Rausch, Franklin. 2026. "Better Understanding of Korean History in the College Classroom through Movies." *ASIANetwork Exchange* 30(1): pp. 1–12. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.17492

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Better Understanding of Korean History in the College Classroom through Movies

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Today, South Korean popular culture has spread throughout the world, as has North Korea's reputation as an impoverished, closed, rogue state. Making sense of the long and rich history that created such widely divergent societies is not easy, but doing so promises to help students better understand not only Korea and East Asia but also the global processes that shape their lives. Because of its relatability, availability, and generally high production values, Korean popular culture can help instructors to do this in a way that students will find memorable and enjoyable. Drawing on the experience of teaching courses related to East Asia, particularly a 300-level modern history of the region and an introductory honors seminar on East Asian popular culture, this paper will, through the description and presentation of learning materials and units from these classes, help readers to easily integrate Korean popular culture and history into their own classrooms.

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I first taught a Korean history course in the fall of 2015 and was concerned that not many students would register for it—a major issue for a non-tenured professor.[1] After all, I was (and am) at a small public regional university in rural South Carolina. Would there be any interest? I was pleasantly surprised that, far from having too few students, I had a waitlist. As I found in conversing with my students, much of this had to do with an interest in Korean culture that arose out of its globalization, which had reached even into our little corner of the state. However, as Longenecker and Lee (2018) have noted, cultural differences can make it difficult for American students (and the vast majority of our students are from the United States) to understand the culture whose products many of them enjoy consuming. For example, the tendency toward a more collective culture in Korea versus one that leans more toward the individual in the United States can be challenging for students to understand (218–20). I have found that leaning into this reality by showing clips from historical movies has been a great help in exposing, discussing, and understanding those differences. I believe that this also helps students, especially those for whom Korean history is almost completely unfamiliar, to better retain information. Moreover, movies, by their very nature, immerse students in a different time and place, which in turn allows them to not only learn to think more like people in the past but also how to feel at least some of what they felt. In this paper, I will provide concrete examples of how I have used various movies, including summaries and learning objectives, sample discussion questions and activities, and sources for further readings.[2] My primary audience is instructors, particularly early career instructors, who want to bring in more active learning but are not sure how to do so and would like concrete ideas.[3] However, I hope that the model I suggest will also serve those who want to bring in movies beyond the ones included here.

Before discussing particular movies, it's important to describe the class that these movies were utilized in—HIST 377: Modern Korea. While I taught this course as a regular lecture class in its first iteration, I shifted to an online hybrid model as a result of classroom requirements following the Covid-19 pandemic and have continued in this manner since then. Students are assigned readings and online lectures with an assignment due the day before class meets. This allows me to teach two sections—a Tuesday regular section, which has a mixture of history and international studies majors taking the course as an upper-level elective and students from other majors who need a general education world cultures credit, and a Thursday honors section, which is generally made up of high-achieving non-majors. Most students have not had any international experience, typically with a few having never left the South. Thus, while many are very eager to learn and are actively curious about Korea, there is much that is new to them.

Joseon Dynasty Movies: *Chunhyang* and *The Throne*

An important part of Joseon history is the key role Confucian virtue played in Korean identity and statecraft. In my experience, students often struggle with just how patriarchal Joseon culture, society, and law could be, particularly the double standard regarding women's chastity, which held that men could theoretically have multiple romantic partners while women were ideally allowed only one in their life. To help students better understand this aspect of Joseon history, and to see how women might be able to exercise some agency despite the difficult circumstances they face (J. Kim 2014), I show multiple clips from the 2000 film *Chunhyang*, directed by Im Kwon-taek.

The oral tradition upon which the tale of Chunhyang is based was first performed in the eighteenth century as *pansori*—a musical form that would be come to be understood as an important part of Korean identity—and later written down in both poetical and prose forms (Lee 2005). The story is set in the latter half of the Joseon dynasty, when Confucian ideals held sway throughout the country. In Im Kwon-taek's version, Mongryong, a governor's son, falls in love with Chunhyang, a daughter of a *gisaeng* (enslaved courtesan). I play for the students a clip in which Mongryong, already smitten after seeing Chunhyang playing on a swing, goes to visit her. Shortly after expressing his admiration for her artistic skills and good literary taste, Mongryong makes a bold physical romantic advance, but he is rebuffed by Chunhyang, who asserts that she is not an "easy courtesan." Mongryong then asks Chunhyang's mother for permission to marry. They do this in secret and then lovingly consummate their marriage (I do not show that section to the class, as it involves a significant amount of nudity).

Shortly after they are married, Mongryong follows his father to Seoul but pledges that he will return after he passes the official exams. After filling the class in on these details, I play the second clip, which shows that while Mongryong is away, a new governor arrives and demands that Chunhyang serve him as a *gisaeng*, which would mean giving up the chastity that she had promised to her husband. Chunhyang refuses, asserting that she is a good wife. As she is beaten, she recites the various Confucian moral duties to which she adheres. I then show a clip from later in the film in which Mongryong arrives as a secret government inspector, rescuing Chunhyang and punishing those who persecuted her. Chunhyang is then celebrated for her virtue. Though Chunhyang does not have the options available to men, the clip does show that by actively performing Confucian values, she is able to gain some agency and respect in a patriarchal society, helping students to better understand how gender worked in Korea during this period. The questions I ask students to answer as we watch the video, and that then serve as the basis for discussion, are as follows (outlines of the answers I'm looking for are in parentheses):

1) First clip
    a. What attracts Mongryong to Chunhyang? (both her beauty and cultural refinement)
    b. How does Chunhyang defend herself from Mongryong's advances? (she refuses to give in and asserts her status and virtue)
    c. Why does Chunhyang's mother insist on marriage? (her romantic relationship that led to the birth of Chunhyang had not been formal, causing her great difficulties)
    d. Why do you think Chunhyang accepts the marriage? (she genuinely has feelings for Mongryong, but she also realizes that she can raise her status this way)
2) Second clip: Why do you think Chunhyang refuses to give in to the governor's demands? (that would violate the real feeling she has for Mongryong and also lead to a decline in her status—in addition, the governor is not exactly a prize catch)
3) Third clip: Both Mongryong and Chunhyang are presented as heroes—what do the different ways they are presented as heroes tell us about gender norms during this time period? (Mongryong is an active official who saves Chunhyang from the suffering that she can only endure)

Before class, I print out these questions on a sheet that is handed out to students. I do this for several reasons. First, I do not allow the use of laptops or tablets during in-person discussion. Second, exams are open note, so I want to make sure that students have materials from our discussions at the ready. Third, students might forget the questions that are being asked as we watch the videos, so it's helpful to them to have the questions in front of them in a format that allows them to take notes.

After the *Chunghyang* clips, I show portions of *The Throne* (*Sado*, Lee Joon-Ik, 2015) to students. This film focuses on the relationship between King Yeongjo and his son Prince Sado as the burden of responsibility and the strictness of his father drives the young man to madness (Hwang 2023, 48–52). This results in his father ordering Prince Sado into a rice chest, which he then hammers shut and is where the young man ultimately dies. For this movie, I show four clips. In the first, we see Sado as a young boy. Students are asked, "What might be odd about this upbringing?" Ideally, they should note how even as a young child, Sado faces enormous pressure and has complex relationships with authority figures. For example, he must obey his teachers, but those teachers, as government officials, are not allowed to touch him, meaning that when

he falls asleep during his lessons, they must gently flick water on his face to wake him up. The second clip shows him in early adolescence as his father, who stayed up late copying out passages from a Confucian work, berates his son for his failure to properly memorize it, for reading novels, and for playing outside. Students are asked to list the pressures that Prince Sado is under in order to help them to understand, despite the great efforts King Yeongjo made on his behalf, how a historical situation could have developed in which a Confucian monarch ordered the death of his own son. This theme of mounting pressure continues as the students are then shown a clip in which Prince Sado, now a young man, has been appointed his father's regent. Though this should be an occasion for him to be gently guided to learn to govern properly and keep the necessary balance among the *yangban* (ruling class) factions, he is instead criticized and undercut for being unable to read Yeongjo's mind and making mistakes (Kim Habousch 2001). The following questions are utilized for that clip:

1) Why is being connected to the ruling dynasty dangerous? (King Yeongjo notes the deaths of various members of the royal family owing to political struggles)
2) How does Sado become regent? (Yeongjo manipulates the government officials by pretending that he will abdicate completely in order to get their support for Sado becoming regent)
3) Why is Sado's appearance importance? (his father will be judged based on it—it's important to note the kind way Yeongjo helps Sado with his clothing early in the clip and the criticism he gives later)
4) What did Sado want to do with the military? Why? (Sado wanted to save money by uniting the military command to lessen the tax burden on the peasants, but Yeongjo had split it in order to create a harmonious compromise between factions)

At this point I break the students into groups and tell them they are now government officials and each group is a different faction. I then ask the students to decide whether they support the king in being strict or encourage him to lessen the pressure on the prince. After they have made up their minds, I then play the scene in which Prince Sado is ordered to enter the rice chest. This is important, as it captures the emotional conflict that King Yeongjo faces—Prince Sado's madness endangered the dynasty, but executing him according to the law would tarnish the legitimacy of Sado's son, Yeongjo's grandson and the future King Jeongjo, who weeps as he begs his grandfather to spare his father (Kim Haboush 2001). Moreover, Yeongjo is caught between his duty to his ancestors and the dynasty and his duty to his son, who is begging for his life. I ask the following questions based on this section:

1) Why is the birth mother of the crown prince's view important? (if she accepts his death, it reduces Yeongjo's culpability)
2) Why is the royal grandson possibly in danger? (his father might be seen as a criminal and, in Joseon law, subject to punishment, along with other members of his family)
3) Why is Sado taking off his clothes so important? (it implies that he is no longer a member of the royal family and therefore his actions cannot be held against his son)
4) Why does the king want Sado to commit suicide instead of just executing him? (committing suicide would maintain Jeongjo's legitimacy, while execution would harm it)
5) Why is Sado ordered to enter the rice chest? (this is an attempt to remove Sado without actually ordering his death, thereby removing any challenge to Jeongjo's legitimacy)

It's important to make sure that students understand the emotional toll this took on Jeongjo and the political ramifications it had. Those who supported the king had to deal with the fact that one day, he would die, and the man whose father's death they had supported would now be in power. To this end, I provide readings from the memoirs of Lady Hyegyeong, Sado's wife, as she was caught between her duty to her increasingly insane and dangerously violent husband and her love for her son (Kim Haboush and Ko 2013).

Taken together, *Chunhyang* and *The Throne* help to humanize the people of Joseon by illustrating the powerful pressures and restrictions they faced. Moreover, *Chunhyang* illustrates how Joseon people who played by the rules and performed their status roles could, within limits, have some agency in their lives. In contrast, as seen in the case of Sado, these same rules and expectations could lead to suffering and even death.

The Japanese Colonial Period

While there are many excellent movies about the colonial period, there are some from that time as well. While contemporary movies are "better" in many ways (for instance, visual and sound quality), showing movies created during the time period they depict provides another layer for historical analysis. To this end, and to reveal anxieties about gender relations changing following the fall of the Joseon dynasty, I show clips from the movie *Sweet Dream* (*Mimong*, Yang Ju-Nam, 1936). In this movie, a wife and mother chooses to use her freedom to pursue material

consumption and adulterous sex, spending money freely and abandoning her husband and daughter. Even as her daughter, a school girl, falls into depression, the errant mother maintains a romantic relationship with a criminal. Following a botched robbery, she takes a taxi to a train station so that she can escape and make a new life elsewhere. However, in order to make the train on time, she urges the taxi driver to speed. But before she arrives at her destination, the taxi hits and severely injures her daughter. The mother, while in the hospital with her daughter, takes poison and dies, moments before her husband arrives armed with a revolver, seemingly with murderous intent (D. H. Kim 2017, 210–18; Taylor-Jones 2018). I ask the following questions, one for each clip:

1) What social anxieties appear in *Sweet Dream*? (this clip reveals the conflict between the modern husband and wife, the abandonment of the child by the mother, and the beginnings of her relationship with a criminal)
2) What social anxieties appear in *Sweet Dream*? (this clip presents the wife attempting to begin a relationship with a dancer she sees at a theater; it also shows the girl at school in a lesson on traffic safety, foreshadowing the eventual accident)
3) What social anxieties appear in *Sweet Dream*? What does the ending mean? (this clip features the botched robbery and the taxi accident)

In addition to these questions, it is good to ask students to observe in each how the sphere of action for women was expanding and how new technologies, such as the telephone and new forms of transportation, were impacting daily life. Moreover, I ask students to list all the interactions the characters have with Japanese people. That is a trick question, as there really are no significant interactions, as no identifiable Japanese characters appear. I then ask the students to discuss what that tells us about Korea at this time (I'm looking for them to recognize how Koreans were trying to create their own autonomous space within the colony).

Sweet Dream helps to illustrate to students the concept of colonial modernity—that the massive changes and dislocations states undergo as they become modern are tied to the experience of foreign rule (Robinson and Shin 1999, 1–21; Taylor-Jones 2018). *Sweet Dream* clearly showcases these changes in terms of technology (taxis, telephones, and trains), education (the daughter's experience in school), and changing gender roles (the idle housewife who can freely spend money and easily escape the supervision of her husband). The lack of a happy ending illustrates how deeply the anxieties of this period were felt.

Post-Division: South and North Korean Movies

By the time we reach the division between North and South Korea, we are late in the semester. Students are therefore tired just as we are hitting a difficult part of the course—following the different historical trajectories of the two countries. Again, movie clips can help students better understand these different histories. To represent South Korean movies, I show clips from *The Marines Who Never Returned* (*Toraoji anneun haebyeong*, Lee Man-hee, 1963). Specifically, I screen the initial battle sequence, which depicts ROK Marines as tough and shrewd, but ultimately compassionate, fighters able to successfully use advanced technology to defeat their enemies. I then play a clip in which the marines discover civilians murdered by North Korean soldiers, with one of the marines discovering the corpse of his sister.

Finally, I show a scene in which, finally having been paid, the marines go to a brothel that only serves UN soldiers and demand that they be served as well. When they are refused, they begin to tear up the bar, throwing down money to pay for the damage they do. The madam cleverly ends the destruction by telling the marines that if they continue to destroy their establishment, it will be impossible for her and the other ladies to drink with them (it is made clear shortly thereafter that "drinking" involves offering sexual services as well), and the women and marines reconcile. This scene has been rather shocking to students but illustrates the difficult position faced by Koreans of the time owing to the unequal power relationships they had with United Nations countries, particularly the United States (Diffrient 2005). I remind students throughout the viewings that many of the people who watched this movie would have endured the Korean War and the poverty and suffering of their country, had likely lost loved ones, and perhaps were even veterans. I use the following questions—one for each clip:

1) What are the marines like in the "Combat" video? Why might that have appealed to Koreans watching this movie at the time? (the soldiers are brave, strong, moral, and able to effectively use modern technology—they can protect the country against Communism)
2) What are the marines like in the "Discovery" video? Why might that have appealed to Koreans watching this movie at the time? (the marines react with horror and sadness when discovering the bodies of the murdered civilians, which could have been cathartic for audiences)
3) In the "Visit to the Bar" video, what happens that might seem odd in contrast to American war movies? Why might that appeal to a Korean audience? (American soldiers would not usually be depicted visiting a brothel in movies of this time, but the conflict over how to respond to American/foreign power and the scene's resolution might have been cathartic for audiences)

It's important to also note how androcentric this movie is—the female characters (women working at the bar and a little girl adopted by the marines) are clearly subordinate. Moreover, it's against images of suffering female characters that the South Korean marines, adept with modern military technology, are presented as heroic protectors—North Korean Communists kill Korean civilians, including a marine's sister and the mother of the girl whom the soldiers protect and provide for. This illustrates a particular form of male, militaristic nationalism that was developing during the presidency and later dictatorship of Park Chung-hee from 1963 to 1979 (Moon 1998, 115–73).

Students typically come into class with their own clear understandings of the differences between South and North Korea (K-pop versus nuclear saber rattling, for example). However, in teaching Korean history, it's important to emphasize that they share key similarities. The same theme of powerful men representing a strong government that can protect women seen in *The Marines Who Never Returned* is also visible in *The Flower Girl* (*Kkot panun jeonyeo*, Kim Il Sung, Korea Film Export & Import Corporation, 1972). That movie takes place during the Japanese colonial period and focuses on the hard life of a family whose father has died. The family is in debt to a landlord and his wife, pro-Japanese collaborators, forcing the mother to perform free labor for them, though the family still often goes hungry (Workman 2014, 152–54).

Despite the difficult circumstances they face, the mother and her son (the eldest child) and two daughters are presented as a loving family. For instance, the titular flower girl sells flowers to help make ends meet while her blind little sister patiently waits outside to welcome her back home. The audience learns through a flashback that it is the landlord's wife who is responsible for the little girl's blindness. The family, owing to their debt, is forced to help the landlord's wife prepare for a party. Because they are required to work, the little sister, left alone without supervision, tries to take a roasting chestnut. The landlord's wife catches her in the act and strikes her. The little girl falls, tipping over a boiling medicinal mixture, which spills on her face and blinds her. As soon as he learns of it, the older brother burns down one of the landlord's out buildings. This only results in his arrest by Japanese police and imprisonment.

As if things could not become more difficult for the family, the mother falls ill due to her hard life, leading the eldest sister to sell flowers to buy her medicine. Though the elder sister is able to purchase the medicine, the mother dies before she can take it. As she was the major economic support of the family, and no other options are available, the elder sister goes to the prison where her brother is held only to be told (incorrectly) that he has died. While away, the little sister stands weeping on a hill, waiting for her return. The landlord's wife becomes ill, and her superstitious beliefs lead her to blame her sickness on the girl's crying. A man is hired to trick the little

sister into following him, and she is abandoned in the snowy mountains. Fortunately, a hermit takes her in, and the older brother, who has been released from prison, happens to ask to stay with that hermit while he is traveling home. Reunited with his little sister, he continues his journey. In the meantime, the older sister returns and is told by an old man what the landlord's family did to her younger sister, and, like her brother, immediately goes off to seek revenge. Like his act of arson, her actions are ultimately fruitless, and she is captured, with the landlords planning to sell her as a *gisaeng*. At this point, the elder brother, a Communist-inspired revolutionary, organizes the people to drive out the landlords along with their Japanese imperialist allies and help build a new Korean society.

It's worth viewing the movie in its entirety (if there is insufficient class time, some of the musical numbers can be cut out, as they take up a good portion of the run time). Even if this is not possible, it's easy to find clips suitable to an instructor's learning objectives and then fill in any plot developments between them. I would suggest the following questions:

1) What are the flower girl and each member of her family like? (they are loving and happy to sacrifice their own welfare for that of other family members)
2) Why do they suffer? (the loss of their husband/father, indebtedness, the cruelty of the pro-Japanese landlord and his wife, and the Japanese colonial state that backs them)
3) Why did the elder brother and the flower girl fail when they tried to fight back against their oppressors? (they act as weak individuals rather than as part of the group)
4) What enables them to finally succeed in their fight against their oppressors? (the elder brother, thanks to the guidance of the Revolutionary Army, properly organizes them to work together).

It's important to note that almost every Korean person, with the notable exception of the landlord-collaborators, is depicted as morally good and pure. They are almost childlike in their rashness to act on behalf of their loved ones but are ultimately unable to achieve anything without the guiding help of the Revolutionary Army (which would become the DPRK's army), a key aspect of North Korean ideology (Myers 2010). In particular, this movie serves as an illustrative example of the collectivist-individualist polarity noted by Longenecker and Lee (2018, 118–20), which is explained further in Travis Workman's (2014) analysis of this and similar movies: "Subjects gain political agency and correct political ideas by recognizing, more through shared emotion than political savvy, that their personal and familial suffering is meshed with the

macropolitical conflicts of the colonized nation or the emergent nation-state" (153). This statement could also be applied to the suffering experienced in *The Marines Who Never Returned*, showing that, despite serving different and mutually antagonistic governments, there was a shared understanding on both sides of the peninsula of the connection between the male-centered family with men as guardians and the powerful states that protected them.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this paper will help instructors to better integrate Korean historical movies into their classes. In the courses I have taught, students have responded positively to such efforts, showing greater engagement and interest in the course material, reflected in both grades and student evaluations. This is particularly important in classrooms like mine where many students are generally unfamiliar with Korean history and have had relatively little international experience. While I believe the aforementioned examples can be used as is for the most part, each classroom is different and requires appropriate revision. And even if these specific examples are not used, the principles behind them can be applied to other Korean historical movies.

Notes

[1] I would like to express my gratitude for the assistance and advice provided by editors Jooyoun Lee, Taku Suzuki, and the anonymous reviewers.

[2] Most of the movies featured here are readily available, either for purchase or on YouTube, particularly on the Korean Classic Film channel: https://www.youtube.com/koreanfilm

[3] Owing to the variety of different ways people might access movies, I have included descriptions of the clips rather than exact time stamps.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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