

**Editor's note:** The following four essays, two by teachers and two by students, all are partially a result of the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia (NCTA) seminars. We thank all contributors including Dave Barrett who solicited essays from his students, Samantha Hughes and Briana Jamerson.

## My Favorite Asia-Related Digital Media Korean and Japanese Films

By Kathy Newman

### My Sassy Girl

DIRECTED BY KWAK JAE-YONG, PRODUCED BY SHIN CHUL

CINEMA SERVICE

DVD, 123 MINUTES, 2001

### Pingu-Pongu (Ping Pong)

DIRECTED BY FUMIHIKO SORI

PRODUCED BY TAMOTSU SHIINA (AND OTHERS)

ASMIK ACE ENTERTAINMENT, TBS

DVD, 114 MINUTES, 2002



Jun Ji-hyun as the sassy girl. Screen capture from *My Sassy Girl*. ©2001 Cinema Service.

“I believe . . . When you are not with me there are no stars in the sky. I believe . . . The way back to you will feel a little far . . . I'll be waiting. I do it for you.” These words, translated from the theme song “I Believe” from the Korean film *My Sassy Girl*, echo the sentiments of the film. I have enjoyed this lovely song many times since I took an East Asian studies course from Indiana University. I often use the Korean video *My Sassy Girl* and the Japanese video *Ping Pong* in my English classes I teach at Grant Career Center, a vocational high school in Southwestern Ohio whose student population, primarily white Appalachians, deserves more opportunities to learn about cultural diversity. Appropriate materials for implementing core literary competencies, these videos help provide the global perspective that I strive to give to these students.

I seldom show full-length movies, as students tend to be passive and regard movies as “free time”; but with these films, students must engage by reading the subtitles. When they learn that there are subtitles they are required to read, some do a little grumbling; but by the end of the films, they are totally engrossed in the stories, unaware that they are reading. Interestingly, students want the volume turned up; even though they do not know the words, the inflections and music contribute to their enjoyment. At the

end of the film, with thoughts and emotions flowing, students are eager to share, which we do in whole-class discussion and then in writing in the movie review genre. Because *My Sassy Girl* is a movie adapted from a blog that was turned into a novel, the film lends itself to a study of fiction to film.

A 2001 romantic comedy and the highest-grossing Korean comedy film of all time, *My Sassy Girl* entertains and is suspenseful; [SPOILER ALERT] in the end, as a proper romantic comedy, the lovers are united and assumed to “live happily ever after,” making for a satisfying conclusion for the audience. One of the positives of this video for my students is the revelation of the similarities between Korean and American teenagers in everyday experiences, peer relationships and play, conflicts between generations, mourning, and the quest for love and belonging. It's a “chick flick” that even the guys appreciate. The themes of fate and chance run throughout the movie, as does the theme song, “I Believe,” whose translated lyrics can be found online, offering another opportunity for discussion and writing. One disclaimer: I freeze the projector right before the bathroom scene with the male character's naked behind and narrate what is happening during that section before unfreezing the screen. Also, there are a few times when mildly objectionable language is used, though inconsequential and noth-

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Yosuke Kubozuka as "Peco" Hoshino. Screen capture from *Ping Pong*. ©2002 Asmik Ace Entertainment.

ing that hasn't been heard on primetime American TV. *Ping Pong* also entertains but primarily with complex, dynamic male characters engrossed in the sport of ping-pong. One might speculate that guys would prefer this film with its action, but my male students generally rate *My Sassy Girl* higher. *Ping Pong*, with its flashforwards and flashbacks, demands that students follow along closely. Interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts provoke in-depth thinking as the film explores the importance of relying upon one's strengths (the hero within), competing and doing one's best, having passion for an endeavor, and embracing friendship. [Another SPOILER ALERT] As a story of individual growth and maturation, the ambiguous ending (Did one of the main characters play his hardest and lose the tournament, or did he allow his friend to win?) promotes character analysis and conflict resolution; so our literary focus is on conflict and characterization.

Both videos are excellent, well-acted films that are worthwhile viewing for an English classroom. They show the physical settings of Korea and Japan, offer entertaining stories that provide springboards for writing assignments and classroom discussions that require higher-level thinking, and employ cinematic techniques that engage students. I recommend both, as do most of my students. In his movie review, a Metal Fabrication student recommended *My Sassy Girl*. He wrote, "I didn't really like the different language, but once I got past that, I realized that *My Sassy Girl* is a great movie with a story line full of comedy, action, and love. I'd probably watch the movie again to see if I missed anything, but I'm not so much into love movies, so after that, I'd never pick it up again. I'd take it to Goodwill to share it. Overall though, it is a pretty good movie." His watching it once was good enough for me, but his considering watching it a second time, well . . . I believe . . . mission accomplished! ■

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