



Documentary filmmaker Kim Deog-young adjusts his camera in Seoul in this 2013 file photo.

Courtesy of Kim Deog-young

Korea's film market grows at expense of indie movies, director laments

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Kim said there is also a unique socio-cultural element that helped Icelandic football team become stronger.

Icelanders are humble and genuine and most importantly, they are not hierarchical. "You can find these traits in everyday life in Iceland," he said. "If you want to know their way of life, the quickest way to learn is to go to swimming pool. Most of the pools are operated with state subsidies, so admission is very cheap. There, you can meet celebrities, sports heroes, politicians and business moguls. They are accessible and ordinary people speak to them freely."

Kim said these traits seemed to have helped Icelandic football fans build a strong bond with their stars.

"All players are approachable. They are famous but they are someone else's uncles or cousins. So, the fans feel a sort of extended kinship toward the players and think that they are part of their national football team," said the filmmaker.

Iceland stunned the world during the 2016 UEFA championship game against England. The former defeated the latter 2-1. Iceland's sensational win became one of the football miracles of the year.

Although Iceland failed to advance to the round of 16 at the 2018 Russian World Cup in the face of two formidable football powers— Argentina and Croatia, the country wrote history. It is the smallest nation that qualified for the 2018 World Cup. Iceland was depicted by the media as the ultimate underdog for its previous saga in the European championships.

"Iceland has a population of a mere 350,000 which is as small as that of Dobong-gu District in Seoul. Such a tiny country became the eye of the storm in 2016 and 2018," said Kim.

While a culture of black humor in Belgium and a less bureaucratic society in Iceland helped foster bonds among their people and ultimately helped their national football teams, such a positive synergy seems to be missing in football fandom in Korea.

The analogy of a holy grail is oftentimes used whenever talent searches for national football team coaches are underway. The leadership in national football teams



Kim, right, interviews Georgeta Mirciolui at her home in Bucharest, Romania in this February 2019 file photo for the "Two Homes" documentary. The Romanian woman has been waiting for her North Korean husband for 60 years since their tragic separation in the late 1950s. Her husband was a Korean War orphan and was sent to Romania for training during the war.

Courtesy of Kim Deog-young

is compared to those who are facing a holy grail mainly because of Koreans' rollercoaster reactions to the team depending on the game results.

Some Koreans use the self-deprecating term of "the boiling pot" mentality to refer to whimsical fans because just like pots on induction cooktops, they become heatedly excited in victory but quickly show a cold shoulder to the players in the wake of a loss.

For Kim, "Small but Strong" is more than a football documentary. The one-hour film indirectly conveys his message to the nation, particularly to the politicians of his homeland Korea stuck in a ceaseless unconstructive debate and profit-seeking business moguls who flex their muscles in the film industry.

He regrets Korea, also a small country, has no such culture of mutual respect that can unite the nation. "Do we Koreans have such a shared bond or cultural belief that bind us together? Do we have one?" he asks.

Through the tale of two small but strong European countries and the miraculous progress they made against all odds, Kim raises these questions.

Kim is part of the so-called "8/6 generation" which refers to people who were born in the 1960s and went to college in the 1980s.

Unlike the typical 8/6 juggernaut— student activists-turned-politicians— who are criticized for reportedly mismanaging

the country, Kim chose a career path very different from that of other college graduates of his time.

In 1990 when he was a Sogang University student, he founded a TV station at the university. Songang is Korea's first university to have an in-house TV station. He juggled several part-time jobs and sold innovative daily products he made to make the seed money.

After completing his master's degree in philosophy in 1994, he founded an independent production house "Shinchon Film House" that year and produced documentary films. One of the documentaries he made at that time was "1989" which captured the pro-democracy student activists who fought to the death.

Kim was discovered by Cho Dae-hyun, then KBS director-general in charge of the award-winning "KSB Special" which aired documentaries every Sunday between 1993 and 2013. Cho offered Kim a job at KBS, which he accepted.

Kim filmed Hyundai autoworkers who were laid off in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis that hit the nation in 1997 in "Farewell to the Factory." It was also screened at the Busan International Film Festival.

He zoomed in on Dutch football coach Guss Hiddink in a documentary which aired on KBS 1 in 2001, a year before the 2002 FIFA World Cup held in Korea and Japan.

Kim said he is enthusiastic about capti-

vating stories and inspiring people, noting books and people are the two key sources of his inspiration.

He reads 100 to 200 books every year. When hearing about or seeing people that interest him, he phones or emails them right away to set up a meeting with them to know more about them.

"I should admit that I am definitely not good at projects that can make money. But I'm an enthusiast of stories that can make this society healthier," he said.

After five years at KBS, he founded his own production house "Mr. Kim's Tonggugidong Story" in central Seoul, in 2013.

His involvement in documentaries and independent films as a producer and filmmaker over the past three decades helped him watch in person the wax and wane of documentaries.

He said there has been "a power shift" in the film industry.

Power shift

The presence of multiplex in Seoul became the epicenter of the cinematic earthquake. CGV Gangbyeon, which was opened in April 1998 in Gueui-dong, Seoul, was Korea's first multiplex.

The movie theater complex with multiple screens within a single complex gave moviegoers freedom to choose from multiple films.

But it dealt a blow to independent filmmakers. The sprawls of multiplex nationwide have intensified monopolies in the film market as box-office hits dominate multiple screens, making it harder for low budget, independent films to find theaters to be screened at.

"Two decades ago, content creators and producers were respected and they could more easily than now make their voices heard. But the power has gone to owners of multiplexes and distributors and they flex their muscles at the box office," said Kim. "Multiple screens in a single theater complex helped the film industry grow exponentially. But multiplexes had a devastating impact on independent filmmakers. Screens are dominated by blockbuster movies that can guarantee high profits for owners."

The domination of blockbuster films in local theaters sparked a debate about diversity among film experts.

Kim realized the harsh reality facing

independent filmmakers as he strove to open his documentary "Two Homes" in Korea.

The movie is about North Korean orphans who were sent to Eastern European countries for training during and after the Korean War.

Kim interviewed former teachers, orphanage staff and experts in Hungary, Poland, Romania, Czech Republic, and Bulgaria for the film.

"Two Homes" was invited to the Polish International Film Festival and premiered there in November last year.

After months of struggle to find distributors and screens at home, the much-anticipated movie will hit theaters sometime in the first half of this year.

"CGV and I agreed to screen the movie and it will be screened either in March or June, depending on the screening schedule," he said. Kim is in a last-minute negotiation with CGV about how many days it will be screened.

He revealed nervous excitement about moviegoers' reactions to his documentary.

"The Roman writer Terentianus Maurus of the late 2nd century observed during his time that 'The readers' fancy makes the fate of books.' I concur with him," he said. "I think each movie has its own fate and it is determined by movie lovers. I cross my fingers for the success of 'Two Homes.' I believe there will be people who will see and love it and recognize that I toiled to shoot the film."

He said the competition of filming doesn't mean their job is done. In fact, it means only half of their job is done and there is a remaining half that needs to be done to screen their film — marketing.

He said marketing has become tougher for independent filmmakers as they have to sell their products to distributors who are preoccupied with profits and cash cow movies.

Last year, Culture Minister Park Yang-woo hinted at the introduction of screen quota to allow a spot for independent films. He called for government support for independent films from production to distribution.

Kim is skeptical about the pledge. "In Korea, there are no organizations or groups that are lending their help for independent films. But there are only groups that support films that curry favor with their political orientation," he said.