

South Korea *Inside the Miracle*

FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES
AND SCIENCES
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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

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Korean Americans

PRODUCED BY HOWARD MASS
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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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