

CHIHWASEON *(Painted Fire)*

DIRECTED BY IM KWON-TAEK, PRODUCED BY LEE TAE-WON (2002).

COLOR; IN KOREAN WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES, 116 MINUTES.

RATED R

C*hihwaseon (Painted Fire)* is a passionate portrait of nineteenth-century Korea's greatest painting master, Jang Seung-up (known as the artist Oh-won). It won the Cannes Film Festival's Best Director award for the dean of Korean filmmakers, Im Kwon-taek, and has won acclaim by critics around the world, even when they admit to not quite understanding why the film works so well. Their appreciation and puzzlement owes directly to the professional tone of Im Kwon-taek, whose films, especially his most recent works such as *Sopyonje* and *Ch'unhyang*, have taken direct aim at the emotions of Korean audiences and are therefore "insider" films for Koreans. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that all three recent Im Kwon-taek films have been widely viewed and praised by non-Koreans.

The Korea of Oh-won the painter was on the brink of destruction in the late 1800s, about to experience the revolutionary transition from peaceful isolation under the Choson Dynasty to traumatic subjection to colonial rule by Japan. Jang Seung-up "vanished without a trace" in 1897, as the film tells us, so we only sense the forebodings of national ruin, which followed rapidly between 1895 and 1910. But the historical clues in the film succeed in providing the context for the mercurial emotions of the painter in the film. The film is also about social class discrimination and the odds against succeeding merely on the basis of merit.

For example, paintings—that is, of delicate orchids, of landscapes modeled on Chinese masters, portraits, birds, and flowers—were the property of literati and court painters. For a penniless commoner like the young Jang Seung-up to show a flair for perfect imitation—the way all painters learned to paint classical themes—was a daring social act that earned him insults and beatings. Nonetheless, under the protection of a noble protector, he made just enough headway to become noted in his locale, and his paintings became a way to make a living.

As a study of artistic technique, therefore, and of how artists were made, *Chihwaseon* is a valuable text. Scenes of the artist at work are one of the film's delights. "Genius at work" is the message as his brush does its magic on paper. This occurs throughout the film as he proceeds from imitation to innovation. Oh-won famously required liquor and sex to inspire his creative talents. He despises having to paint for money, requiring him to follow instructions from people who want to commission his works. Some of his best paintings are meant as gifts for people who can't pay anything for them. Late in the film, when he has been honored with a temporary appointment by the king as a court painter in Seoul, he finds himself unable to meet a deadline for a painting that the king means to present to Yuan Shih-kai, the Chinese proconsul in Korea in the 1880s. He wonders aloud why he should exert himself to please a foreign occupier of his country. He realizes that he is a prisoner in the palace and he manages to escape, becoming a virtual fugitive.

One of the special gifts of director Im Kwon-taek is the ability to communicate in cultural code with a generation of Koreans nostalgic for the countryside they left during their schooling, when the population of Korea was going from eighty percent rural to eighty percent urban. The writer spent a year living in a remote Korean village in the 1960s, long enough to pick up many of these references. Some are visual: the seasonal scenes where one can actually feel the temperature, the quietness of dusk over the paddies, or the narrow lanes between thatch-roofed farmhouses. Some are audible: the scraping of the tiles when Oh-won climbs over a wall, the wind in pines on a nighttime hillside, and everywhere the mournful music of reed instruments. And some are scenes that form social documents straight from the memory of anyone who has lived in a Korean village: the scolding that Oh-won's mistress gives him when he comes home drunk, the mixture of fear, awe, and love shown by the orphan boy who tries to be Oh-won's servant (and secret student), and the sheer capacity of Oh-won and other men in the movie for alcohol—whether *makkoli*, *soju*, or *chongjong* (sake).

Chihwaseon succeeds because of its edginess: it takes time for the viewer to decide if Oh-won is anything more than a talented narcissist who's wasting his life and abilities in a self-absorbed campaign for attention. We see him abused, beaten, and kicked around as a boy; but then we watch the grown-up painter slap his women around, beat his young sidekick, and demand that others jump to his beck and call. While this is not an unfamiliar pattern, we know that Oh-won is capable of much more than the coarseness seen in the film.

Im Kwon-taek offers a glimpse into the soul of the painter Jang Seung-up in a love scene near the end of the film, an unflinching episode in which Jang the man wants for once to communicate honestly but seems to have lost the ability—if he ever had it—to expose his own emotional vulnerability. The scene makes the movie inappropriate for showing in school, at least in its entirety; but for the adult viewer it completes the portrait of Oh-won the painter and Jang Seung-up the human being.

Many Western commentators have said that *Chihwaseon*, though obviously an outstanding work of cinematography, requires too much of the viewer in terms of background on Korea. A person uninitiated in Korean history will not understand many of the cultural references. This might be true; however, teachers can use this visually stunning film in bits and pieces to help teach about classical Sino-Korean painting, first, and traditional Korean village life, second, without going into the more difficult social questions. Older students, however, can appreciate the film in its entirety, and it is likely that there are many students with creative capabilities who will find resonance in *Painted Fire* and the life of Oh-won Jang Seung-up. ■

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