



# News and Reviews

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## Interview with Filmmaker Dai Sil Kim-Gibson

>> by Sarah Barbour and Xian Barrett

*Dai Sil Kim-Gibson has directed six films about Koreans and Korean Americans. She is probably best known for her documentary Silence Broken, about the Korean "Comfort Women" and their continuing quest for justice from the Japanese government. Her other films, about subjects as seemingly disparate as the Sakhalin Island Koreans and the Los Angeles race riots, reflect her dedication to human rights and her concern for individuals whose rights are violated. For more information about Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, her films, and the Comfort Women issue, please visit to her Web site: [www.twotigers.org](http://www.twotigers.org).*

*While she was on campus last April, we talked to her about her films. Following are some excerpts of our conversation:*

**AEMS: *Silence Broken* may be your best known film. Why did you make it?**

**I**t is a story that has been silenced for half a century. It needed to be told.

The project started as a book, and originally, I wanted to do a feature film for theatrical release. I knew that there would be a paucity of visual materials to make a documentary. More importantly, I believed that as a feature drama, it would attract more people. But I couldn't raise that kind of money. In the meantime, however, I was able to get a small grant to make a documentary. Writing the book and making the film went on at the same time and I published the book to coincide with the broadcast of the film.

...You know on Hitler alone there are over 100,000 pieces of work, including books, films, et cetera. However, when I was writing and making a film about Comfort Women, the books and



Dai Sil Kim-Gibson

films in English on this topic were less than ten. Still, many people said, "Hasn't there been a work on this topic?" Whenever I heard this, I couldn't even scream.

I could only feel my scream in the pit of my stomach. Because there were a book or two, publishers were reluctant to print my book.

I found a small publisher who printed my book. My book sold over 5,000 copies, mostly through word of mouth, so there is an audience out there that is interested in this subject. But publishers and programmers think otherwise.

**AEMS: *Silence Broken* is a little unusual in that it lacks narration. Why is that?**

Both the book and the film are collections of oral histories. It is not only the topic that is important but the methodology that gives these

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From *Our Nation: A Korean Punk Rock Community*. See review, page 6.

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## Our Nation: A Korean Punk Rock Community

>> Produced by Timothy R. Tangherlini and Stephen J. Epstein. 2002. 39 minutes.

Although *Our Nation* can be most easily described as an introduction to the South Korean “punk” scene, it offers a much larger portrayal. Namely, the documentary provides a window on South Korean youth, on a generation struggling both to make their way in a transformed South Korea (that is by no means all-new), and to try their hand at sculpting that new South Korea themselves. In *Our Nation*, Drug, the premier and first punk café and CD label, emerges as a frenzied, wild social space in which young people are trying on new identities as they fashion their futures. The documentary takes its title from the first compilation CD on the Drug label, featuring the first punk group, Crying Nut, to go big. Beginning with this title, directors Stephen J. Epstein and Timothy R. Tangherlini have fashioned a film that is wonderfully suggestive and decidedly not declarative. “Our Nation,” as CD title, works precisely because its meaning and tone are not entirely clear; just as the sense with which Crying Nut chose this name cannot be easily pinned down, nor can the generation pictured in this documentary. The CD and video both challenge: to what extent do South Korean punk and its scene mean to provoke or to reject the mainstream? While *Our Nation* is informative, it refuses to instruct. This makes for a video that invites its viewers to reflect, to consider what, after all, the South Korean fin-de-siècle punk scene is all about. It is hard to imagine a high school or college student who would not be riveted by this film and its queries: why punk, why South Korea, why now,

and so what?

In keeping with the non-didactic mode of this documentary, the terms and styles, musical and otherwise, that make up South Korean punk music and its social scene are ones that Epstein and Tangherlini do not define or outline. Rather, *Our Nation* introduces its audience to the look, feel, and conversation of the scene. This is not to suggest that *Our Nation* is not a meticulously edited tableau (it is) but rather to underscore that the viewer is challenged to personally integrate a diversity of voices. Wonderful, for example, is that the film never defines South Korean “punk” (e.g., what makes it “punk,” what makes it “South Korean” etc.) but rather lets us eavesdrop on its producers, musicians, and fans as *they* struggle variously over what it is, what it isn’t, how it is transforming and so on. One thing does, however, become resoundingly clear: South Korean punk is not simply a Western import but rather a locally inflected work-in-progress. Again and again we listen to young people happy to proclaim that “Korean punk” need not conform to the musical, cultural, or stylistic confines of punk-past or punk-Western. As the not-so-young founder and manager of Drug offers, he doesn’t care what it is as long as it is “singing about what’s around us.” Or as one performer basically puts it, “It’s punk if I say it is.”

If South Korean punk is its very own musical scene—one that viewers of *Our Nation* really get a feeling for—with its every breath *Our Nation* convinces that one cannot assume the meanings of

South Korean punk. While the youths who have made punk go wild to tunes that challenge the musical mainstream and take on the South Korean establishment, theirs is not a simple wholesale rejection of prevailing South Korean values or visions. In a wonderful companion article to the film, Epstein goes so far as to coin the phrase “neo-Neo-Confucianism” to describe the affinities of the Drug scene and generation (Epstein, p. 2). The tension between (seeming) all-out rejection and conformity comes to life via vivid portrayals of punk performers and consumers. We listen, for example, as the lead singer of the only girl-band, Supermarket, talks about the joys of making *kim-chi* (pickled vegetables) and doing laundry by hand (we witness a suds scene). *Our Nation* viewers are thus privy to the interface between Drug—the under-ground (literally) music scene—and the minutiae of domestic life. In other scenes we follow a fan back to her middle class apartment, and again fans on their bus commute to a college in a satellite city of Seoul. In short, we get a feeling for how South Korean punk works its way into people’s lives—we see it in its quotidian relief.

Despite the film’s attention to the humdrum of (even) punk in people’s daily meanderings, we nonetheless come to understand that South Korean punk must be appreciated in the context of the specificity of the lives of South Korean middle-class youth—foremost the enormous education pressure and anxiety about future well-being in a highly stratified and competitive society. We listen to one young man proclaim that he does not even want to think about high school (i.e., its misery) and again to many other accounts of the enormous pressure to succeed. In an even broader vein, we hear one young man offer in perfect English, “South Koreans have their share of things to be pissed about.” Finally, the vicissitudes of academic pressures aside, viewers get a clear sense of the pressures to conform more generally, to look, act, and be a particular way. We hear punkers talk about wanting to “break the mold,” “to live as they want to live,” and so on. And we listen to one of the musicians from 18Cruk describe wanting nothing more than a South Korea where one isn’t stared at like an animal in a zoo for being “different.” As one young man put it, punk was for him, beginning in middle school, an oasis, an escape. Epstein’s aforementioned article chronicles the social context of South Korean youth and thus works as a perfect reading to accompany the film.

Beyond the specificity of middle class youth—the pressures they withstand and protest—*Our Nation* also considers the historical specificity of the birth and rise of South Korean punk in the early and mid 1990s. It thus sketches the conditions of possibility that made for this scene—

*continued on next page*





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## What's New?

### Visiting Filmmaker

In April, AEMS and the Asian American Studies Program co-sponsored a visit from author and documentary filmmaker Dai Sil Kim-Gibson. While here, she screened her documentary *Silence Broken* (reviewed in *AEMS News and Reviews*, Fall 2001). After the screenings, she spoke and answered questions from the audience. While she was here, Xian Barrett and Sarah Barbour had the opportunity to interview her about her work. Their interview appears on page 1.

### New Web Pages

The AEMS collection of Regional Resources Web pages continues to grow. In response to the SARS crisis last spring, we created a page of resources on the disease and its effects, both medical and social. This page can be found at: [www.aems.uiuc.edu/HTML/SARS/SARS.htm](http://www.aems.uiuc.edu/HTML/SARS/SARS.htm).

This summer we continued to expand our collection of Regional Resources adding pages on Bhutan, East Timor, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Mongolia. In addition to noting interesting media about specific countries, these pages refer users to sites on culture, geography, history, and the arts. To see the entire collection to date, please visit [www.aems.uiuc.edu/HTML/AsianResources/AsianResources.htm](http://www.aems.uiuc.edu/HTML/AsianResources/AsianResources.htm).

### Education About Asia

In the spring of 2002, Sarah Barbour guest-edited a special issue of *Education About Asia* that focused on film in the classroom. Our collaboration with *EAA* continues. This fall Sarah guest-edited the film review section which reviews media on, among other subjects, Pakistani music, Indian religion, Japanese women, the Vietnam War, and Asian immigrants in the American West. For more information about *Education About Asia*, please visit: [www.aasianst.org/ea-toc.htm](http://www.aasianst.org/ea-toc.htm). ♦

—Sarah I. Barbour, Editor

## Guide to Distributors

>> A list of distributors mentioned in this issue of *AEMS News and Reviews*

**Amazon.com.** Web site: [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

**Indiana University Press,** 601 N. Morton Street, Bloomington, IN 47404. Tel: 812-855-8817 or 800-842-6796. E-mail: [iupress@indiana.edu](mailto:iupress@indiana.edu). Web site: <http://iupress.indiana.edu>.

**Marty Gross Film Productions, Inc.,** 637 Davenport Road, Toronto, Canada M5R 1L3. Tel: 416-536-3355. Fax: 416-535-0583. E-mail: [marty@martygross.com](mailto:marty@martygross.com).

**National Asian American Telecommunications Association,** 346 9th Street, 2nd Floor, San Francisco, CA 94103. Tel: 415-552-9550. Fax: 415-863-7428. E-mail: [Distributor@naatanet.org](mailto:Distributor@naatanet.org). Web site: [www.naatanet.org](http://www.naatanet.org)

**The NoodleHead Network,** 107 Intervale Avenue, Burlington, VT 05401. Tel.: 800-639-5680. Fax 802-864-7135. E-mail: [info@noodlehead.com](mailto:info@noodlehead.com). Web site: [www.noodlehead.com](http://www.noodlehead.com)

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