2013 USC Korean Film Festival

MASTER OF DECEPTION: DIRECTOR CHOI DONG-HOON

MARCH 1 - 2, 2013
USC NORRIS CINEMA THEATRE

Organized by Professor David James (Chair of USC Cinematic Arts, Critical Studies), Elaine Kim (USC Korean Studies Institute Associate Director), and Dr. Hyun Seon Park (USC Korean Studies Institute Postdoctoral Scholar)

Co-sponsored by USC East Asian Studies Center, USC Korean Heritage Library, Korean Cultural Center LA, KOFIC LA, 3Plus Logistics, and USC KSI Sejong Society
It is my privilege and pleasure to welcome you to the University of Southern California and the School of Cinematic Arts. We are extremely honored to host this festival of the films of Choi Dong-Hoon and the accompanying discussions with him. Director Choi is recognized in Korea and indeed all over the world as an outstanding film artist. As cinéastes in the United States are coming to realize the extent of his accomplishment, we in Critical Studies are delighted to join again with our colleagues at the Korean Studies Institute and other departments in the university in celebrating Korea’s unique cultural achievements.

For more than twenty years the School of Cinematic Arts has been leading the way in giving scholarly attention to the New Korean Cinema. In 1996, we hosted Director Im Kwon-taek and the first North American retrospective of and conference about his work. Since then, we have been fortunate enough to host almost every year a festival devoted to Korean cinema: Park Kwang Su, Kang Je Gyu, Hong Sang Soo, Park Chan-wook, Lee Myung Se, and Yim Soon Rye are just six of the remarkable artists who have visited us. For making these events possible, I thank our friends and colleagues at the Korean Studies Institute, its director, Professor David C. Kang, Program Specialist, Linda Kim, and especially its Associate Director, Ms. Elaine Kim, without whose vision, energy, industry, and commitment, these events would not have been possible.

And finally, I would like to thank the Director himself, Choi Dong-hoon, for coming to the United States to be with us personally.

Sincerely,

David James
SCHEDULE

FRIDAY, MARCH 1 | NORRIS THEATRE

6:00 PM - 8:00 PM
*The Big Swindle* (2004, 116 min)

8:10 PM - 10:30 PM
*Jeon Woo-chi: The Taoist Wizard* (2009, 136 min)

SATURDAY, MARCH 2 | NORRIS THEATRE

11:00 AM - 1:20 PM
*Tazza: The High Rollers* (2006, 139 min)

1:30 PM - 3:00 PM
Panel and Q & A
*Korean Cinema, Transnational Genres, and Global Culture*

Moderated by David James (Chair of USC Cinematic Arts, Critical Studies) with participants:
- Director Choi Dong-hoon
- Kelly Jeong (Professor of Comparative Literature and Foreign Languages, UC Riverside)
- Jason Squire (USC Cinematic Arts Professor of the Practice, Film Production)
- Peter Van Steemburg (Director of Acquisitions, Magnolia Pictures)

Translated by Jinhee Park (Ph.D. student, USC Cinematic Arts, Critical Studies)

3:00 PM - 3:45 PM
Reception outside of the Eileen Norris Cinema Theatre

3:50 PM - 6:15 PM
*The Thieves* (2012, 135 min)
After being convicted for fraud, a year has passed since Choi Chang-hyuk’s (Park Shin-yang) release from jail. But this time around he’s got an elaborate plan cooked up. It’s the biggest bank heist in history that’ll make any thief have a wet dream. The best five thieves come together to form a team. Starting with Choi Chang-hyuk, the brain behind the perfect plan; Master Kim, the godfather of swindlers; Big Mouth, a guy who can talk people into anything; Swallow, a remarkable lady-killer; and Gasoline, who has a gift for counterfeiting. But the only drawback is that they all can’t trust each other. They have only one goal - to hit a bank for 5 billion won ($5 million) - but each one of them has their own little plan in mind.

500 Years Ago in the Chosun Dynasty. The Pipe of the prophecy has fallen into the evil hands of the goblins, propelling the world into a whirlwind of
disorder. The ancient Taoist wizards turn to the greatest ascetics of their time, the Master and Hwadam (KIM Yun-seok) for help in vanquishing the goblins and trust each wizard with one half of the Pipe. Meanwhile, the Master’s rascal student Woochi (GANG Dong-won) tricks the king with the art of transformation and creates a fiasco, which makes the three Taoist wizards and Hwadam visit the Master. But the Master has been murdered and his half of the Pipe is missing! By taking his master’s pipe out to the market streets, Woochi has been pushed into a corner, ultimately getting sealed into a painting along with his trusty dog, Chorangyi (YOO Hae-jin).

Goni leads a boring life working at a small furniture factory. Money, rather than a college diploma, is what he needs right now to escape a life of poverty. One day, Goni joins a game of cards set up in a corner of the factory. In what looks like a terrible stroke of bad luck, Goni loses all the money he’s saved over the last three years. But he quickly finds out the game was a setup, orchestrated by a gang of professional gambling masters. Enraged, Goni sets out to find the professional gamblers. Goni stakes his life in the cruel, unpredictable world of underground gambling in a game of revenge, desire, and hopeless hope.
Ten professionals from Asia are teamed up to make a miracle.

A band of five infamous Korean thieves headed by Popie (Lee Jung-jae) receives an irresistible offer from Macao Park, a former partner (Kim Yun-seok): steal ‘Tear of the Sun’, a 318-carat diamond worth USD 20M, hidden in a Macao casino. Popie is the muscle and brain, Pepsee (Kim Hye-soo) is the safecracker, Yenicall (Gianna Jun) is the wall-climber and Zampano is the tactician while Chewingum disguises into many characters. Together they do not hesitate to take up the offer. In order to complete this mission safely, they go to Hong Kong and team up with four other Chinese professionals – the poker-faced leader Chen, timid Andrew, gun expert Jonny, and calm safecracker Julie.

On the day of the heist, they walk into the casino not knowing that the cops are staking out in the vicinity. What is Macao Park’s real motive behind gathering the thieves in one place? Who will betray them all? And who will eventually walk away with the diamond?
“It’s not surprising that the highest-domestic-grossing film in South Korea in recent years is ‘The Thieves,’ Dong-hoon Choi’s sprawling, relentlessly entertaining thriller . . . loaded with all the twists, disguises, glamorous settings and split-screen montages you could ask for.”

- New York Times

“Comparisons to such ensemble capers as ‘Ocean’s Eleven’ or ‘Tower Heist’ are inevitable, but South Korea’s ‘The Thieves’ carves its own niche with moments of romance and stylish mayhem mixed with a more emotionally conflicted, winner-take-all sensibility than its American brethren.”

- LA Times

“This didn’t get to be Korea’s highest-ever grosser by accident.”

- Village Voice
With a diverse line-up of characters and unpredictable story lines, Choi Dong-hoon is cited as the director who opened a new chapter for Korea’s crime films, showcasing spectacular action sequences. Choi successfully debuted with the well-made heist thriller The Big Swindle in 2004 and his follow-up Tazza: The High Rollers was the third highest grossing film of 2006. Also, 2009’s WOOCHI was lauded as the first Korean superhero movie and introduced a character never before seen by a Korean audience. His 2012 feature film, The Thieves became the highest domestic grossing film in South Korea.

Choi was born in 1971 in Jeonju, South Korea and graduated from Sogang University and the Korean Academy of Film Arts. He has received numerous awards including those from the Korean Film Awards, Pusan Film Critics Awards, and Baeksang Arts Awards.

Filmography

The Thieves (director, screenwriter, 2012)

Jeon Woo Chi (director, screenwriter, 2009)

Tazza: The High Rollers (director, screenwriter, 2006)

The President’s Last Bang (cameo, 2005)

Boy Goes To Heaven (screenwriter, 2005)

The Big Swindle (director, screenwriter, 2004)

A Good Lawyer’s Wife (cameo, 2003)

Tears (assistant director, cameo, 2000)

A Short Trip (short film, director, 2000)
Ahn Soo-hyun has been producing South Korean films since 2003. She has worked with major directors such as Park Chan Wook on films such as Thirst. She was most recently Executive Producer of Choi Dong-hoon’s The Thieves.

Filmography

Executive Producer / Producer, The Thieves (Directed by Choi Dong Hoon, 2012)

Executive Producer / Producer, Blue Salt (Directed by Lee Hyeon Seung, 2011)

Producer, Thirst (Directed by Park Chan Wook, 2009)

Producer, Voice of a Murderer (Directed by Park Jin Pyo, 2007)

Producer, You Are My Sunshine (Directed by Park Jin Pyo, 2005)

Cut Producer, Three Extremes (Directed by Park Chan Wook / Fruit Chan / Takashi Miike, 2004)

Producer, The Uninvited (Directed by Lee Soo Yeon, 2003)
A SHORT INTERVIEW
WITH CHOI DONG-HOON
BY HYUN SEON PARK, USC KSI POSTDOC, SCHOLAR

Last year, director Choi Dong-hoon received a great deal of attention thanks to his film The Thieves, Korea’s highest grossing blockbuster, breaking the box office record of Bong Jun-ho’s The Host (2006). This achievement makes his mark as a director who is constructing new paradigms in the Korean film industry. Director Choi discusses three aspects of his filmmaking process in a written interview with Hyun Seon Park, Postdoctoral Fellow at the USC Korean Studies Institute.

Park: You started your career with genre films and continue to make genre films. With the exception of Woochi, which is a blend of fantasy, historical drama and action genres, you have continuously made films of the genre known as heist films, with material focusing on crimes such as cons, theft, etc. Is there a particular reason that you are attached to this genre? Why do these genres, which have no real precedent in the Korean film industry, appeal to contemporary audiences?

Choi: First of all, in the film industry there is an unspoken law that there is no sure hit. There have been so many movies that were thought to be blockbusters but actually flopped, and there is no particular genre that guarantees a hit. Accordingly, there is no genre that is certain to flop either. So when I write scripts or make movies I do not expect a hit. Instead, what’s important to me is to honestly answer the question, “Do I truly like this story? Do I get absorbed into this story I created? Am I enthralled by the story as it develops? Is it too cliché, so does it need a unique feature? Is it too unique, does it need some conventional development?” I pour out whatever questions I can ask and struggle to answer them. Instinct also works very importantly. It’s similar to a surfer who stands on still waters, deciding whether to ride or avoid a huge wave that is coming at him from several feet away. I work as though the story is a living creature. If I run through a pre-determined process to get to a pre-determined destination, no one will want to hear it. I focus on the actors who are the most sensitive people when making movies. I also try very hard to persuade the actors with certainty when they ask difficult questions about the characters that I created. Great actors instinctively hesitate when they are asked to go the wrong way. The most important thing is whether we are attracted. Attraction falls somewhere in the middle between unique and conventional.
Park: I think the style that penetrates your films is that of the dissolution of story and space and their re-assemblage. This is because a story evolves in the peculiar situation that one needs to deceive others. However, although you deal with crime and deception in your films, your filmic style has more of the charm of fantasy or dramaturgy than a dark, noir style. What do you think about the theme of deception?

Choi: First belief! All good movies are founded upon basic human sensibilities and emotions: love, friendship, memories, sadness, happiness, patriotism, family, honor, etc. When we experience these emotions, our lives are more beautiful. And if possible, we want to discover and capture the moments where these emotions overflow within our surroundings. But unfortunately, humans are also capable of experiencing the opposite: misunderstanding, anger, jealousy, betrayal, revenge, deception, etc. If these things happen around us, we prey upon them, get shifty-eyed, and stare with eyes big.

Second belief! All good movies are founded upon the twisted sensibilities of humans. I enjoy a story that develops amidst twisted emotions. This is true. But at the same time I do not want the audience to leave the movie twisted after watching the characters with twisted emotions for two or so hours. Whether beautiful or picked and cut, flowers are flowers. I wish that the audience will have felt that they saw flowers.

Park: While it is true that in your films we can catch glimpses of Hollywood film genre characteristics, it seems as though you consistently capture the mood of Asia’s regional identity. Furthermore, in spite of cultural hybridism, regional characteristics are not diluted, but rather become more pronounced or specific. This is very interesting. Have you experience any contradiction or conflicts between the global universality, maintained by the genre-driven plot and the regional particularity that is carried through local spaces and characters?

Choi: Personally, I like movies of the Hollywood genre. To be more honest, it was a very significant genre when I was studying movies, and it continues to inspire me. The attribute of a genre movie is that the story repeats. What’s interesting is the pleasure that the audience feels when they hear and see the story that has been told already. So how can we tell the story differently so that they will feel that it’s new? Let’s take an example of an investigator movie. In Korean movies, if detectives appear in nice suits, Korean audience will be puzzled. They have not seen such detectives in real life, and they do not imagine such detectives either. People would like to feel pleasure from genre movies, but at the same time they do not want to discover the truth.
Doesn’t the truth get revealed through the space where people inhabit and through the habits? I believe that by emphasizing regionality, we can approach the audience more closely. The more detailed and the more concrete, the better. In the case of “Thieves,” because the characters have different nationalities, they cannot communicate very well. If so, I thought it would be good to emphasize that even more. I thought it would be good to emphasize cultural differences also. Combinations of conflicts and contradictions – we call that a story.
HYUN SEON PARK

Hyun Seon Park is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Southern California’s Korean Studies Institute. She completed her Ph.D. degree at the University of California-Irvine. She is currently working on a book manuscript, “Modernism at the Margin: Visualizing Body, City, and Exteriority in Korean Modernism,” which addresses Korea’s geopolitics of modernism with a focus on affect, space, body, and exteriority in modernist texts. Her research interests include East Asian cinemas, Korean modernism, postcolonial feminism, and cultural studies.

DAVID JAMES

Dr. David James is Chair of the USC School of Cinematic Arts Critical Studies Division. His teaching and research interests currently focus on avant-garde cinema, culture in Los Angeles, East-Asian cinema, film and music, and working-class culture. Dr. James received his B.A. and M.A. degrees in English Literature from Cambridge University and an M.A. and Ph.D., also in English, from the University of Pennsylvania. His latest book is The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles. He is the editor of To Free the Cinema: Jonas Mekas and the New York Underground as well as The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class, and has served on the editorial boards of Quarterly Review of Film and Video, Now Time, and Art Week.
ABOUT THE USC KOREAN STUDIES INSTITUTE

OUR MISSION
To explain Korea to the world through research and teaching.

OUR VISION
The Korean Studies Institute (KSI) at USC encourages understanding of Korea in the USC community and beyond. Focusing on both historical and contemporary issues, the KSI seeks to increase the visibility of Korean studies through its student and faculty support and ambitious public programming.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR
DAVID C. KANG

The USC Korean Studies Institute is led by David C. Kang, one of the foremost experts in East Asian international affairs, especially North and South Korea. Under his leadership, the USC KSI stands apart from other major research universities in our focus on contemporary Korean issues: the political, economic, and social issues confronting Korea today. David C. Kang is Professor of International Relations and Business at the University of Southern California, with appointments in both the School of International Relations and the Marshall School of Business. He is also director of the East Asian Studies Center. He received an A.B. with honors from Stanford University and his Ph.D. from Berkeley.

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