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

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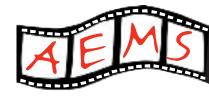
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Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War

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

Ithough it has been labeled the "Forgotten War"-buried between the memories of World War II and the Vietnam War—the Korean

Review

War (1950-1953) recently became a focus of attention in the divided country again, half a century after

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 recordbreaking 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 directorwriter Kang attempts to reconnect his audience to this longneglected historical experience, Taegukgi

provides a fresh look at the war from a Korean

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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Taegukgi

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in the midst of the dehumanizing insanity of the war.

Jin-Tae figures out that the only way to send Jin-Seok

home is to win a medal of honor and to request his brother's release from duty. As the South Korean army, joined by U.S.-led U.N. allies, pushes through North Korea to the Chinese border, Jin-Tae becomes a war hero and merciless executioner of the "commies." Yet when he is finally awarded a medal of honor, his superiors will not release his brother. The film bluntly depicts massacred civilians and maltreated POWs, victimized both by the North and the South. Included are the brothers' family friend, forced to join the North Korean army and eventually killed on Jin-Tae's command, and Young-Shin, who is falsely charged as a North Korean spy and executed by anti-Communist fanatics for getting food for her family from the Communists.

Jin-Seok becomes increasingly disgusted with the cruelty of the war and doubts the motives behind Jin-Tae's obsession with heroism. Jin-Seok's battle, then, becomes not only against the North but also against everything that his brother seemingly stands for. *Taegukgi* thus portrays the frustrating and unglorified reality of the war, which manipulated the norms and values of ordinary people and ultimately defeated its original purpose of reuniting families and the nation. While political leaders Syngman Rhee, Kim Il Sung, and Stalin appear in various scenes of the movie, they remain in the corners. Despite the layers of distrust and



misunderstanding between them, the brothers' allegiance remains to their family as they persistently dream of a return to humble happiness in their daily lives. Through

narrative twists and dramatic turns, Jin-Seok's resentment of Jin-Tae is eventually resolved when he realizes his brother's unchanging principle has not been pursuit of glory, but rather genuine love for their family.

The original title, *Taegukgi hwinallimyeo*, or *Waving the Taegukgi* (the South Korean national flag), is meant to provoke broad questions: What was the civil war actually about? How contradictory was the rationale of a war that destroyed family relationships, community, and the nation for the sake of unification? How arbitrarily was the concept of the "enemy" constructed through the experience of the war? By treating the war with political ambivalence and rejecting simple moralization, *Taegukgi* stimulates debates and discussion concerning the context of the event and its process and consequences.

Despite some weaknesses, such as the lengthy running time of nearly two and a half hours, occasionally unsophisticated character development (especially female characters), continuous graphic violence, and lack of attention to class tensions in the background of the civil war, the film's humanist approach to the unresolved political dilemma appeals to a broad audience across national and generational boundaries. As the film highlights the resilience of ordinary people in pursuing their daily lives while transcending political and ideo-

logical contradiction, it projects hope for healing the wounds of the traumatic experiences of the civil war.

With proper warning (it is rated "R" for violence) and accompanied by additional class materials—such as historical readings or periodicals that reflect changing attitudes in contemporary Korea toward the issues of national division and reunification, or related Korean short stories including Cho Chong-rae's "Land of Exile" (in Land of Exile by M.E. Sharpe, 1993) and Hwang Sunwon's "Cranes" (in Modern Korean Literature by University of Hawaii Press, 1990), the film will elicit active responses from students. The film's bilingual website (www.taegukgi2004.com) and extra features on the DVD include a timeline and map of the battles, information on 1950s Korea, and interviews with Korean war veterans. These are, along with the movie, easily accessible educational tools for college students as well as for general audiences interested in learning about the Korean War as it was experienced by ordinary Koreans. •

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Jinhee Lee is assistant professor of history at Eastern Illinois University. She is currently completing her book *Instability of Empire: Earthquake, Rumors, and the Massacre of Koreans in Imperial Japan.*

Released by Sony Pictures, *Taegukgi: The Brotherhood of War* is available on DVD from amazon.com, sony.com, and other online retailers. Prices start at \$9.99.

>> To view video excerpts from Director Kang Je-gyu's visit to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in February 2006, visit the AEMS website: www.aems.uiuc.edu/HTML/ taegukgi.htm.