

Chunhyang

A film directed by Im Kwon Taek. 2000. 120 minutes.

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Chunhyang is a unique and virtually flawless introduction to Korean film and culture. Im Kwon Taek, South Korea's most creative and gifted director, has created a visually stunning remake of his country's most beloved folk tale. Im does not transform his film to suit Western culture, and that is one of the film's major charms. The music reveals the diversity and richness of Korea's musical tradition and the cinematography includes some of the most extravagant sets and costumes in the history of Korean film. Long after watching the film, viewers will remember vibrant images of life during the late Chosun dynasty (1392-1910). Audiences will also be impressed by the gorgeous sets, the period costumes, and location shots of the beautiful countryside. The younger generation will be captivated by the passionate love story of a very beautiful and sensual young woman, Chunhyang, and the handsome Mong-nyong.

The film grew out of Im's *Sop'yonje* (1993), the first internationally recognized Korean film, which incorporates the hauntingly beautiful sounds of *p'ansori*, an ancient operatic form of music. His objective in *Chunhyang* was to combine the sounds and spirit of *p'ansori* with Korea's most enchanting and famous story of star-crossed lovers. For Im, *Chunhyang* and *pansori* are the essence of Korean culture. In a *Los Angeles Times* interview he explained that "I wanted to let people know about the pleasures of *p'ansori*, and I thought that through film it might be the easiest way to reach them." Another reason to make the film was "to remind people of the fidelity and courage of Chunhyang who braved torture and the threat of death to remain faithful to her lover."

The story of *Chunhyang* is the story of true love, long-suffering virtue, and triumph over evil. It also conveys a very powerful message about the oppressive class structure of feudal Korea. For years scholars tried to trace the origins of the story and recently found a bit of evidence that it might be based on a true story. Im narrates the famous tale through recordings of Cho Sang Hyun, Korea's foremost singer of *p'ansori*. Cho appears briefly at the beginning of the film before a captivated audience, but what we hear was recorded thirty years earlier. The film with live concert footage of Cho and then, with his voice in the background, the story unfolds magically before us. The unique aspect of the film is that the story is told mostly in *p'ansori*. The music is riveting. Some liken it to Navajo chanting.

While Mong-nyong, the aristocratic son of the provincial governor, watches the beautiful sixteen-year old Chunhyang flying high on a swing, it is love at first sight. He hears that Chunhyang's mother is a lower class *kisaeng*, a professional entertainer, so he treats the young girl as a servant. (It was the custom of the age to inherit one's mother's social class.) He demands that she entertain him. She refuses. Mong-nyong then learns that Chunhyang has upper-class blood from her father's side of the family, and was brought up like a lady. She reads and behaves like a member of the aristocracy. Chunhyang's

aristocratic heritage deepens Mong-nyong passions for her. They fall deeply in love with one another, abandon the strict class divide, and marry secretly. Before long Mong-nyong learns that his father has been called to Seoul to be a member of the king's cabinet. The despondent Mong-nyong realizes that he cannot reveal his marriage to a commoner until he passes the rigorous tests at a Confucian academy and gains a position in government as a high ranking official. The unhappy lovers vow to remain loyal to each other until he can return. Their separation will last three years.

Meanwhile, the new governor, a villainous one, arrives. He believes in brutalizing his subjects, especially the beautiful Chunhyang who refuses to accept her legal position as one of his courtesans by declaring loyalty to her lover. After she refuses his advances, Chunhyang is brutally beaten and sentenced to death. Her public beating is the film's most disturbing scene. With each lash, Chunhyang suffers terribly, but she refuses to relent. The scene conveys the Confucian belief that a woman's greatest virtue is loyalty to her husband, regardless of the circumstances. When Mong-nyong returns and hears of his lover's plight, he vows revenge.

Viewers may initially struggle with the unfamiliar sounds of *p'ansori*, but the captivating story and the exquisite cinematography should hold the attention of virtually any audience. When the film was released in Korea, Im was criticized for hiring a sixteen-year old for the part of Chunhyang. A secondary teacher should preview the film and possibly fastforward one of the particularly passionate sex scenes.

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