


**the**  
**notes**  
 dec  
 2015

all the latest

Your NOTES are usually brought to you by members of the EFS committee, but this month we have enlisted the services of noted Korea expert Chris Green to explain the context of a rare and little-seen film from a country still unfamiliar to us. He will be at the screening to answer any questions you may have about the film, and we are grateful for his efforts. All part of the quality experience we try to make EFS for our members each month...

# The DMZ

Park Sang-ho, Korea 1965

**Korean title:** *Bimujang jidae*  
**Script ...** Byeon Ha-yeong  
**Cast.....** Jo Mi-lyeong  
 Nam Kung-won  
 Ju Bin-a  
 Lee Yeong-kwan  
**Producer ...** Hong Seong-chil  
**Music ...** Kim Yong-hwan  
**Cinematography ...**  
 Ahn Yun-hyeok

Park Sang-ho was a lifelong cinema junkie. Born near Seoul in September 1931, he read books on directing, acting and editing while still a teenager, and took no interest in school. His one dream was to make films. Alas, no amount of childlike enthusiasm for the art of cinema was going to make the 1940s a good time to try it. Only three or four films were being made in any given year, and Japanese control of Korean cultural production was tight.

Park concluded that theater might be a better entry point. Petitioning a former head of the Korean National Theater who lived in his

neighborhood, he was introduced to the theater group Sinhyup and started working there as an intern. It was there that, during the Korean War of 1950-53, he met the most famous of all Korean directors, the late Shin Sang-ok. Shin dropped by the theater during the production of a musical, *Cheoyang's Song*, whereupon Park spoke of his ambition to make films. Shin agreed to employ the young man in his production company, and Park's filmmaking career began.

According to Shin, making films is actually very easy. It is a matter of "seeing things through someone else's eyes, and portraying those things." Park, whose first feature film, *The Sea*, came out on Shin's imprint in 1956, was wonderfully talented at exactly that.

His career took off in the 1960s. Rapid economic expansion resulted in equally swift technical changes in the film industry – which Park, by then in his 30s, was agile enough to exploit. Moreover, government policy forced production companies to generate more domestic films. In terms of sheer volume, the 1960s marked the peak of South Korean film production, with as many as 200 films being



made annually. Most of these were bland melodramas (in which local audiences, weary of the breakneck modernization process, seemed happy to immerse themselves), and much of the remainder was even blander anti-communist propaganda.

But Park Sang-ho stood out. In 1963 he made *Happy Businesswoman*, a deft commentary on the changing role of women in South Korean socio-economic life that gave rise to the playful term, "ttosuni." A transliteration of the film's Korean title, the word is still used to describe a hard-working woman with a sharp mind. The key to the film's success was the director's willingness to offer an unfiltered portrayal of real lives – literally; Park filmed them with a concealed camera. This dedication to realism was replicated two years later when he made *The DMZ*.



For thirteen years, ever since the Korean War ended in a truce in 1953, the 250km-by-4km De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) that divides the Korean peninsula had been growing harder and more distant from ordinary lives. First civilians and then soldiers were slowly but surely pushed back from

the area and kept at arm's length. It came to be riddled with anti-personnel mines.

Park, however, was not willing to stay out. With the collaboration of US Forces Korea – most prominently a mine-clearance unit, which had to check every location in advance – he made *The DMZ* in situ. From the tank to the train to the stream, everything you will see was real, and much of it is still there. Park gave local audiences a chance to experience a part of their own country that they were not allowed to visit.

Quite contrary to the anti-communist films of the era, *The DMZ* makes no attempt to highlight the superiority of South Korean society over its North Korean rival, or to instill a sense of fear in viewers still raw after a decade of war. Instead, it focuses on a simple tale of two children wandering in the DMZ, as well as the tragedy – and abject ridiculousness –

of peninsula division itself.

As it turned out, domestic viewers were not in the least bit grateful to Park for his bravery or attention to filmic detail. Melodrama and escapism were the commodities of the day, and *The DMZ* flopped at the box office. However, it won a number of prizes abroad, where “the tragedy of Korean division” has always taken on an abstract, more emotional form quite different to that which it adopts in South Korea. In the South, division is the lived reality day in and day out – and mostly gets ignored.

Transcending that chilly box office reception, *The DMZ* has come to represent a triumph for realism and storytelling over ideological excess in a fascinating – but challenging – period for South Korean cinema. It was voted 39th best Korean film of all time by a panel of domestic film experts in 2006, and one of the top films of the 1960s in a second poll taken in 2014.

## a brief history of korean cinema

*The Japanese Empire brought modern filmmaking techniques to the Korean peninsula during the colonial period (1910-1945). The first Korean-made films were screened in 1919, and Korean motion picture companies thrived throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. The 1926 silent film Arirang made a major star of actor-director Na Woon-kyu (in spite of its subject matter, a quite obvious commentary on resistance to colonial rule), and in 1934, Lee Myong-u made the first indigenous Korean talkie, Chunhyangjon.*

*Sadly, in the late 1930s war mobilization brought this era of creative freedom to a shuddering halt. Japanese troops confiscated production facilities, ending the technical advances and freedoms under which Korean studios had been operating. For a decade thereafter, film in Korea became a propaganda tool for the Japanese war effort. The Korean War broke out in June 1950, shortly after domestic filmmaking had begun to recover from its utter subordination to Japanese rule. Advancing North Korean troops*

*transported north all equipment, rare film prints and – most devastatingly – technically or theatrically competent personnel they happened across. South Korean film lost a generation of talent.*

*The post-war government saw the need to stimulate the moribund industry, and tried to do so from 1955. However, it was tainted by incompetence and corruption, and in 1961 the dictatorial but determinedly effective government of Park Chung-hee came to power in a military coup. An early step taken by the new regime, the Motion Picture Act of 1962 set new standards for film producers, establishing a system of incentives that granted import licenses for foreign – read Hollywood – films to producers who made domestic films (at a ratio of 3:1).*

*Predictably, this incentive structure resulted in cheap, carelessly produced domestic films that only served to aid production companies in reaching the quota requirement. However, subsequent amendments to the Act refined it by demanding that domestic films be of “good quality”.*

*Large producers began outsourcing domestic film production to smaller ones, and a new pool of talented South Korean filmmakers and production companies was created. Into this milieu came tonight's film, The DMZ.*

*Overall, the late 1950s and 1960s are seen as a golden age for South Korean cinema. Sadly, in the 1970s it fell victim to both the successes and the failures of the Park government. Rising disposable incomes brought televisions into ordinary homes for the first time, driving down cinema admissions from 173m in 1969 to 54m in 1980. Simultaneously, repression and censorship killed much of the creativity in the industry. It would take until well into the 1990s for it to recover.*

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS  
**DAISIES** (Věra Chytilová,  
Czechoslovakia 1966)  
**Monday 18 January 2016**

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