

Female Awareness of Seoul International Women's Film Festival

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Abstract

Despite the film festival cultures more and more popular from the 1970s and it becomes very normal in western countries, the related festivals in Asian countries are rare, especially, woman's film festivals. This essay argues that the Seoul International Woman's Film Festival is crucial in influences "female awareness" in South Korea. How to bring "female awareness" in people's lives? How to influence people's "female awareness" in this way? Are there have different feedback from domestic and international audiences towards this type of film? What the actual impact of this film festival? To answer these problems, this essay will be divided into three parts. First, it will illustrate the background of women in Korea and base information of Seoul International Woman's Film Festival, and then the key part of this essay is to analysis the SIWFF in society movements, the programming choices and special event setting in this film festival. In the end, this essay will further focus on the feedback of local government and policy they carried out.

Keywords

Female awareness; Seoul International Women's Film Festival; Korea; Film festival.

1. Background

There are around 130 women's film festivals all over the world [1], but the majority of women's film festivals are located in western countries. Only 10 women's film festivals are developed in Asia [2]. Compared with western countries, the film festival developed in Asia is a little bit late. Until April 1, 1997, the first edition of Seoul International Women's Film Festival was held. The SWIFF is an annual festival right now and the slogan of the festival is "See The World Through Women's Eyes" [3], it clearly points out that this festival will explore the women's films from the female's perspectives.

From the perspective of society, it also has the necessary reasons to hold a women's festival. That is although with ideology developing, women could accept higher education than old society, the increase in educational attainment has not improved the social status of women in Korea. In particular, influenced by traditional culture, there are still existing gender discrimination in Korea [4]. It is time to change this social situation.

Devoted to improving females social status, it is true that from its inception in 1997 as a film festival which occurs every other year [3], to 2001, SIWFF became an annual film festival, that is an important sign of its growing popularity. Seoul International Women's Film Festival is a good platform for females from different countries to have communications with each other.



Figure 1. The poster in 2020 [3]

Though the poster before 2020 all shown as text, lines or abstract patterns not meaning the propaganda was weak, but the poster in 2020 is reified the female pattern more specific, which differ from the previous poster. The poster designer LEE stated that in combination with the film festival's slogan in 2020-- "mutual gaze", the women in the poster are exchanging eye contact, which means women are connected with each other, they care about each other [3]. From the film festival's poster pattern more specific, this could imply that social acceptance of "women" has increased.

2. SIWFF and Society Events

Skadi [5] points out that the core element of women's film festivals is feminist activism, and the majority of initiator is filmmakers or scholars of feminist film theory. They are driven by social changes and they are urged to create a private place, where women can meet, throw away "the ordinary social conventions" and form a group and speak for women.

From 2017, SIWFF did regard itself as an activist forum. Because when the 18th edition of the festival took place in June 2016, the Candlelight Revolution was also started on the Ewha Woman's University campus [6]. The Candlelight event occurred due to students found out the university illegitimately admitted a student and this student has a close connection with the Korean president at the time, Park Geun-Hye [7].

Because the campus is near to the festival cinema which was hosting its 18th edition of the festival. Furthermore, the 'young-young feminists' ('young feminists' after Korea's 1990s) who take part in the Candlelight Revolution were also attended for the festival [8]. They showed up because they want to support for the documentary called Candle Wave Feminists, directed by Kangyu Garam, this documentary records their own experience. Thus, audience numbers for 2017 rose rapidly. It is true that as Skadi [5] said women's film festivals have always been part of or at least existed in close relation to feminist movements. More people take part in the film festival, the more people will notice "female awareness".



Figure 2. Candle Wave Feminists directed by KANGYU Garam (2017)

Immediately, in 2017 the film *Candle Wave Feminists* developed the true story of Candlelight movement and it revealed history from a feminist perspective. In fact, it contains 10 different short videos and the majority of this film is to pay attention to interviews. Additionally, the intention of *Candle Wave Feminists* is to record the feminists during the movement, they dared to raise questions, solve the questions and change society and history.

In recent, combining with a social event called "save our cinema", their aim to call for helping the endangered individual theatres. Before "save our cinema", In 2020, Cameron Mackintosh has announced the long-term closure of the London and UK tour of *The Phantom Of The Opera* [9]. In this case, Korean filmmakers aware that due to COVID-19, lots of independent film theatres cannot open as usual. SIWFF decided to take safe action to save the bankruptcy independent film theater. They used Indie Space, an independent film theater to show films. SIWFF expresses that by following the quarantine rules strictly, they want to maintain their precious experience of watching films and talking about the film in the public space [3].

Under the shadow of the patriarchal culture, people may have been accustomed to the dominant male voice, and the SIWFF can quickly combine the industrial changes formed after the outbreak of the COVID-19, and participate in it with a positive, sensitive female perspective. In this way, SIWFF has attracted the attention of many people who do not know about them. This kind of activities is also supported by Yin [10] who writes that the film festival cooperates with other activities to increase the film festival's influence by enhancing the common influence, thereby it can reflect the value of the film festival.

3. The Female-oriented Programming Choices at SIWFF

The programming choices of the Seoul International Women's Film Festival attempting to bring women's issues into public discussion and encouraging awareness.

First, the Korean Feature Competition plays a significant role in SIWFF. This section was added in the festival from 2018 and its aim directly at promoting Korean women's novels and documentaries which are from feminist perspectives [11]. And the number of films is increasing, last year there are 2 more films applied to take part in than the previous edition, and there are total about 26 films wanted to represent in this part. The invited films are diversity, including documentaries, experimental films, and there are also include lots of film subjects, some showing women's daily life, some telling the history of women, some focus on violence or sexuality of women etc. This variety of work shows that Korean female directors have been active filmmakers in terms of both content and form. For example, *Us, Day by Day* is directed by KANGYU Garam, it screens as world premieres in the festival and it investigates that what question is 30 to 40 years old Korean feminist facing? As time goes by, these feminist got

married and have children, however the matters they worried about a few years ago still remain. Plus, this documentary records a feminist movement which is about the Gangnam Murder Case [12]. This a documentary means some ordinary feminist's efforts in the real life. In fact, These issues exist in the document are difficult to change and they like a clock to notice feminist people, it still has a long way to improve female awareness. Yet, these issues also like flags to call for more aspiring young people to change the negative situations. The historical memory carried by the video has contained the most direct emotion in the group consciousness, and some core values already recorded in films. It is easy to touch the audiences and the feminists can obtain the understanding and the communication of the different value judgments between others who are not understanding them.

In the end of the film festival Us, Day by Day got Best Korean Film after SIWFF 2019. Although the new films like Us, Day by Day sometimes need to be recognized by the "larger authorities" film festivals in order to get more audiences [13], but at least SIWFF gives the new talent's chances to jump into people's eyes. LE [14] points out that there are no doubts that gender inequality brings some huge challenges for South Korean women because it deprives talented women of opportunities. Kim Sunah who is a director in SIWFF demonstrated that in film colleges, the female-male ratio is 50:50, however, the production rate of short films is 30:70 and only 12% feature films are made by women, mostly independent productions, what worse, commercial features, only 5% are made by women [15]. Therefore, with the growing "female consciousness" in South Korea, SIWFF2020 develop a new section called 'Linkage: Director × Critic'. They invited seven Korean women filmmaker, these who have produced films in 2019 or 2020. Watching their films and have some discussion, in order to reinforce the female's discourse of films, improve their fame and provide to talented women of opportunities to express themselves.

SIWFF invited famous film director called Kim Doyoung to the discussion. She produced the film Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982. Adapted on the famous novel, Kim Ji Young, Born in 1982 can be regarded as the most topical film. The original is female, the director is female, the protagonist is female, the perspective is female, it does tell the story of the lives of women in Korea and eastern Asia. This film is so famous not only limited in the local area but also have lots of positive reviews in Chinese social media. For example, in Douban (a Chinese social media) it better than 92% feature films. And some audience knows this film is because of SIWFF, it obviously struck a chord with lots of audiences. When female's films increase, they bring out questions and making the dimensions of discussion rise, society will pay more attention to women. This is a positive development, also this is also what women's film festivals expect to achieve.

In 2020, they also held a female-oriented programming "Special Talk about Hong Kong", in this part some women film scholars can discuss the films of Ann Hui. Ann HUI is an influential female in the HongKong New Wave. In the recent 40 years, she has recorded the diverse lives of HongKong [3]. This essay assumed that "Special Talk about Hong Kong" is an international activity and it is a good way to enlarge their influence in Asia, a common way to appeal more audience take part in the festival.

In the same vein, Films de Femmes also organizes meetings and debates about the status of women [16]. It is true that the festival attempts to use activities to stimulate involvement to make the audience immerse in the positive environment, Enrico Carocci evidences that in this case not only of cinephiles or international film scholars but also local spectators interested in the topics addressed.

4. SIWFF Bring "Female Issues" Into Local Government Discussions

SIWFF speaks for women and it gets the echo. From 2018, All the result of efforts is embodied in the feedback of the local government. Before the opening of 20th SIWFF, Kim Sunah, the

director of SIWFF reached a consensus with the Korean Film Council (KOFIC), which is a government agency. The chairman of KOFIC highlighted that people who have been convicted of sexual violence are prohibited from all kinds of film support plans. KOFIC is working to expand the ban list, some assumed of sexual violence people will be banned too in the future [15]. It is an efficient way to deal with the problems of the gender issue in the film industry and they set a good example to the public, noticing people it is time to raise the female awareness. Moreover, KOFIC has supported the Centre for Gender Equality in Korean Film by funding from 2018. The Centre is operated by Korea women filmmakers right now and in the future, they will have further research on policy or find some legal ways to protect the women who are suffered from sexual abuse. In addition to that, before the opening of 20th SIWFF, Kim Sunah urged KOFIC again to go for more proactive industry-wide measures, saying sexual abuse and gender inequality are creating an imbalance in the industry and the content it produces. Moreover, During the 20th SIWFF, they held an international conference to talk about the strategies and policies toward gender equality in the film industry [3].

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5. Conclusion

In conclusion, as a film cultural institution, the efforts of "female awareness" in Seoul International Women's Film Festival is particularly excelled.

In terms of event setting, SWIFF has been effective to a certain extent in connecting women with different social activities. SWIFF provided a safe platform for women to express their opinions in the contemporary society through the candlelight movement and the recent "save our cinema".

In the field of the programming choice, the SIWFF plans lots of female-oriented section, for instance, the Korean Feature Competition in SWIFF, which dig out many outstanding female filmmakers in Korea. "Linkage" discussion, a good place to enhance the discourse of films and communicate with each other. What's more, a section can interact with international called "Special Talks", and other programmings.

Through communicating in a safe place, SWIFF's efforts get good grades. They do appeal more and more people to take part in the festival and they are cooperating with more famous institutions. Last but foremost is that by SWIFF's strongly urge the government to raise high attention on female issues. Along with providing funds, the government also supported the female issues by providing some legal protections.

Overall, with regard to the future, this essay firmly believes that the Seoul International Women's Film Festival will have a better impact on improving "female awareness" in Korea.

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