However, this number decreased to 5 in 1998, none in 1999, and 3 in 2000. While

this increased again to 6 films in 2001 and 9 films in 2002, the Korean film industry had already won back the Korean audience with a series of slick and sophisticated films. In addition, the financial crisis forced out chaebol, which until then produced low-risk and low-return fares, from the film industry as part of the IMF-requested economic restructure. Their exit created a vacuum filled by market-savvy and risk-taking venture capitalists (K. Kim, 2004, p. 271).

The film that is often credited for redirecting the Korean audience from Hollywood fares to local films is the aforementioned *Shiri*, a North-South Korea spy action thriller released in 1999. Thus, it is argued that “the history of Korean cinema can be divided into before ‘Shiri’ and after ‘Shiri’” (J. Kim, 2004e). *Shiri* indeed heralded a departure from the past by successfully tapping the hitherto overlooked commercial viability of Korean films. The film even overtook *Titanic*, a feat often compared to “Goliath falling down by David’s stone” (Shin, 2004, p. 65). In addition, *Shiri* featured action sequences and special effects, which had been considered exclusive property of the Hollywood blockbuster, thus signaling the attempt to “de-Westernize” the blockbuster (Berry, 2003, p. 217-29). Its skillful mix of the Hollywood-style blockbuster and local theme demonstrated to the audience as well as investors that Korean films could be comparable to Hollywood titles in terms of quality and money-making potential. Thus, capital began to pour into the heretofore cash-strapped Korean film industry, which set the current success in motion.

The domestic success of Korean films soon spilled over to regional markets. For example, *Shiri* became the first Korean film to open nationwide in Japan, where it sold over 1.2 million tickets and grossed \$15 million (Herskovitz, 2000, p. 65). Similarly, *My Sassy Girl* became a huge hit in Hong Kong, earning \$14 million in the box office in 2001

(Salmon, 2004). Since then, Korean films have become key commercial components in regional markets, which account for around 55% of the total export revenue of Korean films in 2002. Given Koreans' fear of being dominated by Japanese popular culture, it is ironic that Japan has emerged as the biggest market for Korean films, followed by Chinese-speaking regions. The commercial viability of Korean films has attracted stars and funds from China and Japan and has generated various co-production ventures signaling the "Birth of Asiawood" (Beals, 2001, pp. 52-56).⁶ These developments, along with Korea's Pusan International Film Festival showcasing vibrant Korean as well as Asian films, have catapulted Korea as a regional center for cinema.

Meanwhile, Hollywood also jumped on the bandwagon by not only picking up several Korean films for limited distribution in the U.S. for the first time, but also acquiring remake rights to a dozen of Korean films. Since Miramax first purchased remake rights to *My Wife is a Gangster* in late 2001 (M. Kim, 2001a, p. 8), twelve Korean films have been sold to Hollywood producers for remakes. These include such hits like *My Sassy Girl* and *A Tale of Two Sisters* (sold to DreamWorks), *Marrying the Mafia* and *Il Mare* (sold to Warner Bros.), and *Oldboy* (sold to Universal Pictures).⁷ Mirroring the accelerating interest in Korean remakes, Miramax purchased remake and distribution rights to *My Teacher, Mr. Kim* in post-production stage (Harris and Dunkley, 2003, p. 12) and agreed to include an American cast as part of the remake deal of *Jail Breakers* (Murdoch, 2003, p. 7-8).

⁶ For example, *Musa: The Warrior* in 2001 stirred more interests due to a Chinese starlet Zhang Ziyi in the film and 2009 *Lost Memories* heralded a successful co-production between Korea and Japan (M. Kim, 2001b, p. 59; C. Alford and Herskovitz, 2001, p. 28). *Rikidozan* released in 2004 marks a new level Korean-Japanese film cooperation. While producer, director, and lead actor are Korean, the rest of the cast is Japanese and the almost entire dialogue is in Japanese (J. Kim, 2004a, p. 28).

⁷ Remake rights to *My Sassy Girl* were sold for \$750,000 plus 4% of global revenues and *Il Mare* was sold for \$500,000 plus 2.5% of global revenues. Other films sold for remakes include *Hi, Dharma* sold to MGM for \$300,000 plus 5% of global revenues, *Tell Me Something* to Fox 2000 Pictures, *The Phone* to Focus Features, and *Addicted* to Intermedia for \$250,000 (C. Alford, 2002, p. 14; Russell, 2003a, p. 19; Harris, 2004, p. 6).

With the increased regional and international presence of Korean films, there has been exponential growth in export sales of Korean films, which is not something the Korean film industry has been known for until very recently. Indeed, only several years ago, exporting Korean films, let alone expecting commercial success, was not much of a possibility (Lent, 1990, p. 136). For example, the export figures of Korean films were only \$492,000 in 1997 and \$3 million in 1998, a meager sum, but a significant increase largely made possible by export sales of a kid movie, *Yongary* (Lee, 1998, p. 25). However, export figures soon jumped to \$11 million in 2001 and \$15 million in 2002, and doubled to \$31 million in 2003 and again to 63 million in 2004. With the rise of exports, the value of exports to the local film industry has risen from 9% of total revenue in 2002 to 14% in 2003 and to 21% in 2004 (Russell, 2004, p. 52). Reflecting the growing interests in Korean films, films are sold even before they are completed.⁸

The Korean film industry, once on the verge of extinction under the fire from popular Hollywood films, is now in the position of strength. Its local blockbusters challenged Hollywood's dominance, eliciting envy from other countries which view the Korean film industry as a "model for survival" (Russell and Wehrfritz, 2004). Meanwhile the Pusan International Film Festival has emerged as the "Asia's movie mecca" (Garger, 2004). Indeed, as Russell and Wehrfritz wittily dubbed, Korea has become a "Blockbuster Nation," beating Hollywood at home and becoming an "Asian star" on the way (2004).

III. Rethinking Globalization and Culture

⁸ For example, the distribution right to *Oldboy* was sold to France at the script stage. *A Tale of Two Sisters* was sold to France and Hong Kong at the production stage (M. Kim, 2003b). *A Bittersweet Life*, sold to Japan at the production stage at \$3 million, already recuperated most of its production costs even before the film's release in Korea in 2005.

The case of the Korean film industry—its challenge to Hollywood at home and its successful cross-border movement—eventually raises questions on the nature and process of globalization. As mentioned above, the discourse on globalization is often informed by notions such as Americanization and cultural imperialism. Then, how are we to reconcile the current development in the Korean film industry with the common view of globalization as Americanization?

Given the view of globalization as Americanization, it may be tempting to pose the Korean film industry as a case against globalization. For example, a local newspaper, *Korea Times*, claims that Korea exemplifies “a nation protecting its own film industry against the rampant trend of cultural globalization, led by Hollywood” (“Has,” 2001). However, this view is not satisfying, as the current success of the Korean film industry is the development within, and helped by, globalization. For instance, as pointed out earlier, the Korean film industry was helped, although inadvertently, by the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, a quintessential, if only negative, example of globalization. In addition, the much-touted Korean blockbuster would have been impossible had it not been for the global circulation of the Hollywood blockbuster. Moreover, the regional and global circulation of Korean films was facilitated by the opening of global cultural markets. Indeed, as Russell and Wehrfritz put it, the Korean film industry is “the liberated offspring of global free markets” (2004). Finally, as will be seen shortly, the success of the Korean film industry has been accompanied by many unforeseen outcomes, which makes it difficult to present a dichotomy between local resistance and global (i.e. Hollywood) hegemony.

Rather than a case against globalization, the example of the Korean film industry requires us to reexamine common assumptions on globalization. First, while the opening

of the Korean market initially led to a further influx of Hollywood films, this did not simply result in Americanization or a cultural invasion. On the contrary, it is often argued that the sense of crisis coming from the opening of the market has strengthened the Korean film industry and allowed it to survive competition from Hollywood (S. Shim, 2001). In this context, it is arguable that the threat of a foreign cultural invasion was dispelled not by protecting but by opening up the domestic market (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 87). Finally, the advance of Korean films in regional and global markets indicates that globalization is more than an undisrupted global advance of American popular culture, thus casting a doubt on the view of globalization as Americanization or cultural imperialism.

In this case, the Korean film industry is not an isolated example. For example, as Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham argue, there has been a significant rise of non-Western regional “centers” – notably, Mexico and Brazil – in the global TV production and trade, a field long known for American dominance (1996, pp. 1-32). Even Hollywood’s global dominance is increasingly challenged by burgeoning local industries with “a more (but not entirely) Hollywood feel” (Ferozhar, 2002). In addition, Bollywood, as the thriving India’s film industry is called, boasts hundreds of millions of fans around the world, sometimes even overwhelming Hollywood fare in popularity (Power and Mazumdar, 2000, pp. 62-65).

According to Koichi Iwabuchi these developments, along with transnational movements of Japanese popular culture, should be read as “a symptom of the shifting nature of transnational cultural power in a context in which intensified global cultural flows have decentered the power structure” (2002, p. 35). Indeed, unlike images conveyed by Americanization or cultural imperialism, globalization does not mean that

America enjoys the unchallenged position of cultural dominance across the globe, and that people outside the West are always at the receiving end of cultural exchange. Rather, these examples point out that the “postcolonial periphery” is fast becoming “a major center for the production of transnational culture, not just a sinkhole for its transnational consumption” (Watson, 1997, p. 108). New developments in once cultural peripheries show that transnational cultural flows are not “a one-way street; rather there are a number of main thoroughfares, with a series of not unimportant smaller roads” (Sinclair et al., 1996, p. 8). In this complicated global circuitry, cultural flows are multidirectional, emanating from and crisscrossing multiple centers, as exemplified by *Oldboy*, a Korean film based on a Japanese comic book and sold to Universal Pictures, from which it will be re-made and re-circulated throughout the world.

Amid these changes, even the traditional cultural center does not remain static. For example, given the growing importance of the global market, which accounts for over a half of Hollywood’s revenue, and increasing competition from local film industries, Hollywood has made its English-speaking films more international, while launching various local language productions. In addition, it is often pointed out that there has never been more of a foreign flavor in Hollywood than before (Foroohar, 2002). Especially since the spectacular success of *The Ring* (2002), the remake of a Japanese horror film *Ringu*, Hollywood is in the frenzy of remaking Asian films.⁹ *The Grudge* (2004), a remake of Japanese horror and a box office hit, *Dark Water*, another remake of Japanese horror to be released, and several other Asian remakes in development indeed give the impression that Hollywood is turning into Japanese and

⁹ DreamWorks paid \$1.3 million for remake rights to *Ringu* the original produced with \$1.2 million. This paid off handsomely, as *The Ring* pulled \$129 million in the U.S. and even made more money in Japan than the original, earning \$8.3 million in its first two weeks, as compared to \$6.6 million made by the original (Friend, 2003, p. 41).

Korean, with “a dash of Thai and Hong Kong” (Singer, 2004, p. 7).¹⁰ In this context, it is pointed out that what Hollywood evokes is not necessarily “a specific country of origin, national sensibility or even a mother tongue,” but rather a “set of expectation,” such as “high production quality and global appeal” (Foroohar, 2002).

Given these complicated pictures, as Tomlinson argues, “instead of settled and confident centers of economic and cultural power exercising global hegemony, a better image may be that of a decentered network, in which power is diffused rather than concentrated and the patterns of its distribution are unstable and shifting” (1997, p. 139). As Iwabuchi points out, recognizing these changes in the transnational cultural flows does not mean to ignore the fundamental inequality of the globalization process. Indeed, the current decentering tendency occurs within the context of global inequalities that still characterize the global cultural flows, and it is recentered around only a handful of producers (2002, p. 17). Similarly, if the First-Third and Core-Periphery divide is abstracted and deterritorialized from known geographies, it is reterritorialized, thus re-creating a new geography of inequality. In addition, if America does not have a monopoly over what is circulated in the global circuitry, American models, styles, and symbols are still the most successful and influential. Nonetheless, this fact should not prevent us from recognizing new players of the emerging geography of transnational cultural flows.

Yet, at the same time, the Korean film industry and other similar instances should not be generalized as exemplifying the whole globalization process, as we often

¹⁰ Some remake films in development include Hong Kong/Thai film *The Eye*, Hong Kong film *The Departed*, and Korean film *Il Mare* and *My Wife is a Gangster*. Asian remakes have also provided an opening for Asian directors in Hollywood to direct remakes. For example, Hideo Nakata, director of *Ringu* and the original *Dark Water*, was brought to Hollywood to direct *The Ring Two*, a sequel to *The Ring*, released in March 2005, and is scheduled to aforementioned *The Eye*. Similarly, *The Grudge* was directed by Takashi Shimizu who directed the Japanese original, *Ju-On*.

tend to do in attempts to correct the view of globalization as all-encompassing Americanization. Not all countries have benefited from the opening of the market as has Korea, as they might have seen more influx of foreign (including Korean) cultures than the advance of their own. Indeed, Korean popular culture is said to create its own version of cultural imperialism by advancing to the Asian market (Ward, 2002, p. 12). However, given the over \$8.1 billion revenue Hollywood garnered from overseas markets in 2003 (Guider, 2005, p. 1), as compared to \$63 million overseas revenue of Korean films in 2004, it does not seem to make much sense to compare the popularity of Korean popular culture to the clout of American popular culture in the form of cultural imperialism. Rather, the difficulty of generalizing the case of the Korean film industry should be seen as the indication that globalization is far from a monolithic and essentialized phenomenon. In the context of the ever complicated configuration of power and cultural flows, it is important to recognize globalization in its full complexity without falling into any easy conclusions. In this sense, suffice it to say that decentering power structure is reflective of as well as constitutive of the many faces of ongoing globalization, and the current development in the Korean film industry can be best understood in this context.

IV. Ironies of the Success

If the case of the Korean film industry exemplifies changes, such as decentering cultural production and multidirectional cultural flows within the global circuitry, it also demonstrates the limits of these changes. Given the long-term Hollywood hegemony in Korea, the current success of the Korean film industry is often encapsulated in the rhetoric of resistance and challenge to Hollywood, as seen in the David and Goliath

allegory. From this prospective, it is tempting to frame the case of the Korean film industry and Hollywood in a usual dichotomy, which is often used to characterize globalization, such as local vs. global, diversity vs. homogenization, and resistance vs. hegemony. However, as seen above, the Korean film industry is the development within globalization, not against it, and globalization is not simply another name for Hollywood. In addition, the success of the Korean film industry has generated many unforeseen ironies, which makes it difficult to present the case of the Korean film industry solely in terms of local resistance and challenges to the Hollywood's global hegemony.

First of all, there are growing concerns that Korean films are mere imitations of Hollywood fares. For example, the term “copywood” – the growing practice of imitating segments, basic storylines, or entire stories of Hollywood films – was coined among local critics and film buffs to self-reflexively reexamine the state of Korean films. The “copywood” phenomenon led one local film critic to remark that “they [Korean films] may be better described Hollywood movies featuring Korean faces and Korean food for the purpose of localization, barely a step above dubbing or inserting subtitles” (M. Kim, 2003a, p. 13). Similarly, Korean blockbusters, which have generated economic gains and catapulted Korea to the regional and international spotlights, seem to be a double-edged sword, as they are seen as mimicry of Hollywood and fail to construct a Korean identity (Shin, 2004, p. 67). Indeed, “Korean” in Korean blockbusters is seen to indicate “where Korean blockbusters fail in their efforts to imitate Hollywood blockbusters” (Berry, 2003, p. 225). In this context, as Tsai Ming-liang wonders, it is questionable whether the success is significant “if the movies Koreans are making are the same as the ones made by Hollywood producers” (quoted in K. Kim, 2004, p. 259).

However troublesome this phenomenon might be, the “copywood” phenomenon does not seem to end with copying scenes or storylines of Hollywood films. The uncertainty of the survival of the Korean film industry amid Hollywood’s onslaught ironically led the Korean film industry to assimilate and imitate Hollywood as “the international best practice” (Sinclair et al., 1996, p. 9) in winning back audiences. Indeed, comments made by Kang Je Gyu, director of *Shiri* and *Taegukgi*, are telling in this regard: “The only way to stand up against U.S. films is to take on Hollywood at its own games” (quoted in Watts, 2000). Thus, according to Kyung Hyun Kim, the Korean film industry has scrupulously followed the path of Hollywood since 1999, providing “a working environment conducive for the filmmakers who wish to emulate the style of Hollywood.” In this context, Hollywood’s interest in remakes of Korean films is an indication that the Korean film industry “localized the conventions and praxis of Hollywood to such a successful degree that it has produced formulaic films that are appealing even to Hollywood”.¹¹ Seen from this perspective, the decline of American supremacy in Korea is arguably made possible by Korean films that imitate and indigenize Hollywood (2004, p. 273).

Emulating Hollywood has generated many ironic outcomes amid euphoria of success of the Korean film industry. Foremost, the pursuit of Hollywood production values has driven up the production costs of Korean films, although they are still modest compared to those of Hollywood fares. For example, while *Shiri* (1999) became the most expensive film costing \$2.6 million, that figure shot up to \$12.5 million within five years with *Taegukgi*, a five-fold increase. Average production costs similarly increased from

¹¹ Indeed, remake interests in Asian films are precipitated by the perception that Asian films have caught up with their Hollywood counterparts, being “slicker, more commercial,” and even “more western” than ever before (Singer, 2004, p. 7).

1.9 billion won (around \$1.7 million) in 1999 to 4.2 billion won (around \$4) in 2003. Thus, despite the success, rising production costs have threatened the profitability of Korean films. For example, in 2002 when the Korean films' market share was 47% with the 13.4% rise in revenue from the previous year, Korean films lost an average \$450,000, or \$40 million in total, down from an estimated profit of \$24 million in 2001 (Russell, 2003b, p. 72). The suggestion from *The Economist* shows the precarious nature of the Korean film industry's current success and its challenge to Hollywood: "The dream of becoming Asia's Hollywood will depend crucially on cracking foreign markets, through exports and above all remakes" ("Hello," 2002, p. 62). While Korean films were back in the black in 2003 and 2004, according to Mark Russell, without exports, the Korean film industry would have lost money for the past three years due to increasing budgets and a competitive market place (2004, p. 52).

In addition, despite the current boom of the Korean film industry, small independent films are even further marginalized at theaters due to Hollywood-style wide releases—opening films on the largest possible number of screens. This method is closely related to the introduction of multiplexes. For example, the success of multiplex cinemas is often based on screening blockbusters and well-advertised films on three to four of their multiple screens to reap maximum profits and then slowly cutting back the numbers of screens as the popularity of these films wane. In addition, rising marketing costs, which more than tripled from the late 1990s average (Russell and Wehrfritz, 2004), pressure distributors to capitalize on the film by opening it on as many screens as possible. In this context, big blockbusters with the heavy marketing power come to dominate screens, while small independent films are generally squeezed out.

Since wide release became an industrial norm in the Korean film industry, there has been constant record-setting in the number of screens in the opening week. For example, the local comedy *Jail Breakers* (released in November 2002) set the record when it was opened on 196 screens, but *Untold Scandal* released October 2003 opened on the record-setting 260 screens. However, a month later this record stood at 364 screens with the release of *The Matrix: Revolutions* (J. Kim, 2003). This tendency for wide releases reached its peak at one point in February 2004, when two Korean blockbusters stormed the box office. *Taegukgi* was playing on record-high 513 screens, while *Silmido* was shown on 220 screens after record-breaking release on 450 screens in December 2003. Together, they took up nearly 58% of total of 1,271 screens and 80% of the box office take in Korea. Meanwhile, small films had to either settle for opening on only one screen or postpone their release (J. Kim, 2004d, p. 20). In that week, a local film magazine came up with only the box office top 5, as there were not many films playing in theaters to make a top 10 list (Russell, 2004, p. 1).

While local discourse on the state of the Korean film industry was soon filled with concerns over blockbusters' squeeze on small films, this is simply the culmination of the trends set in motion since the late 1990s. While even today the entry to the Korean film industry may not be completely closed, the barrier is certainly high as the Korean market has been consolidated around a handful of strong distributors—notably CJ Entertainment, Cinema Service, and newcomer Showbox. Not unlike Hollywood studios, these distributors are vertically integrated with film investment, production, international sales, and exhibition under one roof. Especially, having an exhibition arm gives these distributors enormous clout in the market, as they have guaranteed access to screens. Indeed, box office hits are often films distributed by these big three, as

“distributed film get popular as much as popular films get distributed” (J. Kim, 2003).¹² In this context, the recent merge between CJ Entertainment and Cinema Service, each with its own theaters, will further strengthen the market power of these distributors.¹³

This situation has raised concerns that cultural diversity is in danger in the Korean film industry amid blockbusters and powerful distributors (Russell, 2005). For example, it is pointed out that Korean and American films control over 93% of the market in 2003, while the majority of the rest is taken by films from Japan and Chinese-speaking territories (J. Kim, 2003). Thus, films from other countries and less commercially-oriented Korean films are said to fight “a David-and-Goliath battle to be seen and heard amid the big-budget spectacles” (J. Kim, 2004d, p. 20). This situation is especially ironic, as the notion of cultural diversity has been presented as the *raison d’être* for maintaining the screen quota in Korea against U.S. pressure to eliminate the screen quota as a protective measure violating free trade principle.

Linking the screen quota system and the notion of cultural diversity is based on the assumption that cultural diversity is threatened if the market is dominated by films from one country, that is, America. Indeed, Hollywood’s global hegemony is often viewed as a move “towards a dreadful mono-culture, a kind of cultural totalitarianism” (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 130). In this context, guaranteeing certain amounts of screening time for local films can be seen to keep culture diverse. However, if the current development within the Korean film industry is any indication, screening and consuming locally produced films does not necessarily guarantee cultural diversity. On the contrary, unlike in the past when Hollywood alone was the archenemy of cultural

¹² For example, *Silmido* was distributed by Cinema Service, while *Taegukgi* was distributed by Showbox.

¹³ CJ Entertainment recently purchased 40% of Cinema Service—together controlling about 40% of the market and about 60% of all Korean films distributed—and 60% of Primus Cinema, the exhibition arm of Cinema Service (J. Kim, 2004c, p. 13).

diversity, the success of the Korean film industry has meant that some Korean films, as much as Hollywood fares, are to blame for squeezing out small independent films. Indeed, Hollywood is not the only Goliath, as the recent success of the Korean film industry has generated its own Goliaths as well.

Given this, it is problematic to present the Korean film industry as a case for local resistance to the Hollywood hegemony. Indeed, a local or national framework may not be the most effective in conceptualizing alternatives to existing cultural hegemony in the age of globalization, as, with heightened globalization, the local is increasingly constructed through the interaction with the global cultural hegemony. In this context, as Leslie Sklair points out, “the issue is not so much whether nationals or foreigners control the media” (1991, p. 80), as the nature of culture which is produced by the current media system.¹⁴ In this regard, the observation made by Sinclair et al. is particularly resonant with the current situation in the Korean film industry. Talking about the rise of regional centers in the production of television programs, they argue:

The most enduring legacy of the U.S. dominance in world television development was the implementation of its systematic model for television as a medium for the exploitation of entertainment content so as to attract audiences which could then be sold to advertisers. American content may have primed this process, but as the experiences of many parts of the peripheral world shows, it is not required to sustain it (1996, p. 9).

V. Conclusion

Once a cultural backwater, Korea now boasts one of the most thriving film industries, challenging Hollywood’s dominance at home and garnering acclaim in Asia and

¹⁴ Sklair argues that the important question is whether the interests of those who do control the media are those of “the capitalist global system.” In this context, according to Sklair, so-called reverse media imperialism—the growing presence of non-Western media program in the West—is not so much the growing presence of non-Western, as the triumph of consumerism, regardless of its origin (1991, p. 136).

beyond. This development certainly requires reexamination of the common view of globalization as Americanization, indicating changes such as decentering and multidirectional global cultural flows. However, the dramatic transformation of the Korean film industry is not without ironies. As seen above, the current boom of the Korean film industry and the challenges it poses to the Hollywood's position in Korea are made possible not through a radically different alternative to Hollywood, but through localization of Hollywood practices. Seen from this perspective, becoming "Asia's Hollywood" involves not only having a booming film industry like Hollywood, but also indeed becoming like Hollywood. This indicates that decentering and multidirectional cultural flows in the global circuitry do not necessarily signal the end of the American cultural hegemony, but rather its changing nature. Indeed, even when the global popularity of American popular culture has been challenged, American cultural power is still articulated in the fact that it has "set the frame" for global cultural production (Morley and Robinson, 1995, pp. 223-24). In this sense, Richard Wilk's argument that the hegemony of the global cultural system is not of contents, but of form is very much resonant with the changing nature of American cultural hegemony (1995, p. 118).

In this context, it may be tempting to dismiss the current developments within the Korean film industry as another form of American cultural imperialism. However, even though the challenges the Korean film industry poses to Hollywood are limited and therefore should not be uncritically celebrated, this does not mean the simple reproduction of the existing configuration of power. For example, localizing Hollywood conventions has made it possible for the Korean film industry to reclaim its local space from Hollywood, prompting a Korea-based Hollywood subsidiary marketer to joke that

“at the rate we’re doing, we’ll need a quota to protect foreign films” (J. Kim, 2004b, p. A8). In addition, despite seeming similarities, Korean blockbusters are not mere imitations of Hollywood. Indeed, it is often pointed out that there is more drama than action in Korean blockbusters. Moreover, most successful blockbusters—*Shiri*, *Joint Security Area*, *Silmido*, and *Taegukgi*—have dealt with a distinctively Korean issue, the division of the country, thus providing “a site to speak to local Korean issues” (Berry, 2003, p. 226). Finally, as seen above, the advance of Korean films in regional and global markets provides an alternative way to understand the global cultural flows; from unidirectional to decentered and multidirectional.

Given this, as Chris Berry points out with regard to “de-Westernization” of the blockbuster in Korea and China, it may be impossible and even futile to determine whether the current boom of the Korean film industry constitutes “challenge or capitulation” (ibid., p. 218). Indeed, if America’s global cultural hegemony is articulated through forms, deterritorialization has meant that these forms are globally available for local imitation and indigenization, the outcome of which is not predetermined. For example, while deterritorialization is often understood as the seamless advance of American popular culture, it could also empower localities, as in the case of the Korean film industry. In addition, the global spread of hegemonic forms and practices and the localization of them indicate that globalization is not just an inexorable move towards global homogenization. Rather, globalization is a “peculiar form of homogenization” (Hall, 1991, p. 28) or “structures of common difference” (Wilk, 1995, p. 118) which does not repress diversity, but simultaneously articulates “familiar difference and bizarre sameness in multiple ways through the unpredictable dynamic of uneven global-local cultural encounters” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 15).

In this context, rather than framing the case of the Korean film industry in a usual global hegemony-local resistance dichotomy, the Korean film industry should be understood within what Morley and Robins term the “global-local nexus:” “new and intricate relations between global space and local space” (1995, p. 116). Indeed, current developments within the Korean film industry highlight how the local and the global reconstitute each other in their interaction and interconnectedness, and how the question of hegemony and agency gets complicated and reconfigured in and by these processes. This points out that no easy generalization is possible regarding the nature and process of globalization. What is required in this context is a more nuanced view of globalization which is sensitive to changes and challenges generated by globalization as well as their limits.

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