

# Discovering **South Korea** through Journeys in Film

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## *The Way Home:*

An Interdisciplinary Guide for Teachers



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## Introducing *The Way Home*

*The Way Home*, a relatively small-budget film from South Korea, took the world by surprise, grossing over 20 million dollars in its first year of release. The film outperformed many of the commercial blockbusters that were competing for box office sales at the time. This heartwarming film also catapulted writer/director Lee Jeong-hyang into the limelight as South Korea's most successful female film director to date.

There was nothing typical about the production of *The Way Home* to suggest the potential for its commercial success. Yu Seung-ho, who played the role of the grandson Sang-Woo, was the only professional actor cast in the film. There wasn't a trace of sex, violence, special effects or celebrity to be found. Instead, Lee created a film from her heart, drawing from her own relationship with her grandmother who passed away before the film was made. She dedicates the film to "grandmothers everywhere."

*The Way Home* follows a seven-year-old boy from the big city to a small and remote rural community, where he must live with his mute and partially deaf maternal grandmother while his mother looks for a job. Anger, resentment and frustration bring out the worst in this spoiled little boy who has absolutely no compassion for his grandmother when they first meet.

Sang-Woo experiences culture shock, having to give up all that matters to him: his mother, his GameBoy, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Spam, batteries, and even flush toilets, so that he can survive his stay with his grandmother. With the stripping away of all these modern distractions, the film explores the growing relationship between the boy and his grandmother, demonstrating the power of unconditional love to nurture and heal.

Traditionally, showing respect and caring for elders has been an important part of South Korean culture. It is also a theme that resonates around the world. *The Way Home* challenges its viewers to consider what new values and a growing dependence on technology will mean to families and interpersonal relationships in the future.

The location of this film is crucial to the essence of the story. Lee was convinced that when she found the right place to shoot the film, she would also find the right woman to act as the grandmother. She strongly believed that a nonprofessional actor would be far more convincing in the role. With the help of a man who had written a book on remote Korean villages, Lee began scouting locations. Her advisor had recommended the tiny mountain village of Jeetongma with a population of eight people. As soon as Lee set eyes on Jeetongma, she knew it was the right place. The old homes built of mud, the lonely winding dirt roads, and the rugged mountainous terrain seemed to reflect the simplicity and strength of the grandmother's character.

As Lee had always envisioned, the 77-year-old Kim Eul-boon just seemed to appear from this town "like a miracle." She asked Kim if she would consider the grandmother role and at first Kim was reluctant. She was concerned that she might move too slowly, but Lee was able to reassure her that this was exactly what she wanted. It was also unnecessary for Kim to speak because Lee envisioned her as representing nature, strong and ever present without any words. All of the villagers were included as actors in the film.

When Lee Jeong-hyang was in junior high school, she was thrilled by seeing *The Towering Inferno*, starring Paul Newman. A graduate of the Korean Academy of Film Arts, Lee says to this day that as a result of seeing that film, she decided to pursue her own filmmaking career so that she could inspire and entertain others. Perhaps this very different film, *The Way Home*, will inspire your students.

**STARRING:** Kim Eul-boon, Yu Seung-ho, Min Kyung-hoon, Yim Eun-kyung, Dong Hyo-hee

**WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY:** Lee Jeong-hyang

**PRODUCED BY:** Whang Woo-hyun, Whang Jae-woo

**RUNNING TIME:** 80 minutes

**COUNTRY:** South Korea

**LANGUAGE:** Korean with English subtitles

**RATING:** PG for mild thematic elements and language

**AWARDS:** Winner of many international film festival awards, including Best New Director, Best Film, and Best Screenplay at the Grand Bell Film Awards; Best Director at the Blue Dragon Film Awards, the Yong Pyung Film Awards, and the Choonsa Film Awards. Additional awards from Toronto International Film Festival, Boston Film Festival, AFI Film Festival, San Sebastian Film Festival, Mill Valley Film Festival, and San Diego Asian Film Festival.



# Background Note: South Korea

**PROFILE** [Adapted from the U.S. State Department,

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2800.htm>]

**OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of Korea

## GEOGRAPHY

**Area:** 98,477 sq. km. (38,022 sq. mi.); about the size of Indiana.

**Cities (2004):** *Capital* – Seoul (10.3 million). *Other major cities* – Pusan (3.8 million), Daegu (2.5 million), Incheon (2.5 million), Gwangju (1.4 million), Daejeon (1.4 million), Ulsan (1.0 million).

**Terrain:** Partially forested mountain ranges separated by deep, narrow valleys; cultivated plains along the coasts, particularly in the west and south.

**Climate:** Temperate.

## PEOPLE

**Nationality:** *Noun and adjective* – Korean(s).

**Population (2004):** 48.42 million.

**Population annual growth rate (2004):** 0.62%.

**Ethnic groups:** Korean; small Chinese minority.

**Religions:** Christianity, Buddhism, Shamanism, Confucianism, Chondogyo.

**Language:** Korean.

**Education:** *Years compulsory* – 9. *Enrollment* – 11.5 million. *Attendance* – middle school 99%, high school 95%. *Literacy* – 98%.

**Health (2004):** *Infant mortality rate* – 7.05/1,000. *Life expectancy* – 75.58 yrs (men 71.96 yrs.; women 79.54 yrs).

**Work force (2004):** 22.8 million. *Services* – 68%; *mining and manufacturing* – 20%; *agriculture* – 12%.

## GOVERNMENT

**Type:** Republic with powers shared between the president and the legislature.

**Liberation:** August 15, 1945.

**Constitution:** July 17, 1948; last revised 1987.

**Branches:** *Executive* – President (chief of state); Prime Minister (head of government). *Legislative* – unicameral National Assembly. *Judicial* – Supreme Court and appellate courts; Constitutional Court.

## ECONOMY

**Nominal GDP (2004):** \$680.1 billion.

**GDP growth rate:** 2002, 7.0%; 2003, 3.1%; 2004, 4.6%.

**Per capita GNI (2004):** \$14,162.

**Consumer price index:** 2003, 3.6%; 2004, 3.6%.

**Natural resources:** Limited coal, tungsten, iron ore, limestone, kaolinite, and graphite.

**Agriculture, including forestry and fisheries:** *Products* – rice, vegetables, fruit. *Arable land* – 22% of land area.

**Industry:** *Types* – Electronics and electrical products, motor vehicles, shipbuilding, mining and manufacturing, petrochemicals, industrial machinery, textiles, footwear.

**Trade (2004):** *Exports* – \$257.7 billion: electronic products (semiconductors, cellular phones, computers), automobiles, machinery and equipment, steel, ships, textiles. *Major markets* – China (including Hong Kong) (19.6%), U.S. (16.9%), European Union (12.8%), Japan (8.5%). *Imports* – \$219.6 billion: crude oil, food, machinery and transportation equipment, chemicals and chemical products, base metals and articles. *Major suppliers* – Japan (20.6%), China (13.1%), U.S. (12.8%), European Union (10.8%).

## PEOPLE

**Population:** Korea's population is one of the most ethnically and linguistically homogenous in the world. Except for a small Chinese community (about 20,000), virtually all Koreans share a common cultural and linguistic heritage. With 48.42 million people, South Korea has one of the world's highest population densities. Major population centers are located in the northwest, southeast, and in the plains south of Seoul-Incheon.

Korea has experienced one of the largest rates of emigration, with ethnic Koreans residing primarily in China (1.9 million), the United States (1.52 million), Japan (681,000), and the countries of the former Soviet Union (450,000).

**Language:** The Korean language is related to Japanese and Mongolian. Although Korean differs grammatically from Chinese and does not use tones, a large number of Chinese cognates exist in Korean. Chinese ideograms are believed to have been brought into Korea sometime before the second century BC. The learned class spoke Korean, but read and wrote Chinese. A phonetic writing

system (*hangul*) was invented in the 15th century by King Sejong to provide a writing system for commoners who could not read classic Chinese. Modern Korean uses *hangul* almost exclusively, with Chinese characters in limited use for word clarification. Approximately 1,300 Chinese characters are used in modern Korean. English is taught as a second language in most primary and secondary schools. Chinese and Japanese are widely taught at secondary schools.

**Religion:** Half of the population actively practices religion. Among this group, Christianity (49%) and Buddhism (47%) make up Korea's two dominant religions. Though only 3% identified themselves as Confucianists, Korean society remains highly imbued with Confucian values and beliefs. The remaining 1% of the population practice Shamanism (traditional spirit worship) and Chondogyo ("Heavenly Way"), a traditional religion.

