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Sopyonje

Directed by Kwon-taek Im

Review by Adam Hartzell

Yes, *Shiri* rewrote the play-book, but, as Kyung Hyun Kim notes, consider that *Sopyonje* broke the previous box office record for a Korean film, a record held by Im himself with *The General's Son*, through an initial release on ONE screen.

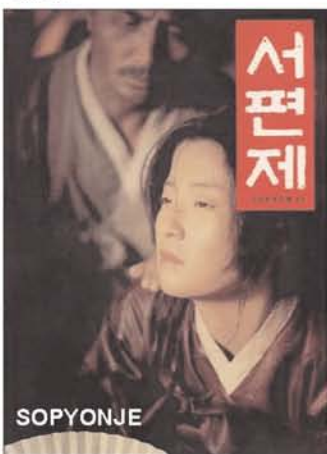
In contrast, *Taegukgi* was simultaneously released on 450 screens, which practically guarantees, if not imposes, success. *Sopyonje* wasn't expected to be a hit, but ended up having a six-month run, becoming the first Korean film to garner a million tickets in Seoul and then roughly the same amount outside of it. *Sopyonje* was supposed to be a guaranteed money-loser, the serious film that Im's financiers permitted him after *The General's Son's* success.

Yet following the "searching for our culture" movement that, according to Hae Joang Cho "arose in the 1970s on college campuses as students began to reconstruct and reinterpret traditional Korean cultural forms," *Sopyonje* was the right film at the right time for just such a South Korean audience searching for something to reclaim about its culture. Call it *Sopyonje* Serendipity, the result for Im was carte blanche to do whatever freakin' film he felt like in the future.

The film utilizes the musical form of *p'ansori* for metaphoric purposes, and it eventually caused a resurgence in the genre, even amongst the pop-rap/dancehall-obsessed youth fans of *Roara* and other KPop icons. Cho states that *p'ansori* developed in the Cholla Province of southwestern Korea, where Im himself grew up, and the title, *Sopyonje* represents the western style of *p'ansori*, a form said to be more "feminine." (The other form, labeled the more "masculine," is *tongp'yonje*.) Some commentators compare



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p'ansori to opera, due to its lengthy story-like narrative and the way it is performed; whereas, others compare it to American Blues due to the pain *p'ansori* exudes, along with the genre originating from the lower classes.

The plot is deceptively simple. Based on a short story by Chung-joon Lee, Yu-bong (Myung-gon Kim) is a *p'ansori* master who travels with two adopted children, daughter Song-hwa (Chang-ae O), Yu-bong's *p'ansori* apprentice, and son Dong-ho (Kyu-chul Kim), a drummer, the only instrument that accompanies *p'ansori* — unless you consider the singer's occasional fluttering of a folding fan for emotional emphasis an instrument.

The three troubadours travel throughout the countryside in efforts to perform and develop

their artistry while trying to remain true to Yu-bong's interpretation of what qualifies as real *p'ansori*. (Such traveling about brings Kyung Hyun Kim to label this film a "road movie.") However, rather than escaping from home as in American road movies, these characters are in search of a home to relocate their families, their past, and their masculinity.)

Spanning time from the 1940s through the 1970s, we slowly see how the intrusion/appropriation of

Japanese and American cultural traditions limit the opportunities for *p'ansori* to be performed, and thus, impede it from being further developed. Hence, *p'ansori* basically represents the struggle to maintain an essential "Koreaness" despite the rush of modernity.

Many Koreans have commented on how the film represented the purest portrayal of *Han* they had yet to see on screen. *Han* is a concept ever elusive to non-Korean viewers. To quote Chungmoo Choi, *Han* basically entails "the sentiment that one develops when one cannot or is not allowed to express feelings of oppression, alienation, or exploitation because one is trapped in an unequal power relationship."

Aesthetically, the film represents Im and his personal cinematographer Il-sung Jung, at the top of their

game. Most striking is the five-minute static take of the three joyously performing "Anrang" as they meander through the gorgeous countryside. (So powerful is this rendition, that I recall attempts at chanting this with two friends who saw the film with me when moving out of my place in Oakland, in an effort to numb our own pain from the

inconvenience of moving obnoxiously large pieces of furniture up the winding staircase of a San Francisco Victorian house.)

Along with presenting the loss to Korean culture through the struggle to maintain a space for *p'ansori*, Im continues his trope of utilizing a woman character as metaphor for the torturous history of South Korea. One of the most discussed Korean films in English — demonstrated by my awkward peppering of citations throughout this review — Im's metaphorical use of Song-hwa's character is perhaps one of the most debated aspects of the film.

To discuss these plot elements further would result in major spoilers. But let me say that after reading Choi's interpretation of this plot element found in the book *Im Kwon-Taek: The Making of a Korean National Cinema*, I have a hard time not seeing what she sees in regards to these scenes. Although, Julian Stringer and Cho, in the same volume, as well as Kyung Hyun Kim, in his book *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema*, and lastly, Im himself, argue alternative interpretations. Personally, I interpret this moment in the film as an example of the horrific results when pursuing art solely on one's own terms to the point of stripping others of their agency.

Sopyonje was clearly a cultural phenomenon. Ju Kwak Han states that it generated the first soundtrack of a South Korean film — I was introduced to this film first

through the soundtrack owned by a Korean American friend in college. It also resulted in the first film book full of various minutiae about the film that extended the discussion into everyday public life.

The Korean daily *Dong-a Ilbo* eventually nominated Im as "Man of the Year." Although *Sopyonje* was able to cross over generational, class, and gender barriers to be enjoyed by millions, the film still had its detractors. Most interesting are those who challenged the "Koreaness" exhibited in the film. As one of Cho's overseas Korean students exclaimed regarding the film's aesthetics, "When did Korea become so French?"

As evidenced by the lively, mostly positive, debate it caused, *Sopyonje* is a testament to perseverance that Im, a man disadvantaged by his family's Leftist leanings from the stigmatized Cholla Province, a man who never even finished middle school and took up film solely as a job that would allow him to eat, and a man who was not known for directing films of artistic quality before 1980, ended up creating what is perhaps the definitive work of Korean cinema.

Add to this the fact that film was at that time a medium that Koreans, especially Korean youth, had all but given up on; additionally, the film carried no big name actors. Korean audiences found exactly what they were searching for in *Sopyonje*, an opportunity to reclaim and rejuvenate Korean culture.

Note: The DVD for *Sopyonje* was finally released in October 2005.

Sopyonje ("Seopyeonje"). Directed by Im Kwon-taek. Screenplay by Kim Myong-gon. Starring: Jeong-hae Oh, Myong-gon Kim, Gyu-cheol Kim, Saegil Shin, Byung-gyeong An, Dong-jun Choi, Jong-won Choi. Cinematography by Jung Il-sung. 112 min. Released on April 10, 1993. Total admissions (Seoul): 1,035,741. Winner of Best Director and Best Actress at the First Shanghai International Film Festival. Also screened out of competition at the 46th Cannes and 50th Venice International Film Festivals. ●