

South Korea *Inside the Miracle*

FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES
AND SCIENCES
PO BOX 2053
PRINCETON, NJ 08543-2053
800-257-5126
30 MINUTES.

The only good thing about this video is its title, *South Korea: Inside the Miracle*. Most often courses on contemporary South Korea profit from setting up just such a dichotomy. This video, however, will not be much help in unraveling the complex contradictions of Korean political and economic development in the postwar era. The video is poorly produced; its imagery, sound and graphics are quite primitive. It has virtually no distinguishable narrative line, and the narrative as it exists is given no temporal or analytical context. Its major contribution is a pastiche of rather gripping visuals of labor demonstrations and the horrifying arrest of a severely injured labor activist from his hospital bed. Such footage reminds us that violence remains an important tool of politics in post-“democratization” South Korea.

The video opens with a statement of its intent; that is, it wishes to challenge the perception of a democratizing Republic of Korea in the era of Kim Young-sam’s presidency. The narrative, if there is one, revolves around the 1995 Subway Workers’ illegal strike and the violent methods the government employed against it. Along the way we are introduced in very truncated and incomprehensible form to snippets of labor activism history: mention of the martyrdom of Chon Tae-il, the garment

workers’ struggle of the early 1970s, later travails of workers in heavy industry such as the Hyundai ship workers, etc.

While it starts with the intent of narrating workers’ struggles in South Korea, the narrative quickly switches to the making of a feature film on Chon Tae-il (a young garment worker who immolated himself and became an icon of the movement) by the well-known director Park Kwang-su. This video can’t decide what it wants to focus on: the fact that Park Kwang-su wants to make a film celebrating worker struggles, a narrative of labor struggles, the continued existence of the National Security Law and its abuses, or a biography of martyred workers.

All of the material shown is compelling and instructive. It is important to know that violence in the name of the NSL continues in “democratizing” South Korea. But this documentary will do more to confuse and alienate viewers. It barely rises above a bad polemic and makes little sense as a documentary. If it is to be used in classrooms, background history and skillful guidance will be necessary.

Incidentally, the feature film mentioned in the documentary has been completed. It is released under the title *A Single Spark* (1996) and will tour the U.S. with five other new Asian feature films in the 1998 Asian Film Tour organized by the Asia Pacific Media Center. ■

Michael Robinson

MICHAEL E. ROBINSON is an Associate Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana.

Korean Americans

PRODUCED BY HOWARD MASS
FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES
AND SCIENCES
BOX 2053
PRINCETON, NJ 08543-2053
800-257-5126
1993. 50 MINUTES. COLOR

This video explores the immigrant experience of Korean Americans and the challenges they face in adjusting to America. Compelling images of the Los Angeles riot and racist acts are the loom framing some of the problems confronting Koreans in the U.S. The viewer experiences the complex fabric woven of the warp and weft of narratives by five Koreans who immigrated to the U.S.

One of the valuable aspects of the video is that the five professionals speak not only from their intellectual experience, but also from their own human experience as the oppressed. Moments such as the professor of Ethnic Studies who cites the subtle discrimination of his daughter’s kindergarten teacher and the implications for the child’s self image and ultimately her ability to compete in an American world linger with the viewer. Skillfully woven into the questions posed by the narrator are experiential narratives by the professor, a social worker, two clergymen, and the executive director of the Korean American Coalition; some are poignant, some gently amusing, but all are insightful.

The questions concern issues such as the extent to which Confucian thought affects Korean Americans; the kinds of problems Korean Americans experience; whether Korean Americans will ultimately assimilate and blend into the mainstream of society; what attitudes Korean

Americans have toward other races; and what the future holds for Korean Americans. The scope of topics makes this video accessible to, and applicable for, a variety of disciplines: sociology, psychology, modern history, Asian survey courses, ethnic studies, interpersonal and intercultural communication courses in college settings, as well as honors or AP classes in secondary schools.

One interviewee’s thought-provoking response in answer to a question about cultural conflicts that lead to personal and family problems explores interpersonal challenges of gender and generational clashes, mixed identities, and self esteem. This segment sheds light on how the first generation of Korean Americans, still influenced by traditional Confucian thought, comes to grips with the second generation, born in the U.S. and taught individualism at school. A new metaphor is introduced describing the 1.5 generation—those who came to the U.S. as children with their parents, and now have a mixed identity because of the influence of both cultures.

The concept of *han* (unresolved feelings of pain and anger) is introduced, and the viewer sees a clip of Korean Masked Dance which gives expression to *han*. Although better views of masks are shown at other junctures, the camera angles do not reveal the masks clearly, and the clip is poorly lighted. Indeed, the primary weakness of the video is that the videography is not as sophisticated as some. The interviews are shot with one camera, with some hollow sound in one of the narratives and without customary music underlying the segments.

But don’t let the simple editing, sound, and lighting put you off; think instead of having five excellent guest speakers in your

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classroom, speakers who will impart new insights on Korean Americans to your students. Comments of my students who have seen the video are favorable; they cite believability and lack of bias as strong points of the video, since Koreans are telling their own story. *Korean Americans* will stimulate productive class discussion. ■

Jessica Stowell

JESSICA STOWELL, Ed.D., teaches Communication and Asian Studies at Tulsa Community College. She has been involved in the Asian Studies Development Program at the East-West Center, University of Hawaii since 1993, and has helped develop the Asian Studies program at TCC.

Inside Burma Land of Fear

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY
DAVID MUNRO
NARRATED BY JOHN PILGER
DISTRIBUTED BY BULLFROG FILMS
BOX 149, OLEY, PA 19547
610-779-8226
BULLFROG@IGC.ORG
HTTP://WWW.BULLFROGFILMS.COM
1997. 52 MINUTES. COLOR

Inside Burma questions, among other things, the “Visit Myanmar 1996” campaign orchestrated by the State Law and Order Restoration Committee (SLORC, which has recently changed its insalubrious acronym) and the role of foreign investment which enriches SLORC and subverts democracy. The video documents the oppression of the Burmese people and their resistance with rare film clips and an interview with

Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). While itself a political act, *Inside Burma* documents the harsh conditions of life in this former British colony in the mid-1990s.

Reporter John Pilger narrates a quick overview of recent Burmese history, noting the resistance to Japanese occupation in World War II and Aung San’s (Suu Kyi’s father) role in the freedom movement which led to Burmese independence in a government that combined Buddhism, Marxism, and democracy.

In 1962, General Ne Win led a coup which overthrew the regime and began an isolating and brutal military dictatorship. In 1988, students and others arose in a rebellion that the government bloodily suppressed by shooting many demonstrators and even some of the medical personnel who tried to aid them. When Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD won an overwhelming victory in the 1989 elections, SLORC nullified the elections.

By the early 1990s, however, the generals saw the need for more resources and began to open the country to tourism and development. Their attempts to make the country attractive to tourists were carried out by political prisoners, often described as slave labor.

Pilger weaves an interview with Aung San Suu Kyi through the video. Suu Kyi traces the rise of the NLD, the 1989 election, her house arrest, and the continuing struggle for democracy.

A series of still shots of the Burma Death Railway, built by forced labor under the Japanese, segues into current forced labor—mostly by convicts, but also children—to build new railways. Pilger emphasizes the large number of Burmese and other Asians who suffered in the building of the Railway. He then points out that

nearly as many Burmese are now suffering under their own government, by being forced to build railways to service a pipeline which will take Burmese natural gas to Thailand. International oil conglomerates Total (France) and Unocal (U.S.) are partners in the development of natural gas.

The other use of forced labor is in [re]building tourist attractions—mainly aimed at upscale, big-ticket tours. Pilger interviews several leading British tour planners who all deny any culpability in human rights abuses. He interviews an Australian lawyer who witnessed forced labor, and we see young children being forced to work on dangerous projects intended to make certain areas more attractive to tourists. This is contrasted with shots of Western tourists exclaiming over the ruins of Pagan. Suu Kyi makes clear that when democracy is achieved it will be time for tourists to visit Burma. The time is not now.

The video closes with a brief interview with members of the Karen minority in the northeast who have been opposing Burmese domination and SLORC. It underscores that this vast pool of cheap Asian labor is a downside of the Asian miracle, made all the worse by treating it as routine. Pilger argues that apartheid in South Africa was not brought down by foreign investment, but by sanctions—suggesting that similar tactics would be appropriate for Burma.

Obviously, this is a political video. It makes a familiar point: that foreign investment and tourism are often not good for the general populations of developing countries. This video had to be shot in secrecy. When broadcast on Australian television in 1996, SLORC attempted to block its reception in Burma by cracking down on the licensing requirements for satellite dishes. Tapes of the broadcast were a hot item

in the underground market during summer of 1996.

We have had the good fortune to watch this video in the company of Burmese and Americans who had witnessed many of the events it depicts. Its power was manifest in their sad faces and tears. Yet, while painful, all were grateful that the story was being told.

Despite its concise history of Burma, details in this video go by too quickly to be grasped by a novice in one viewing. It requires supplementary information for classroom use. Furthermore, students will need time to absorb what they see, and time to discuss it. *Inside Burma* does what *Beyond Rangoon* promised, but failed to deliver—it is a compelling account of the tragedy of recent Burmese history and the heroic efforts of her citizens to overcome that tragedy. We recommend it highly for any collection that seeks to cover recent Burmese and Southeast Asian history. ■

Thomas D. Hall
and
Jean A. Poland

THOMAS D. HALL is Lester M. Jones Professor of Sociology at DePauw University. He has taught the sociology of development and social change for twenty years.

JEAN A. POLAND is head of Swain Hall Library at Indiana University. She presented workshops on computers and libraries to Burmese librarians in Rangoon in 1996. Hall and Poland traveled in Southeast Asia in 1996.