

TEACHING ABOUT ASIA

INTEGRATING THE SILVER SCREEN

At the 2007 ASIANetwork Annual Conference, our panel on “Teaching Films as Text” demonstrated, if there was any doubt, that films are a serious source for engaging students in a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The panel was initially proposed by colleagues at Colorado College, where the block plan’s intensive schedule—eighteen days per course, all day, every day—facilitates our pedagogy over long periods of time. Don Clark, as the program chair, kindly offered to join our group to share his experience of his evening Korean film series. Our panelists confirmed that Asian films have a capacity to connect, to help draw our students in to material that might be relatively unfamiliar and to challenge them to integrate visual and emotional impressions with complex narratives in different cultures. We offer our short papers as examples as to just how film can contribute to making these classes more effective.--Joan Ericson, Panel Chair

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A Valuable Tool for Teaching Korean History

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Korean films, like much else related to Korea, seem to have come out of nowhere to win worldwide notice in recent years. By any measure, whether as stories, works of art, or examples of good technique, the Koreans have won a place in the front rank of world cinema. Koreans see the prizes won at Cannes and other festivals as proof that they are taking the world by storm in what they like to call the “Korean Wave” (*Hallyu*). They may in fact have a way to go before taking the world by storm, but there is no denying the rising reputation of Korean film in neighboring Asian countries and, increasingly, in the West.

When we teach Korean history to mainstream American students, we ask them to imagine a civilization that is almost wholly unfamiliar. Though a handful may have taken a course on China or Japan, their sense of Koreans is derived mainly from stereotypes in the media. Unless they are “heritage” learners with Korean parents and grandparents, they think of Korean *chaeb4l* products (if we’re lucky), or more likely the Korean War and the DMZ, goose-stepping troops in Kim Il-sung Square and Kim Jong-il as a madman in sunglasses. In other words, in attempting to humanize the Korean people and make sense of their story, we begin with serious handicaps.

In teaching Korean history at Trinity University, I’ve discovered that nothing compares to the power of film to dispel stereotypes and invest students’ minds with curiosity and motivation to learn about the Koreans as people and their story as an example of the cross-currents of modern times. I’ve organized an annual Korean film festival at Trinity, which is required viewing for my 25-or-so students but is also open to the general community, including off-campus K-12 teachers who participate in Trinity’s National Consortium for Teaching About Asia (NCTA). The series changes from year-to-year, but at present it consists of seven films. Students in the course are required to view at least four of them and write response papers on each, expressing their understanding of the historical context of each one. Here are the seven films:

Ch’unhyang

Ch’unhyang (“Fragrance of Spring,” 2000, dir. Im Kw4n-taek) is Korea’s greatest love story: the tale of a lowly *kisaeng*’s daughter named Ch’unhyang who catches the eye of the magistrate’s son. The two marry secretly but then the boy is called to Seoul to take the civil service

P’ansori is a Korean operatic form where a storyteller, assisted by a single drummer on a stage, sings/chants/speaks/shouts the story, and plays all the parts in a narrative that poses conflict that elicits powerful emotional responses from a live audience. The genre requires prodigious vocal range and dramatic talent.

examinations. A new magistrate arrives in town and orders all of the local maidens to be brought for his selection. Ch’unhyang, secretly-married, refuses his attentions and is tortured and imprisoned. She suffers horribly while maintaining her faithfulness to her husband. Eventually the husband, now a royal inspector, turns up and rescues her, punishes the evil magistrate, and proves the value of her loyalty.

Ch’unhyang is a tale of Confucian virtues, social class conflict, love, pain, and justice. It has always been a staple in the repertoire of *p’ansori* epics. *P’ansori* is a Korean operatic form where a storyteller, assisted by a single drummer on a stage, sings/chants/speaks/shouts the story, and plays all the parts in a narrative that poses



Because Ch'unhyang continuously refuses Magistrate Pyon's advances, she is beaten repeatedly and locked in prison. (Scene from *Ch'unhyang*)

conflict that elicits powerful emotional responses from a live audience. The genre requires prodigious vocal range and dramatic talent. Many films have been made of the Ch'unhyang story, but in this one, the director Im Kw4n-taek succeeds in presenting the story as an authentic *p'ansori* performance, cutting back and forth between scenes of the story and scenes of the singer in the theatre. The effectiveness of this technique is shown in one scene where the camera cuts to the audience, comprised of rapt students, middle-aged couples, and elderly grandparents, daubing their eyes and weeping at the suffering of the heroine in the clutches of the evil magistrate—conveyed to them solely by the voice and gestures of Cho Sang-hy4n, the singer on the stage. Im Kw4n-taek is famous for his “inside jobs,” his films designed to tug at the heartstrings of Koreans through their common experience. *Ch'unhyang*, however, is a story with a universal theme, so it is effective in class as a window on the Korean soul as well as a demonstration of the power of the *p'ansori* genre.

Chihwaseon

Chihwaseon (“Painted Fire,” 2002) is also directed by Im Kw4n-taek, who won a Best Director prize for his efforts at Cannes. It is the story of a tormented artist in the late 1800s whose low birth status condemns him to paint for a living, but whose talent is such that he should be pursuing his pure creative genius. At a time when Korean society is collapsing and Japan is poised to devour Korea, when the Korean class system is being revealed as a

useful for many reasons, not least of which is its ability to convey an emotional sense of the despair of late Chos4n dynasty Korean national life.



Self-indulgence and arrogance are mainstays for many artists; Jang is no exception. (Scene from *Chihwaseon*)

Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring

Inexorable karma is the theme of the Buddhist movie in the series, entitled *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (“Pom, Y4rum, Kal, Ky4ul . . . k8igo Pom”, 2003, dir. Kim Kid8). Shot in the lavish beauty of changing seasons on a mountain lake, the film tells of a young monk whose life experiences proceed from childlike innocence through cruelty and even murder, back to redemption. . . whereupon he then suffers to see the pattern repeat. This movie transcends time: there are few clues about when it happens. It uses emotion to

national sham, the artist So-woon is forced, not always successfully, to stifle his raging anger and curb his genius. The movie, also beautifully filmed, is shocking on many levels, but it is also

teach the essence of karma and the futility of seeking release from human suffering. I've found that this film greatly enhances the ability of American students to comprehend the appeal of Buddhism in Korea.

The King and the Clown

The King and the Clown (“Wang-8 Namja,” dir. Lee Joon-ik) was a cultural phenomenon in Korea when it came out in 2005. In a society where homosexuality is rarely discussed in public, this movie surprised everyone by being the highest-grossing film of all time in Korea. Set at the turn of the 16th century during the reign of the much-maligned king known as Y4nsan'gun, this story unpacks both the king's reputation and the place and fate of homosexuals. In this case, the main character is an actor who entertains the king and ends up in a palace revolt, attacking the lock-on-power that the king's

nobles (the *yangban* officials) have upon him. The actor Lee Jung-i plays the effeminate clown who wins the king's affection, and the punch line of the film is the way his character wins over the audience, including both females and males. A much-discussed byproduct of the

film in Korea was a lively discussion among women who wondered openly why Korean standards of manhood exclude the gentle and empathetic traits of the clown as played by Lee Jun-gi. The actor, much

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to his own amazement, became an overnight metrosexual sensation and the movie an instant classic.

It's easy to imagine the kind of class discussion that follows *The King and the Clown*. Student comments range between

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Scene from *The King and the Clown*

the Analects and “Brokeback Mountain.” Korean-American students are quick to share their own families’ attitudes about gender, contributing a nice educational bonus to the rest of the class. Though this may not be the best way to study the troubled times of Y4nsan’gun, it certainly demonstrates the way attitudes are changing in contemporary Korea.

Korean War Films

The Korean War is another subject about which Korean attitudes are changing. Two films in the series treat this topic while discussing the long-term damage done to Korea by the interminable North-South confrontation.

JSA (“Joint Security Area,” dir. Park Chan-wook) turns on an investigation of a murderous incident in the DMZ between North and South Korean soldiers. The movie portrays a natural state of brotherhood between them as they are forced to pose as enemies. Before the year 2000, when it was made, a filmmaker would have gone to jail in South Korea for showing North Korean soldiers as decent, essentially Korean people. This is



Scene from *JSA*

the wild shooting that results leaves many of them dead. The movie defines what is natural and unnatural about the two Koreas, reinforcing the logic of reunification as opposed to the artificial and violent fact of national division.

Welcome to Dongmakgol (2005, dir. Pak Kwang-hy4n) is set during the Korean War when an isolated mountain village is suddenly “discovered” by wandering soldiers of the North and South and, however improbably, by a downed American pilot. In this village the politics of the war make no sense, and before long everyone is getting along. The film is a comedy—mostly—though it ends tragically, again telling us about the senselessness of what’s happened to Korea. This film has an anti-American undercurrent, a cultural element that has acquired meaning as Koreans have been allowed to learn truths about the U.S. role in the Korean War that were concealed prior to the 1990s. But that is not the main import of *Dongmakgol*. The style is humorous, the theme nationalist, and the technique, absolutely beautiful.

My Sassy Girl

The final movie in the series is about being young in South Korea. *My Sassy Girl* (“Y4pkijogin Kby4,” 2001, dir. Kwang Chae-yong) is a romantic comedy about a slacker and his love-object, a twenty something

surprising, but the real shock of the film lies in the sudden turn between the soldiers during a secret visit, when something triggers their instant resumption of armed enmity, and

girl who is getting over a lost love affair. She opens her heart to her beau Kyun-woo only slowly, as the film heads to a predictable conclusion. Along the way she is revealed as a liberated woman who is beautiful, smart, and talented but also gets drunk, regularly beats him up, and seems not to know her own mind. His singular devotion to her and her volatile behavior work together to make viewers laugh. More to the point, the material context of their story reveals South Korea to be the surprisingly wealthy, techno, and hip society

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that it has recently become. American students identify with the characters because their U.S. counterparts are sitting right there in the room. As a result, they love the movie.

My Sassy Girl is full of cultural code. One scene puts the young couple in a thatched farm watchtower, a direct visual reference to Hwang Sun-w4n’s love story “Sonagi” (“Cloudburst”), which is read by every schoolchild in Korea. Another “coded” item is the beau’s name, Kyun-woo, which is the Korean name of the Herdboy in the story of a tearful rendezvous between the Weaving Maiden and the Herdboy, that happens every year on the night of the lunar July seventh on a bridge in the Milky Way, and said to be provided by blackbirds that fly up for the occasion.

The Herdboy (Kyun-woo) and Weaving Maiden (Jikny4) come up momentarily in *Ch’unhyang* also, as the magistrate’s son sees Ch’unhyang and her friends crossing a bridge in their town of Namw4n and wonders out loud if she will ever be the Jikny to his Kyun-woo.

Seeing films from somebody else’s culture reminds our students to watch for such cultural clues and allows them to realize that art is about people and language that is more than just words.