

Old dogs, new tricks and good films



Ahn Sung-ki (left) and Bae Chang-ho were behind many of Korea's biggest movies of the 1980s. "The Last Witness" is their newest collaboration. By Choi Jae-young

Confidently facing a sea change in cinema, these 1980s icons still have the right stuff

By Inès Cho
Staff Writer

Bae Chang-ho and Ahn Sung-ki were Korea's ultimate movie combo in the 1980s, a director-actor team associated as closely as John Ford and John Wayne, Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro, and Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune. They are still household names even though they have not made a commercial hit together for several years.

The popular duo got back together in 2001 with "The Last Witness," a mystery-action film that combines the graphic brutality of war, a mystery, an innocent love story and a James Bond-like chase. The film debuted at the Busan International Film Festival.

Both Bae and Ahn are very much aware that timing is crucial in a movie's commercial success. Gangster films were the rage this year, but "Last Witness" is a cop movie.

Even more significant are the seismic shifts in Korea's film industry. The most prominent change is that Korean films have gained some recognition internationally, creating a rush of investment by Korean powerhouses such as Samsung, Korea Pictures and Taewon Entertainment. In the past, when a movie completed its theatrical run here, it simply went to domestic home video to be forgotten. Now, however, investors look for international sales, including TV, video and remake rights in overseas markets.

The second big change is in domestic competition, which has become fiercer as movie theaters switch to the multiplex style, sometimes with more than 10 screens at one location. Earlier, large uniscreen theaters would host one movie at a time, often for an extended period. The new theaters, luxuriously appointed with larger and more comfortable chairs and more advanced sound systems, have caught on quickly. The result is a shorter run for films that do not draw well right from the beginning.

The final big change is the new breed of audience, young people raised in the Internet and digital age, whose viewing and thinking habits have been changed by the new media.

Bae Chang-ho, 48, has been widely dubbed a trendsetter for Korean films since imprinting his signature on the industry in the early 1980s.

His successful works, such as "Gorae Sanyang" ("Whale Hunting," 1984), "Jeokdoeui Kkot" ("Tropical Flower," 1983) and "Gipko Pureun Bam" ("The Deep Blue Night," 1984) best represent the Korean films of the 1980s, a period known for political and social turmoil.

Bae, a graduate of business administration from Korea's prestigious Yonsei University, surprised industry professionals with the depth and complexity of his plots and development. His works exude deep cultural sentiment and rich emotions, often presented through strong visuals and long takes.

That very complexity, however, may have been the reason for his failure to reach a wide audience in the 1990s. Box office success eluded him then, but even in his smaller releases, Bae's talent was in evidence, and his international reputation grew.

"Jeong" ("My Heart" 1999), a lyrical film about deeply felt Korean notions of affection, won both the Audience Award at the Urbine Asian Film Festival in Italy in 2000 and the Audience Award and Special Jury Award at the First Benodet International Film Festival in France in 1999. He also won the best director award at the Busan International Film Festival in 2000.

If Bae is one of Korea's most celebrated directors, his partner, Ahn Sung-ki is its favorite actor. If you ask Koreans about Ahn, they will usually describe him as the "national actor" of Korea.

Some might argue that there would have been no Ahn Sung-ki without Bae Chang-ho. The deep characters designed by Bae matched Ahn's character and acting style very well. Together, Bae and Ahn have made 12 films over the 22 years they have collaborated since first meeting as unknowns in 1979.

Ahn was cast by the veteran director Lee Jang-ho in "Barambureo Joeun Nal" ("A Good Windy Day"). The son of an actor himself, Ahn got his first job playing an orphan when he was 5. There were few child actors then, and when word of his talent spread, he was flooded with more job offers than trained adult actors.

Ahn never received any formal training in acting,

but he is still going strong after 40 years in the field. Placid and prudent, he carefully chooses his words.

He is never loud but knows how to make an impression. In 1983 in "The Deep Blue Night," he was a wretched con man seeking the American dream. In 1995's "Hair Dresser," he was a greasy French-style hairdresser who cut off the ears of a customer. In 1999 in "Nowhere to Hide," he was a serial killer and master of disguises on the run from the law. He is Korea's Mickey Rourke, Dustin Hoffman and Anthony Hopkins all rolled into one.

Some sharp-tongued critics in Korea have said that Ahn is too dull, despite his stellar successes, but that's not the view of much of the rest of the world.

Jean-Pierre Garcia, the festival director of the Amiens International Film Festival (www.filmfestamiens.org), who organized the Ahn Sung-ki Retrospective of Korean Films in 1992, said that Ahn's acting is so diverse that he couldn't believe that the roles were portrayed by the same actor.

Ahn also won the Grand Prize at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 1992 for his leading role in "White Badge" (1992) a New York Times best-selling novel by the Korean-American author Ahn Jung-hyo.

In "The Last Witness," Ahn portrayed an ordinary Korean man who did not participate in the Korean War, but became victimized by it just the same. His refined presence in the movie created a real, moral weight, more so than the leading characters who did all the chase and stunt scenes.

Ahn is now working on a new film, "Chuihwaseon" (English title not decided yet), about the life of one of Korea's most famous painters of the 19th century, Jang Seung-eop. It is directed by Im Kwon-taek, a filmmaker known for such classics as "Seopyeonje" and "Chunhyangjeon." After that, Ahn will team yet again with Bae, traveling to Kenya to shoot "Africa My Love."

When asked about his feelings about the fiercely competitive movie market, Bae remained confident: "I create a form, not a trend." After so many years together, these two talents can be honest and relaxed together, unconcerned about outshining each other.

inescho@joongang.co.kr

Vets rue emergence of 'lazy' cinemagoer

Bae Chang-ho stormed into the restaurant in Sagan-dong, flushed from the December air. He quietly sat down and greeted Ahn Sung-ki with his eyes. They said they hadn't seen each other for some time - the three weeks since the opening of "The Last Witness."

They spoke to the JoongAng Ilbo English Edition about their recent work as well as the current trends in filmmaking in Korea.

IHT-JAI: "The Last Witness" included actors of diverse characters and ages.

Bae: Because the movie contains more than 50 years of history since the Korean War, the biggest agenda for me was to find actors who could cover that span of time. Ahn was the perfect actor, able to cover the time period and also the kind of pure character who had been victimized by the war. Such actors in Korea today are scarce.

The casting was tough, because I have to deal with a changed audience: The degree of cinematic absorption has changed. The audience today is much simpler than in the past. Watching a movie used to be an emotionally and physically consuming experience that required participation, like watching a play from a great distance. To enjoy a movie, you needed to use not only your eyes, but also your head and heart, and modern young audiences refuse to use their brains or energy. They just want to sit there and let the movie entertain them so they can just laugh. They are lazy and prefer to see simple plots.

That's why my movie, when it premiered at the opening of the Busan International Film Festival, triggered a mixed reaction. The young viewers who watched "The Last Witness" reacted completely differently from the more mature viewers who understand cinematic expression. Young people found the movie too slow, too difficult, too distant from modern life.

IHT-JAI: Is that why broad slapstick is so popular in Korea?

Ahn: True comedy is too much for the simple mind of the audience. Slapstick wins. That slapstick trend coincided with the *jopok* (organized crime) theme - that's what's trendy in movies. You go back to the old days and it was the same. There were times in Korea when everybody had to make teenage movies, soft porn, bar hostess stories and so forth, just to make easy money.

Back in the 1980s, actors had to be serious, even nervous, about being in front of a camera and carry the burden of acting. They had to portray a persona, or deliver meanings that weren't said or shown on

the surface. They were subtle and satirical, so a lot of interpretation was required. There was an unspoken agreement between the director and the audience.

IHT-JAI: The movie is about the Korean War, which can appeal to an international audience.

Bae: All the Korean films that have been noted internationally, such as "JSA" and "Shiri," center on the internationally best-known themes of Korea: the separated country, the tension between the two Koreas and ideological differences. But before the country split, there was the Korean War, the root of modern Korean history. While it is true that my movie deals with the international issue, my focus is the tormented lives and fate of the lovers who were innocent victims of

the war. Plus, the setting is Gyeongju island, not well known to most Koreans.

Also I wanted to introduce a new genre of mixed categories. It used to be that a mystery had to be strictly a mystery. "The Last Witness" has a few different genres: a mystery, a police film, a romance and a war story.

IHT-JAI: What's it like working with Bae Chang-ho?

Ahn: When I met him, he was different from the rest of the Chungmuro movie people. He was pure of heart and continually pursued creative ideas and plans. I enjoyed talking to such an imaginative person. We talked all the time, on and off the set. While working on a movie, we would be already talking about our next movie.

IHT-JAI: So what do you see in current trends?

Bae: The new movies are all about realism, and the phenomenon of a digital generation has brought that to us. Viewers want fast interaction. They want immediate rewards, and they pay great attention to minute details. The details have to be as close as possible to reality. I was on a panel of judges for the Seoul Net Festival, and I was impressed with the good quality of young directors' works using realistic approaches, but what was uniformly missing in all was the ability to create something.

IHT-JAI: Do you feel frustrated because of the change today?

Bae: We live in the time when anybody can become a director or an actor. I want to pursue what I'm good at. I believe that soon there will be a time when being able to move people's hearts becomes a rare, perhaps sought-after talent.



Ahn Sung-ki in "The Last Witness"

'Back in the 1980s, actors had to be serious. They had to deliver meanings not on the surface.'

Gangsters ruled 2001; now the cops are in pursuit

By Chun Su-jin
Staff Writer

The surprising success of the Korean film industry in 2001 comes just a few years after its arguable nadir in the mid-to-late 1990s, but now the industry is going gangbusters.

The year 2001 indeed marked a dramatic achievement: The top five most popular films in Korea, and 7 of the top 10, are all local productions (not counting the just-released "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone," which is also setting records).

Another notable facet of Korean films' success is the predominance of a single theme - gangsters.

Although the styles of the individual films varied - from dramas like "Chingu" ("Friend") to slapstick comedies like "Shillaui Dalbam" ("Kick the Moon") - they all centered on mobsters. There was even a woman mob-boss in "Jopok Manura" ("My Wife Is a Gangster").

"Doosabu Ilchea" ("My Boss, My Hero") is threatening to bring an end to the gangster trend, which has been much criticized for its shallowness. In fact, the tag line on the poster for "My Boss, My Hero" poster admitted, "Yes,



Gangster movies are already passe, so now it's time for police movies to dominate the Korean movie scene. (From left: "Yesterday," to be released in March, "This Is Law," now playing, and "Public Enemy," to be released in January.



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we are another gangster film. What's wrong with that?"

Gangster movies were not the first trend in Korean films. In the late 1990s, screens were dominated by horror movies, such as "Gawi" ("Nightmare"), "Yeogo Goedam" ("Whispering Corridors") and "Joyonghan Gajok" ("The Silent Family").

Coming up next: police films.

The classic team of the director Bae Chang-ho and the actor Ahn Sung-ki kicked off the trend with "Heuksuseon" ("The Last Witness"),

which opened in November, attracting slightly over 1 million viewers. You can expect a lot more police-related films soon.

According to Cho Sung-kyu, a movie distributor, the change was not unexpected. "Everyone knew that the gangster movies would not last longer than one year, and the director Bae started the new trend of cop movies with "The Last Witness."

The coming police films will vary in styles just like the gangster fad did, from drama to fantasy to mystery. "Igeosi Beobida" ("This Is

Law") just opened last Saturday, starring Shin Eun-yeong, who played the lead in "My Wife Is a Gangster," as Detective Kang, fighting against the problems of society along with two other detectives.

Next will come "Gonggongjeui Jeok" ("Public Enemy"), to be released Jan. 15, which focuses on the fatal relationship of a persistent cop and an evil and smart criminal. "Public Enemy" is more of a psychological thriller rather than an action film.

"Lost Memories 2009" is a science fiction

film starring the good-looking Jang Dong-gun (from "Friend") as a secret agent hunting down a mystery in 2009 Seoul. "The third city of Japan," a world at once similar but very different from our own. "Lost Memories 2009" is a collaboration with Japanese filmmakers, and is slated for a February release.

"Yesterday," a mix of fantasy and action starring Kim Yun-jin, the heroine of "Shiri," is tentatively scheduled for release in March. "H," which is aiming to be an "intelligent thriller" about special police operatives, began filming Dec. 15.

Considering all the police movies that are about to be released or in production, law enforcement tales are likely to occupy Korean theaters for much of next year.

According to Mr. Cho, the trends of gangster and police movies mirror the difficulties that Koreans are now facing. "What people need when they go to movies," he said, "is some loud action or comedy that would help them to forget their harsh reality. The form of action was first gangster movies, and next will be cop movies."

sujiney@joongang.co.kr