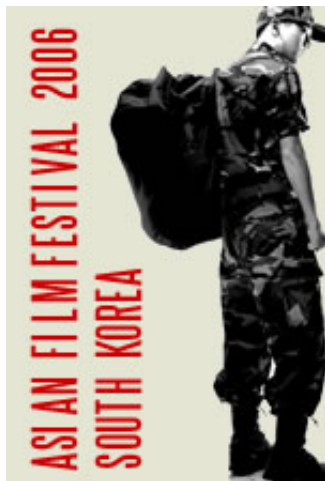


## The Unforgiven : A Great Learning Experience

***The Unforgiven* was reviewed in the Summer 2007 issue of *AEMS News and Reviews*.**

In the fall of 2006, I taught "Introduction to Korea Through Film" through the department of East Asian Languages and Cultures (EALC) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). This was an intermediate undergraduate class of 30 students. Due to a coincidence of timing, I was able to require all students to attend the screening of *The Unforgiven* (Yoon Jong-bin, 2005) at the annual **Asian Film Festival** put on by the **Asian Educational Media Service** and the **Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies** on September 29, 2006. Since many of the students were Korean Americans and non-EALC majors, there was a high level of interest in Korean society, but a low level of academic or intellectual engagement with various problems, issues, or trends in Korean society.



None of my students had previously seen or heard of *The Unforgiven*, so they all went into it with an open mind—with some very interesting results. Although the general reaction of the students to the film itself was somewhat less than positive, I regard the overall experience as a tremendously effective teaching opportunity. In particular, the students gained a deeper appreciation for the art-house genre, achieved a better understanding of some important issues facing contemporary South Korea, and gained a real sense of intellectual empowerment by being able to witness a Q&A session with the director.

For the most part, the students have grown up on a steady diet of Hollywood blockbusters, and their lack of exposure to the art-house genre partly accounted for their dislike of the film, which seemed to the students unnervingly unpolished and unprofessional. Because *The Unforgiven* was Director Yoon's film school graduation project (as opposed to a somehow deliberately artsy film), the low budget and lack of glitz became vaguely acceptable to them, and this enabled the students to begin to consider the possible merits of a low-budget art-house film.

**Seungsook Moon** 's idea of "militarized modernity" provided a useful framework for approaching the issues the film address. Moon's term refers to the particular modernization trajectory that South Korea traced from the 1960s through the 1980s, when military dictators used repressive authoritarian regimes to completely rebuild Korean economy and society. I lectured the class on Moon's ideas before the film screening, and afterwards we discussed how they might be applicable to the film. The students then analyzed the film with the five elements from New Criticism (plot, character, setting, theme, motif). They then used these analyses to prepare a micro-

theme response for the exam. The following example from our exam demonstrates one student's synthesis of the theory with the film:

Yoon Jong-bin's 2005 film, *The Unforgiven*, attempts to give insight into the relationship between Korean military and social culture. One theme of this movie is that mandatory military service has a negative impact on Korean culture. The motif of suicide paints compulsory military service as a murder—responsible for the tragic deaths of some of Korea's best and brightest. The army base setting was a place of demoralization and depression that broke the will of the soldier—in some cases even the will to live.

Perhaps most importantly, I believe that the Q&A session with director Yoon after the screening (streaming video is available on the AEMS website) gave my students an opportunity to grow intellectually. According to my students' reports, the important scholars in attendance were enthused and energized by the film, and they peppered Yoon with a number of interesting questions. And yet their academic interest led to a high level of theorizing that evidently overwhelmed Yoon, as he reportedly responded at one point during the Q&A that he had no idea what everyone was talking about, and that when making the film he was just trying to graduate. In other words, Yoon himself apparently did not realize, at least not explicitly, what he was getting into as he was making the film. The students were very disappointed by this, as they were expecting a real live director to be somehow superhuman.

By witnessing Yoon's human frailty, the students became tremendously empowered to *do their own thinking*. In high school (and most of college, I fear), my students have been trained to defer to authority figures, and as a consequence they are extremely hesitant to think for themselves. Frankly, and somewhat unfortunately, most of my students in all of my classes would prefer that I just "tell them" in lecture what is important rather than have them work it out for themselves in class discussion. As they see it, since they are not authorities on the matter, why would their ideas matter? But when the foremost authority, the director himself, has no idea, the playing field is instantly leveled and suddenly my students are *thinking critically*. This kind of student empowerment does not come cheaply or easily. So although they disliked the film, and although they were disappointed with the director, it was a great learning experience.

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### **Recommended Resources:**

#### **Reading :**

Moon, Seungsook. 2005. *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*. Durham, NC : Duke University Press.

#### **Viewing:**

Fenkl, Heinz Insu, Aaron Magnan-Park, Seungsook Moon, and Hyunju Park . **AEMS Educator Workshop: Teaching Korea Through Film**. September 30, 2006. Webpage with streaming video. *Includes presentation by Seungsook Moon on The Unforgiven*.

Yoon, Jong-bin. **The Unforgiven: Q&A Session with Film Director Yoon Jong-bin**. September 29, 2006. Webpage with streaming video.

*The Unforgiven* is available on VCD and DVD. YesAsia offers the VCD for \$11.99 for purchase. DVD Asian has the Region 3 DVD for purchase for \$28.95.

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