

Bringing Korean Films into the Classroom

By Mary E. Connor

Teachers exposed to Korean history and culture often want to learn more. Most teachers are amazed that Koreans not only invented metal movable type before Gutenberg, but also the world's first iron-clad ship, known as a "Turtle Ship." The beauty of ancient palaces, the spirituality of Buddhist sculpture, and the technical achievements of Koryō celadon potters inspire educators to learn more so they will be better able to teach about Asia. They will discover that the Silk Road did not end in China, but extended into Korea and Japan and that early Koreans had an enormous influence on Japanese culture. Students are led to make comparisons—how was it possible for Korea to have a tradition of peace, stability, and long, stable dynasties when China had more than ten dynasties during approximately the same period?

South Korea's achievements during the past sixty years are extraordinary. For example, in 1945, it was estimated that only one out of every three Koreans was literate. Now Koreans are one of the most literate and best-educated people in the world. Even in impoverished North Korea, the literacy rate is ninety-nine percent. In South Korea, eighty percent of Koreans graduate from high school and go on to ter-

tiary education. Students will take note of the importance of an educated work force in achieving rapid economic growth. American students might be interested to learn how student activists advanced democracy in South Korea.

One powerful way to engage students in Korean history and culture is to introduce them to South Korean films. The amazing success of the Korean film industry has been the driving force behind the Korean Wave, a phenomenon of contemporary Korean culture that has been widely popular throughout East Asia, Southeast Asia, in India, and particularly among Asian American youth in the United States. *Chunhyang*, *Tae Guk Gi: The Brotherhood of War*, *J.S.A. (Joint Security Area)*, and *The Way Home* are part of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), a term coined in the late 1990s for the sudden popularity of Korean films, television dramas, pop music, movie stars, anime, and comics. Social studies teachers who incorporate contemporary Korean films into their classroom will provoke interest in Korean history and foster appreciation for its culture. This essay includes short reviews of the above titles, as well as a review of *State Of Mind*, a thought-provoking documentary on North Korea.



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Chunhyang

DIRECTOR, IM KWON-TAEK
DVD, 120 MINUTES, 2000, ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Chunhyang is based on Korea's most famous and best-loved folk tale, and the film captures the very essence of Chosōn Korea (1392–1910). Created by one of Korea's major directors, the film captivates viewers, especially the young. It is a passionate love story, often compared to *Romeo and Juliet*, with a narrative of true love, long-suffering virtue, and triumph over evil.

Aside from being an appealing love story, audiences will enjoy the beautiful Korean landscapes, magnificent architecture, extravagant sets, and distinctive and colorful Korean native dress. The film takes place during the Chosōn dynasty, revealing Confucian values, a rigid class system, restrictions on women, the importance of scholarship, good governance, and the richness of Korea's musical traditions. Structured as a story within a concert performance, a *pansori* singer narrates the story. One gradually becomes familiar with the distinctive rhythms and vocal range of this ancient operatic form. In *Chunhyang* the *pansori* (a genre of Korean traditional music that is usually performed by two people—one plays the drum while the other chants a song in a folk style) is moving as we follow the courting, separation, and torture of the heroine.

When Mong-nyong, the aristocratic son of the provincial governor, is on an outing in the countryside, he sees the beautiful sixteen-year old Chunhyang (spring fragrance), and it is love at first sight. He learns that she is the daughter of a *kisaeng* (a courtesan), and treats Chunhyang as a servant. After she rejects his advances, Mong-nyong learns that her father was an aristocrat and that she was brought up as a lady. This fact, combined with Chunhyang's beauty, arouses his passion. They fall deeply in love, abandon the strictures of class, and secretly marry. Before long, Mong-nyong learns that his father has been appointed to the king's

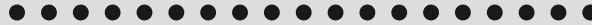
The film takes place during the Chosōn dynasty, revealing Confucian values, a rigid class system, restrictions on women, the importance of scholarship, good governance, and the richness of Korea's musical traditions.



Mong-nyong and Chunhyang as husband and wife. Screen capture from the film. © 2000 CJ Entertainment.



The corrupt governor delivers a harsh sentence. Screen capture from the film. © 2000 CJ Entertainment.

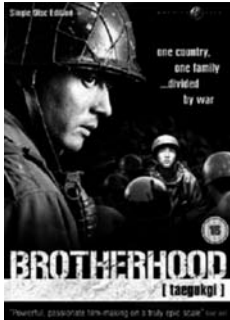


cabinet, and that he must move to Seoul with his family. He cannot reveal his marriage until he passes the rigorous Confucian exams to gain a position in government as a high-ranking official.

The unhappy lovers vow to remain loyal to each other until he can return. Their separation lasts three years. When Myon-nyong does return, he learns that the new governor is a cruel tyrant who brutalizes his subjects, especially Chunhyang. She refuses to accept her legal position as one of his courtesans by declaring loyalty to her husband. She is brutally

beaten and sentenced to die. Her actions convey the Confucian tenet that a woman's greatest virtue is loyalty to her husband. Myon-nyong vows revenge and Chunhyang becomes a heroine, admired for her beauty, her loyalty to her husband, and her resistance to corrupt authority.

Some viewers may struggle with the sounds of p'ansori, but the hypnotizing rhythms of this musical form can be fascinating. Secondary teachers should preview the film and fast-forward one of the particularly passionate sex scenes. ■



© 2004 KangJeGyu Films.

The Brotherhood of War (Tae Guk Gi)

DIRECTED BY KANG JE-GYU
DVD, 140 MINUTES, 2004, ENGLISH SUBTITLES

This war film broke all attendance records when it was released in 2004, and it became Korea's highest-grossing film to that date. It was selected best film and best director at the 2005 Asian Pacific Film Festival.

Disturbed that most Korean films treat the Korean War as an inevitable and impersonal clash between conflicting Cold War ideologies, Director Kang Je-gyu set out to create a blockbuster film with a perspective that conveys the emotional, psychological, and physical impact of war on individuals. Although the film portrays animosity between the communist North and anti-communist South, it focuses on the close relationship between two brothers, Jin-Tae and Jin-Seok. The war shatters their bond and comes to represent all the families torn apart by war.

Jin-Tae is the older brother who earns money as a shoeshine boy to help support his family, especially his bright and sickly brother who has dreams of attending college. With the sudden outbreak of war, the two are forced into military service against their will. As is the case of most South Korean soldiers, they have no military training or equipment, but they are determined to survive. Jin-Tae decides he must earn a medal of honor so that his brother can be sent home. As Jin-Tae struggles to save his beloved brother, he becomes a crazed and merciless killer. When he learns that his fiancée is falsely accused of being a communist and is murdered, he defects and becomes a soldier in the North Korean army. Jin-Seok grows to hate the cruelty of war and even his brother because he believes that Jin-Tae's motives are based solely on his obsession with becoming a war hero. Director Kang Je-gyu answers criticism of excessive violence and the demeaning portrayal of North Korean soldiers by defending his theme of the extreme personal devastation of war. He also challenges the charges of historical inaccuracies by reporting that before making the film he obtained extensive historical information from the military, foreign sources, and families affected by the war.

My students were deeply moved by *Tae Guk Gi* and showed more interest in the Korean War than had any previous class. It was no longer material for a test. They were caught up in the drama and the plight of two young brothers. Because the film is violent and long (148 minutes), I chose to show only a few segments. One selection establishes the closeness of the two brothers, close family ties, and the sudden shock of hearing of the outbreak of war. Immediately the brothers are forced to board a train and go off to fight the communists. About one quarter of my

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Jin-Tae (left), and Jin-Seok, before the outbreak of the War.
Screen capture from the film. © 2004 KangJeGyu Films.



In the heat of battle, Jin-Tae finally recognizes his brother.
Screen capture from the film. © 2004 KangJeGyu Films.

students elected to write reviews of the film, rated it as excellent, and most said, *I did not know war was so terrible*. An excellent companion to selections from the *Tae Guk Gi* is Hwang Sunwon's *Cranes* (1953), a touching short story about childhood friends and their brief encounter with one another when on opposite sides of the war.

Until the 1990s, strict anti-communism was an absolute principle of censorship. With the end of authoritarian rule and Kim Dae Jung's introduction of the Sunshine Policy, the hostile North-South relationship was reexamined. This film was a "reunification movie, one that acknowledged the reality of division and the human suffering it caused, but criticized the ideological conviction underlying the division, and explored the possible reconciliation between North and South."¹ ■



©2000 CJ Entertainment.

J.S.A. (Joint Security Area)

DIRECTED BY CHAN-WOOK PARK
DVD, 110 MINUTES, 2000, ENGLISH SUBTITLES

J.S.A. (Joint Security Area) is a “reunification” film that explores the possibility of becoming a brother to one’s enemy. The film became the highest grossing movie in Korean history when it was released in 2000. The movie takes place in the DMZ (demilitarized zone), an area considered the most heavily militarized area in the world. Through a chance encounter, two guards from opposing camps become friends until they are caught by a North Korean officer.

The film is about discovering one’s identity as a brother—a brother to one’s enemy. Each had been indoctrinated to hate and kill the other, but their friendship forms with the discovery of what can happen when enemies meet and have a chance to talk and get to know one another. Although the ending is tragic, it reminds us how difficult it is to overcome the politics of division and distrust that accumulate over time. *J.S.A.* makes the case that Cold War identities could be overcome if Koreans on both sides of the DMZ have opportunities to openly meet and have genuine conversations with one another. ■



Guard duty on the line. Screen capture from the film. ©2000 CJ Entertainment.



A brother to one’s enemy. Screen capture from the film. ©2000 CJ Entertainment.



© 2004 Showbox.

The Way Home (Jibeuro)

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY LEE JEONG-HYANG
DVD, 90 MINUTES, 2002, ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Other recent films reflect nostalgia for simpler times and Confucian values of honor, family, and respect, which seem to be disappearing in a society undergoing radical change. *The Way Home*, released by Korea’s most commercially successful female director, Lee Jeong-hyang, highlights aspects of rural life that have been lost in the course of rapid economic growth.

The film captures the differences between rural and urban Korea by showing the relationship between a very spoiled seven-year-old city boy and his seventy-seven year old grandmother, who has spent her entire life in a remote mountain village. It also conveys the gap between the older generation who experienced war, poverty, and authoritarian government, and the young who are growing up in a democracy with material comforts that include cell phones, Internet access, and music videos. Most importantly, the film is about the unconditional love that grows between a young boy and his grandmother.

The opening scene of *The Way Home* introduces Sang Woo, who is traveling from Seoul with his single mother, who has fallen on hard times and needs to leave her child with her elderly mother in a mountainous region of South Korea while she finds a job. The grandmother is hunchbacked, mute, and illiterate, but works tirelessly without complaining to care for her grandson. Her home has no electricity, no indoor plumbing, and no access to fast-food restaurants. Sang Woo immediately dislikes the place, spends most of his time playing his Game Boy, and treats his grandmother with disrespect. He refuses to eat anything except the food and drink his mother has left for him.

The film is deliberately slow-paced to imitate life in the countryside. *The Way Home* is a simple and very touching drama about the

healing power of love. Sang Woo desperately misses everything about what he took for granted in Seoul, but in time, the unconditional love of his grandmother touches the boy’s heart. The film will lead to interesting classroom discussions about family life, to which every student can relate. ■



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A State of Mind

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY DANIEL GORDON
VERY MUCH SO PRODUCTIONS
DVD, 93 MINUTES, 2003

The British documentary *A State of Mind* introduces us to the daily lives of Hyon Sun and Song Yun, two delightful North Korean school girls (ages thirteen and eleven) who have been selected

to train for the Mass Games, a Communist spectacle of extravagant proportions involving over 100,000 performers. The focal point of the documentary is their months of rigorous daily training that reveal determination, discipline, gymnastic skills, and devotion to the State. Their greatest wish is for their “Dear Leader,” Kim Jong Il, to see them perform, so he will know they are good communists.

The film dramatically conveys how a totalitarian regime has shaped the minds of the people and coerced individuals to subordinate their own needs to those of society. It provides images of Pyongyang and the way of life of the people who reside there. Although there are no signs of prosperity, life in the capital city of Pyongyang may initially seem quite reasonable given most media coverage of North Korea. Most people appear healthy and cheerful. Interviews reveal that they are interested in US involvement in Iraq and are convinced that the United States is a threat to their way of life. Love for their Dear Leader

The film dramatically conveys how a totalitarian regime has shaped the minds of people and how individuals subordinate their own needs to those of society as a whole.

is matched only by their animosity toward Americans. A grandfather of one of the girls recounts the brutality of the United States during the Korean War. Others blame the wickedness of American imperialists for their current hardships, such as food shortages and nightly power blackouts.

On the big day, Hyon Sun and Song Yun perform in the Mass Games along with 100,000 other North Koreans. The massive floor-show displays columns of dancers and singers, gymnasts and acrobats, soldiers, and schoolchildren, all dressed in bright colors. The amazing syncopation of such numbers is a wonder of choreography. Another stunning part of the performance is the backdrop provided by between 15,000 to 20,000 schoolchildren positioned in the grandstand, facing the audience. They all hold large booklets of colored cards that they flip to different pages on cue to create different scenes, such as beautiful mountainous landscapes, raging battlefields, and images of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Viewers of the documentary will find the performance to be hauntingly beautiful, frightening, and the very embodiment of a perfect totalitarian state.

Gordon’s documentary provides an exceptional opportunity to engage students. For a generation that does not easily understand communism, this film provides an opportunity to grasp the ideology, its implications, and its hold on the people of North Korea. In order to allow sufficient time for discussion of the film, showing the first ten minutes of the documentary and the last chapter is recommended. To supplement the study of North Korea one might assign “The Son,” a



Hyon Sun (left) and Song Yun on their way to school. Screen capture from the film. ©2005 Kino International.



Hyon Sun during her Mass Games performance. Screen capture from the film. ©2005 Kino International.



Song Yun during her Mass Games performance. Screen capture from the film. ©2005 Kino International.

North Korean propaganda piece that may be found in *Modern Korean Fiction: An Anthology*, edited by Bruce Fulton and Youngmin Kwon.

All of the films mentioned in this essay are available to purchase from Amazon.com or to rent from Netflix or local video stores. ■

NOTES

1. Bo-Myung Seo, “Reflections in American Cinema” *Korean and Korean American Studies Bulletin* (East Rock Institute) 15 (2005): 54.

MARY CONNOR taught United States History and Asian Studies for thirty-five years and now serves as President and Program Director of the Korea Academy for Educators, a non-profit organization that informs educators about Korean history and culture and the Korean-American experience. She is the author of *Asia in Focus: The Koreas* (2009) and the recipient of the Peace Corps Association’s Global Educator Award and the Organization of American Historians Tachau Award. She recently accepted an invitation to join the EAA editorial board.