

## Teaching Korean Politics through Cinema

By Yoonkyung Lee

**K**orean studies in the US have experienced a tremendous growth over the last decade in undergraduate institutions, as well as in some high schools. The numerical surge of Korean heritage students interested in learning their cultural background, the rising popularity of pop culture originating from South Korea, the frequency of North Korea appearing in the media headlines, and the aggressive expansion of funding by the Korean government may have all contributed to the enlarged visibility of Korean studies in American colleges and schools. Along with students' rising demand to learn about Korea, the number of Korea-related courses beyond language and history has also increased.

I am a political scientist and have taught an undergraduate course, Korean Politics through Cinema, three times over the last six years, but teaching Korean politics to college students with little prior knowledge of Korean history or society can still be a pedagogically daunting task. As a method to facilitate students' understanding of turbulent Korean politics in the post-1945 decades, I took advantage of the rising popularity of Korean cinematography and utilized several feature and documentary films with political and historical content in my classes.

In this essay, I describe cinema that has worked in my course on Korean politics and suggest how various films may be used to stimulate critical thinking and a deeper understanding of Korean history and contemporary politics than simply students learning facts. Most of the films featured in this essay will not only work for a political science course but could also be used in a high school or undergraduate modern world history survey course or an introductory course on modern East Asia.

### The Course: Korean Politics through Cinema

My course attracted different kinds of students, including Korean international, Korean-American, other Asian, and American students. What students know about Korea other than the Korean War (often the only subject they learned about Korea in high school) are either South Korea's international brand names like Samsung or K-pop or North Korea's nuclear ambition. Korean international students who have some experience in the Korean educational system are more knowledgeable of Korean history and current affairs, but what they know is often limited to memorization of key political leaders and historical events.

Moreover, despite recent improvements, text materials for social science courses on Korea are still limited in their diversity and quality. Audiovisual resources can help fill this deficiency, especially because they provide powerful storytelling, concrete images, and audio to students who are more accustomed to this type of media than print materials. Thus, I incorporated audiovisual materials such as pictures, recorded sound, music, YouTube clips, and films, in addition to various readings on Korean politics. The incorporation of films was instrumental in the Korean politics class because it offered visual access to a subject about which most enrolled students had limited familiarity. With the growing popularity of Korean cinema, students had greater interest in and exposure to various films made by Korean producers, and as such, they were able to relate to the assigned films with greater appreciation.

The class began from the post-1945 period and proceeded chronologically and thematically to the present with the explicit objective of linking the politics of past decades to current political issues and conflict. I usually utilized four to six films and chose at least one film that directly addressed the just-described objective. Pages 55–56 include an annotated list of feature and documentary films included in my class.

### Incorporating Films in Korean Politics

While students enjoyed every film used in class, *Welcome to Dongmakgol* and *Peppermint Candy* were their favorite picks. In the film reaction papers, students wrote that they found *Welcome to Dongmakgol* entertaining and relevant for understanding the Korean War by revealing human faces of combatants and pushing them to raise fundamental questions about the war including for whom the war was fought. In reactions to *Peppermint Candy*, students commented that it was a "difficult" film to watch but the most thought-provoking piece on Korean politics. Through films such as *The President's Barber* and *A Single Spark*, students indicated that they were appalled to witness the extent of various forms of violence that the then-authoritarian ROK government used, not only against political dissidents, but sometimes with factory workers and ordinary citizens.

Students had more limited knowledge about North Korea than South Korea but were curious about this unknown subject. Films on North Korea were chosen to deliver images and stories that would show something underneath the surface of a rogue state, instead of just including films that reinforced the national security content regarding the DPRK, which is almost all negative. Some of the students were shocked to find that North Koreans had personal lives! After watching the films on North Korea, students seemed to have gained broader views that transcended their prior view regarding this seclusive country.

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## The Course Themes and Films

All the teaching films recommended in this essay are available with either English audio or English subtitles from Amazon, unless specified otherwise.

### THEME

#### Legacies of Japanese Colonialism

*Silence Broken: Korean Comfort Women*

Directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson (2000, 56 minutes)

The film documents the oral testimonies of Korean women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II and follows their struggle to bring the issue to international attention to force the Japanese government for its official rectification.

#### The Korean War<sup>1</sup>

*Welcome to Dongmakgol*

Directed by Gwang-hyun Park (2005, 133 minutes)

This movie takes a humorous and humanitarian approach to the conflict of the Korean War. Combatants represent three perspectives about the war: a US fighter pilot whose plane crash-landed in the mountains; three retreating North Korean soldiers; and two South Korean soldiers who are lost and bumped into each other in Dongmakgol, a remote mountain village, isolated from the ongoing war. When an accidentally released grenade destroys the food storage, they decide to stay to help the villagers and begin to see each other as relatable, normal individuals. When American commanders plan an air strike because of a mistaken belief that the North Korean Army occupies the Dongmakgol area, the soldiers decide to work together to divert the attack to save the village from complete destruction.

#### Military Dictatorship

*The President's Barber*

Directed by Chan-sang Im (2004, 122 minutes)

The main character, Sung Han-mo, is a barber who has his business in Hyoja-dong, the neighborhood of the presidential residence, and becomes the president's barber. The film shows how an ordinary person like Han-mo gets inadvertently intertwined with political events, such as rigged elections under Rhee Syngman, the April 19 Uprising, Park Chung Hee's military coup, and anti-Communist hysteria and political repression under Park. When Han-mo's young son is arrested for no crime and tortured by intelligence agencies, he finally realizes the politics that surround him and refuses to serve Chun Doo Hwan, a new president who came to power by another military coup.

#### Economic Development and Labor Issues

*A Single Spark*

Directed by Kwangsu Park (1995, 92 minutes)

This film is cast from the perspective of Kim Youngsoo, who is writing the biography of Chun Taeil while being chased by the police for his involvement in student activism. Chun Taeil was a garment worker in Cheonggyecheon, who strived to bring the issues of dismal labor conditions in the 1970s to public attention. When legal methods to improve working conditions were exhausted, Chun chose to commit suicide by setting himself on fire, demanding that employers and the government comply with labor laws.

#### The Kwangju Massacre and Its Trauma

*Peppermint Candy*

Directed by Chang-dong Lee (2000, 129 minutes)

The movie unfolds through retrospectives of various aspects of Yong Ho's life, from when he is a bankrupt businessman in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis back to the time he was an innocent young man. The film traces how he changes from a young worker, who dreams of becoming a photographer and who has just met his true love (Soon Im), to a frightened soldier who gets shot and unintentionally kills a female student during the Kwangju Massacre, to a brutal police officer who violently tortures student activists and who distances Soon Im from his true feelings, and finally to a successful businessman who cheats on his wife and who witnesses the wreckage of his family and business. He goes to the same river where he had a gathering with Soon Im and other coworkers and commits suicide, crying out, "I want to go back." The film is a powerful depiction of an individual whose youthful innocence has been destroyed because of major events in recent Korean history.

## The Course Themes and Films Continued

## THEME

## Democratization

*The Dynamic Development of Korean Democracy*

Distributed by the Korea Democracy Foundation (2012, 28 minutes)

Available from Korea Democracy Foundation, <http://www.kdemo.or.kr/en/information/video/list>

This is a documentary program that succinctly depicts the decadeslong battle university students and citizens waged for political freedom in the ROK and the nation's 1987 democratic transition.

## Understanding North Korea

*North Korea Beyond the DMZ*

Directed by J. T. Takagi and Hye-jung Park (2003, 60 minutes)

Available from Third World Newsreel, <http://www.twn.org>

This documentary follows a young Korean-American woman who decides to make a trip to North Korea to reconnect with the siblings of her parents, who had departed their hometowns in North Korea during the Korean War. Through unique footage of North Korea and interviews with ordinary people, college students, and scholars, the film offers visual access to everyday life in North Korea.

*A State of Mind*

Directed by Daniel Gordon (2004, 94 minutes)

The film follows two North Korean teenage gymnasts and their families for over eight months during training for the 2003 Pyongyang mass games. The teenage girls' school lives, mass game practices, family meals, their parents' careers, and the parents' testimonies about the Arduous March (the 1990s famine) reveal various everyday life experiences of North Koreans. The film clearly depicts the totalitarian nature of North Korea.

*The Game of their Lives*

Directed by Daniel Gordon (2002, 80 minutes)

This documentary is about the seven surviving members of the North Korean national soccer team who participated in the 1966 Football World Cup, which advanced to the quarterfinals after defeating the Italian team. The film, through telling a sports story largely unknown in the West, illustrates that athletes' pride in victory is a universally shared value.

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By the end of the semester, students indicated that the combination of cinema with text materials substantially enhanced their interest in and knowledge of Korean politics and history. The films offered the visualization and dramatization of some of the course topics into powerful stories of individuals. Students also appreciated the comparison of master and counternarratives that deepened their understanding of political issues in contemporary Korea. One caveat associated with using films in class is the possibility that students take the stories in the film as nonfiction or a matter of historical fact. For some students, President Park Chung-Hee is the actor who played Park in *The President's Barber*, and the actual Kwangju Massacre is what they see in *Peppermint Candy*. It is important that the instructors constantly remind students that the films are fiction and that it is important to compare cinema accounts with historical ones.

### Conclusion

Discussions presented in this essay suggest implications for teaching Asia-related social science courses to undergraduates. Often, students enroll in such classes with little prior knowledge of the subject. Yet, because the current generation of college students has been immersed since they were small children in instantaneous transmittable cinema images and sounds, the inclusion of audiovisual materials can serve as an attractive gateway to increase students' interest in unfamiliar subjects. Using film in conjunction with nonfiction readings greatly enhances traditional lectures.

Instructors of Asia-related social science courses strive to deliver both region-specific knowledge (eg, South Korea's late 1980s democratization) and more general social science content (eg, theories of democratic transition). Through visual materials, instructors can identify concrete examples and connect them to a broader understanding of a variety of social science concepts (such as economic development, state-business relations, and political activism). When these connections are made, students are able to broaden their knowledge beyond region-specific "facts" and use their knowledge to better understand human action and institutions in their own cultures. ■

### NOTES

1. Another film to be considered under the theme of the Korean War is a recently released film, *The Front Line* (directed by Hun Jang, 2012). The story takes place around the Aeorok Hills, where combats continue during the war's ceasefire negotiations. The fighting is intense because the control of the hills determines a new border between the two Koreas. It shows the tribulations experienced by soldiers fighting from both sides, visually paralleled by the barren geography of the Aeorok Hills where the fight occurs.

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