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Film review: Tae Guk Gi: The Brotherhood of War [Taegukgi Hwinalrimyeo]

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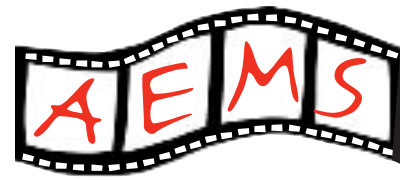
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News and Reviews

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SONY PICTURES

Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War

>> Directed by Kang Je-gyu. 2004. 148 minutes.

Although it has been labeled the “Forgotten War”—buried between the memories of World War II and the Vietnam War—the Korean War (1950–1953) recently became a focus of attention in the divided country again, half a century after

Review

the war’s “end” (the 1953 armistice was never followed by a peace treaty). The catalyst was Kang Je-gyu’s *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War*, which became the largest production in Korean film history at the time of its release, with its \$14-million budget and a record-breaking audience one-fifth the size of the South Korean population.

The Korean War has appeared in a number of documentary and feature films in the U.S., China, and the two Koreas. Some films justify their nation’s involvement in the conflict with their own versions of nationalism and individual heroism. Others trivialize the actual content of the war in pursuit of political or commercial success for the film. While many of these films present

certain aspects of the war introducing collections of footage captured by the U.S. Office of Armed Forces and interviews with journalists, war veterans, and policy makers, they tend to treat the war as an inevitable and impersonal clash of ideologies in the context of the Cold War, rather than the lived experience of individual participants. What

The film highlights the resilience of ordinary people in pursuing their daily lives while transcending political and ideological contradiction.

frustrates a teacher of the Korean War is, then, not necessarily the paucity of films on the topic but the invisibility of Koreans in the narratives of the traumatic event, of those who suffered ten times the casualty rate of Americans. As ambitious director-writer Kang attempts to reconnect his audience to this long-neglected historical experience, *Taegukgi*

provides a fresh look at the war from a Korean perspective.

During his visit to the University of Illinois in February of this year, Kang explained his belief that a feature film needs to reward its audience with “emotional excitement” and “relatable themes.”

Accordingly, while introducing the specific context of the Korean War, *Taegukgi* focuses on a universal theme of brotherly love in a politically detached manner. The film brilliantly unfolds the double tension that runs through two parallel wars: the physical battle between North and South Korea, and the psychological rivalry between two brothers, whose estrangement in some ways represents those of actual Korean families torn apart by the war.

Jin-Tae, an uneducated but earnest and strong shoeshine boy, cheerfully supports his family, especially his bookish and sickly brother Jin-Seok for his college education. The family barely makes ends meet, but they have dreams of a better life as they anticipate Jin-Seok’s successful future career and Jin-Tae’s marriage to Young-Shin. With the outbreak of the war, the family’s hopes are shattered as the brothers are drafted off the street against their will. The brothers are dispatched south to the Nakdong River where their unit must maintain the final defense line against the militarily superior enemies of the North. Like many other South Korean soldiers at that time, the brothers have had no proper military training nor equipment, let alone knowledge of Cold War politics. The film follows the fluctuating battle fronts during the first year of the war and doesn’t flinch from depicting the daily horrors of battle as the brothers struggle to survive

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