

Panel 3: Remapping Cold War East Asia

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**Archive Revisionisms:
Reevaluating South Korea's State Film Censorship of the Cold War Era**

When General Park Chung Hee rose to power through the May 16 coup in 1961, one of the first things that his military junta did was to stop the public screenings of 35 domestic and 22 foreign films deemed “unhealthy” prior to those motion pictures’ re-censoring. After a six-month review, the new military government banned one Korean film (Yu Hyun-mok’s *The Stray Bullet*) along with six foreign ones. While foreign films (such as *The Red and the Black*, *Young Sinners*, and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*) were barred on moral grounds, Yu’s masterpiece, widely touted as the best Korean film ever made, was singled out for political reasons due to its realistic portrayal of postwar poverty and social malaise. The film’s censorship file includes a report by the Security Department head in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, defining *The Stray Bullet* as “pro-communist propaganda” that “denies any hope for Korean society, provokes rebellions and desperation of the unemployed and proletariats, and gives an impression that a communist revolution might be necessary.” To contemporary readers, this evaluation might sound paranoid (in the same vein as the Red Scare in McCarthy-era America), considering the fact that Yu’s characters are ordinary, apolitical citizens who simply struggle to survive under economic adversity rather than revolting against the social status quo. This case study alone might conjure up a sinister image of Korean film censorship under the successive military regimes of Park Chung Hee (1961-1979) and Chun Doo Hwan (1980-1988) during the Cold War era.

However, this paper makes the case that, while political oppression/repression existed inside and outside the film industry during this period, film censorship was not simply a tool for authoritarian dictatorship. Availability of government censorship documents of the period (accessible to researchers at the Korean Film Archive since 2016) gives historians an opportunity to reevaluate the role of film censorship in Cold War Korea. It is tempting to conflate the national (or macro) policies of oppressive regimes with the industry-specific (or micro) operations of film censorship, which in fact involved many different players (the Ministry of Public Information [the Ministry of Culture and Public Information after 1968], the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and Education, the Korean CIA, the United States CIA, film producers, trade associations, etc.) that were involved in a multilayered process of regulating individual motion pictures with different agendas in mind (i.e. national security, public morality, sexual explicitness, protection of children, etc.) and repealing such decisions. Drawing upon primary archival documents (from both Washington D.C. and Seoul) as well as Korean language scholarship on film censorship and policy, this paper aims to provide a broad understanding of the role of government censors at a time of perpetual security crises stemming from regional and global Cold War conflicts.