Screening History
The 2014 San Diego Asian Film Festival held a landmark retrospective on LGBT and queer themes in South Korean cinema

by JAMES S. KIM

Gay South Korean filmmaker Kim Jho Gwang-soo and his partner, Kim Young-hee, made headlines in the media last year when they held a symbolic public wedding ceremony and attempted to register as a married couple. Western news outlets hailed the event as a trailblazing and daring act in a society where same-sex unions aren’t recognized and traditional values and religious conservatism keep a tight lid on any lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) discourse.

Korean media, expectedly, largely ignored the event.

The ceremony was a bold move in modern-day Korea, but it definitely wasn’t the first time LGBT issues have surfaced in Korean history and popular culture, said Todd Henry, an assistant professor and acting director of the Program of Transnational Korean Studies at the University of California, San Diego.

“As someone who is studying history, I just have to say to myself, ‘Maybe this is just a media play for publicity,’” he said of the Western press coverage. “But in terms of historical background and [records], why is it that South Korean society wants to forget that it has a tradition of same-sex people who try to dignify their relationships through marriage?”

Henry isn’t alone in his interest in the subject. A number of researchers in South Korea and the United States have traced LGBT and queer themes throughout Korean history, but they’ve never been able to gather in one place—until the November 13-15 weekend. The Pacific Arts Movement, in partnership with UCSD, held a landmark retrospective on the subject at the 58th Annual San Diego Asian Film Festival.

Titled “Remembering Queer Korea,” the program, which was held on the UCSD campus, featured screenings of six historic South Korean films plus a video exhibition of a traditional all-female musical theater production. A three-day academic symposium hosted guest speakers from both South Korean and American universities who discussed images of queer themes in South Korean culture and cinema, beginning in the early 1900s through present day.

“The program represents our interest in giving context to Asian cinema and Asian cultures—[to show] there is a history to the kind of independent production and self-representation going on in Korea and elsewhere,” Brian Hu, artistic director for the festival, told KoreaScope.

The six films in the retrospective focused on oft-overlooked LGBT themes in Korean cinema throughout past decades. Drama like The Pollen of Flowers (1972) and Sabang (1988) emerged during the repressive regimes established by presidents Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, respectively, a drama dealing with the subject of homosexuality and family, was released at a time South Korea was experiencing a wave of social change.

Henry was a graduate student in South Korea in the 1990s and became involved in some of the social movements taking hold in the country. Human rights protests and student demonstrations, in addition to film festivals, were leading the discourse, particularly on LGBT topics, he said.

“I was very curious to know the deeper roots and origins of the kind of phenomena I was witnessing,” Henry said in a phone interview. “It occurred to me that it probably wasn’t the first time [in South Korea] that a film dealing with LGBT issues was screening, nor was it probably the first time that two people of the same sex were seeking to get married or falling in love with one another.”

The idea for “Remembering Queer Korea” sprang out from that curiosity and eventually took tangible form once Henry assumed his position at UCSD in 2009. Henry met with the members of the Pacific Arts Movement (then called the San Diego Asian Film Foundation) and the project began taking shape.

“The idea was that filmmakers were doing a lot of the same kind of work that academic historians were, [such as conducting] interviews and writing their own narratives of modern Korea,” said Hu, who just marked his fourth year with the festival. “Meanwhile, there are queer images from the 1970s and 1980s in Korean cinema that serve as an archive of a similar counter-history. So we put together a slate of films that allow history, curiosity, cinema and memory to speak to each other in creative and provocative ways.”