

# Korean Cinema and Modern History

## Fall 2026 · Syllabus

|                         |                                                            |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Course number / section | [KOR 3410 Korean Culture Old & New OL1, CRN:95417 ]        |
| Credits                 | [3 credits]                                                |
| Meeting times           | Mondays & Wednesdays, 12:30–1:45 pm                        |
| Format                  | Synchronous online via Zoom                                |
| Instructor              | [Yongtaek Kim]                                             |
| Email                   | [ykim791@gatech.edu]                                       |
| Office hours            | [12:00-12:30 pm and 1:45-2:15 pm on MW and by appointment] |
| Term dates              | August 24 – December 7, 2026                               |

## Course description

This course uses fifteen South Korean films to work through the modern history of the Korean peninsula, from the military rule of the 1970s and 1980s to the present. It is a history course, not a film studies course. We are not here to review films or to rank them. We are here to treat each film as evidence — an argument someone made about the past, at a particular moment, for a particular audience.

Every film in this course carries **two dates**: the year of the events it depicts, and the year it was released. Those dates are usually far apart, and the distance between them is where the work happens. A film about 1980 released in 2017 tells you something about 1980 and something about 2017, and the second thing is often more interesting.

No prior knowledge of Korean history, Korean language, or film analysis is assumed.

## What you will be able to do by December

1. Narrate the major events of modern Korean history from the 1970s to the present, and explain how they connect.
2. Evaluate a feature film's artistic, historical, and societal significance — identifying what it asserts, what it omits, and whose perspective it adopts.
3. Compare a dramatized account against historical sources and explain the gap in terms of the choices filmmakers made, rather than cataloguing errors.
4. Explain how a film's release date shapes its account of the past.
5. Locate, evaluate, and share reliable sources on Korean history, and discuss contested

questions with evidence.

## Films

| #  | Film                     | Events       | Released |
|----|--------------------------|--------------|----------|
| 1  | 12.12: The Day           | 1979         | 2023     |
| 2  | A Taxi Driver            | 1980         | 2017     |
| 3  | 1987: When the Day Comes | 1987         | 2017     |
| 4  | Chil-su and Man-su       | 1988         | 1988     |
| 5  | Memories of Murder       | 1986–91      | 2003     |
| 6  | Traces of Love           | 1995         | 2006     |
| 7  | Default                  | 1997         | 2018     |
| 8  | Shiri                    | 1999         | 1999     |
| 9  | JSA: Joint Security Area | 2000         | 2000     |
| 10 | The Host                 | 2000–06      | 2006     |
| 11 | Cart                     | 2007–08      | 2014     |
| 12 | Inside Men               | fictional    | 2015     |
| 13 | The Bacchus Lady         | contemporary | 2016     |
| 14 | Birthday                 | 2014         | 2019     |
| 15 | Parasite                 | contemporary | 2019     |

**Access:** Streaming availability shifts constantly. Viewing links or library access for each film are posted in Canvas at least ten days before that film is due. If a film becomes unavailable, contact me immediately rather than the day before it is due.

**Time commitment:** Budget roughly two hours per week for viewing on top of class time. Several films run over two hours.

## Background materials

There is no textbook. Each film has its own Canvas module containing background materials in two tiers:

**Fundamental (required for all students).** Typically three to four sources covering the film's plot and production, the historical episode itself, and at least one piece analyzing how the film

handles the history. These are what your discussion post is expected to draw on. Read them *before* watching.

**Supplementary (optional).** Additional sources offering deeper historical context, biography of key figures, or alternative interpretations. Not required, but the strongest posts almost always draw on at least one.

The Fundamental materials are short. Skipping them and writing from the film alone is visible immediately in a post, and it is the most common reason posts lose points.

## How class works

**Mondays** are historical background. Lecture for roughly twenty-five minutes, one key source we read together, then a short breakout (about twelve minutes) where your group answers one assigned question, followed by group reports.

**Wednesdays** are yours. Breakout rooms run long — twenty-five to forty minutes depending on the week — with a different question per group, followed by reports and full-class discussion. On six Wednesdays a group presents; on the others we use the whole period for discussion.

**Breakout rooms.** You will be in the same group of five all semester. Every group writes into a shared class document during every breakout — I watch that document in real time, which is how I know whether a room is working. Roles (Recorder, Reporter, Timekeeper) rotate each session.

**Cameras.** On during breakout rooms. Your call during lecture.

## Assignments and grading

| Component                            | Weight |
|--------------------------------------|--------|
| Discussion posts (15 × 10 points)    | 30%    |
| Breakout participation and group log | 20%    |
| Group presentation (once per group)  | 15%    |
| Final project                        | 30%    |
| Self-introduction video              | 5%     |

*There is no separate attendance grade. Attendance is assessed through breakout participation, because being present is what makes the group work possible — see that section below.*

## Discussion posts — 30%

One post per film, fifteen total. **200–250 words** across four required components. Ten points each.

## The deadline

### **Every discussion post is due Sunday at 11:59 pm.**

One rule, all semester, for all fifteen films — including the weeks where the film is discussed on Wednesday rather than Monday. Exact dates are in the schedule at the end of this syllabus, but you do not need to look them up: it is always Sunday night.

**Post early in the week, not Sunday evening.** One of the four components requires you to respond to a classmate's question, and you cannot see anyone's post until you submit your own. If you post at 11:50 pm Sunday, you will have ten minutes to read the board and write a response. Students who post Thursday or Friday have days.

Late posts are not accepted, because we use them in Monday's class.

## **The four components**

**1. Key Observations — 85–100 words — 4 points.** What stood out to you in the film *and* in the assigned readings, and why it matters. Connect what you noticed to a major theme or to the historical context. Anchor it in something specific: a moment, a decision, an absence, a discrepancy between the film and the readings. Do not summarize the plot and do not tell me whether you liked it.

**2. Supplementary Source — 35–50 words — 2 points.** Share one freely accessible online source not already in the Canvas module — a journal article, news piece, documentary, archival footage, interview. Explain its relevance in a sentence or two. Two requirements:

- Post it as a working hyperlink. Type or paste the URL and press Enter so it becomes clickable, rather than leaving raw text.
- It must be unique — not already posted by a classmate for this film.

Failing either requirement costs 1 point per instance. A duplicate source earns 1 point out of 2.

**3. Engaging Question — 35–50 words — 2 points.** Pose a genuinely open, thought-provoking question about the film or readings — one a classmate could answer several different ways. Yes/no and comprehension questions do not qualify. **Full credit requires that at least one classmate responds to your question.** A duplicate question receives partial credit.

**4. Classmate Response — 35–50 words — 2 points.** Answer exactly one classmate's question, by the same Sunday deadline. Vary who you respond to across the semester rather than returning to the same two or three people.

## **Practical notes**

- After posting, check the board for duplicate sources and questions and revise yours if needed. This is your responsibility, not mine.
- Posting a question nobody answers costs you points, so make it answerable — and post it early enough that people are still reading. A question that goes up at midnight will not be seen.
- Two lowest post scores are dropped.
- I read posts aloud in class, anonymously. Assume yours will be one of them.

## **Breakout participation and group log — 20%**

This is the largest single measure of your day-to-day engagement, and it is where attendance

registers. There is no separate attendance grade because there does not need to be one: if you are not in the room, your name is not on your group's block, and the group is short a voice. Assessed from three things: your presence across the semester, your group's completed entries in the shared class document, and my observation when I visit rooms. Every field filled, in complete sentences, with something specific in it. **A group block left blank counts as an incomplete session for everyone in that group.**

You have two absences that carry no penalty — that is the built-in allowance for illness, interviews, and bad weeks. Beyond that, each absence reduces this grade. If something serious is going on, tell me early. I am far more flexible before a deadline than after one.

## Group presentation — 15%

**Each group presents once**, on the assigned Wednesday below. Twelve minutes plus five minutes of questions. Your group also writes two discussion questions for the class and posts them in the shared document by 9:00 am that morning.

| Date      | Film                     | Group   |
|-----------|--------------------------|---------|
| Wed 9/16  | 1987: When the Day Comes | Group 1 |
| Wed 9/30  | Memories of Murder       | Group 2 |
| Wed 10/21 | Shiri                    | Group 3 |
| Wed 11/4  | The Host                 | Group 4 |
| Wed 11/18 | Inside Men               | Group 5 |
| Wed 12/2  | Birthday                 | Group 6 |

The presentation is not a plot recap. Take one historical claim the film makes, test it against a source, and tell us what you found. Full rubric distributed in Week 2.

## Final project — 30%

Proposal due Week 8, draft conference Week 13, final submission Friday, December 11.

**Option A — Film as evidence.** Take one film from the syllabus and one substantial historical source it touches. Eight to ten pages analyzing what the film asserts, where it departs from the record, and what those departures tell us about the moment the film was made.

**Option B — The sixteenth film.** Propose a film that should be on this syllabus and is not. Eight to ten pages making the case: what historical episode it covers, what it adds that our fifteen films miss, where in the sequence it belongs, and what it would displace.

Either option may be submitted as a recorded presentation of roughly fifteen minutes instead of a paper, with prior approval.

## Self-introduction video — 5%

Due Friday, August 28. Two to three minutes: who you are, what brought you to this course, and

one thing you already know or believe about Korea — from any source, including a drama or a song. Graded complete / incomplete. Post it where your classmates can see it; you will be working with these people all semester.

## Academic integrity — artificial intelligence

**The use of AI tools — ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot, or any equivalent — is strictly prohibited for all work in this course.** This includes discussion posts, presentations, and the final project. It applies to generating text, rewriting your text, and producing summaries of the films or readings.

AI detection software is used on submissions. A violation results in a failing grade for the assignment or for the course. This is not a hypothetical policy: a student received an F for a single AI-generated submission in a previous term.

The reason is simple. The entire mechanism of this course is that I hear how *you* think about a film, and that your classmates respond to *your* question. Outsourcing that does not produce a shortcut — it produces nothing, for you or for anyone reading your post.

If you are stuck, come to office hours. That is what they are for.

[Insert institutional academic integrity statement.]

## Other policies

### Accessibility

[Insert institutional statement.] All films should be viewed with subtitles regardless of accommodation status. If an assigned film is unavailable in an accessible format, tell me and I will find a substitute.

### Difficult content

This course covers a violent century. Films on this syllabus depict state torture, the killing of civilians by soldiers, serial murder, structural collapses that killed hundreds, suicide, and the deaths of children in a ferry disaster that remains an open political wound in Korea. These are not incidental — they are the history.

Specific content is flagged in Canvas before each film. If a particular film is genuinely not something you can watch, come to me privately and we will arrange an alternative that meets the same objective. That conversation stays between us.

## Schedule

**All discussion posts are due Sunday at 11:59 pm.** The dates below are for reference; the rule does not change.

| <b>Wk</b> | <b>Date</b> | <b>Session</b>                                    | <b>Due Sunday 11:59 pm</b> |
|-----------|-------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1         | Mon 8/24    | Course introduction                               |                            |
|           | Wed 8/26    | Korean history timeline; reading film as evidence | Intro video — Fri 8/28     |
| 2         | Mon 8/31    | <b>12.12: The Day</b> — 1979 / 2023               | Sun 8/30                   |
|           | Wed 9/2     | Extended discussion                               |                            |
| 3         | Mon 9/7     | <b>LABOR DAY — no class</b>                       |                            |
|           | Wed 9/9     | <b>A Taxi Driver</b> — 1980 / 2017 (combined)     | Sun 9/6                    |
| 4         | Mon 9/14    | <b>1987</b> — 1987 / 2017                         | Sun 9/13                   |
|           | Wed 9/16    | Discussion — <b>Group 1 presents</b>              |                            |
| 5         | Mon 9/21    | <b>Chil-su and Man-su</b> — 1988 / 1988           | Sun 9/20                   |
|           | Wed 9/23    | Extended discussion                               |                            |
| 6         | Mon 9/28    | <b>Memories of Murder</b> — 1986–91 / 2003        | Sun 9/27                   |
|           | Wed 9/30    | Discussion — <b>Group 2 presents</b>              |                            |
| 7         | Mon 10/5    | <b>FALL BREAK — no class</b>                      |                            |
|           | Wed 10/7    | <b>Traces of Love</b> — 1995 / 2006 (combined)    | Sun 10/4                   |
| 8         | Mon 10/12   | <b>Default</b> — 1997 / 2018                      | Sun 10/11                  |
|           | Wed 10/14   | Extended discussion; final project guidelines     | Project proposal           |

|    |           |                                                               |                          |
|----|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 9  | Mon 10/19 | <b>Shiri</b> — 1999 / 1999                                    | Sun 10/18                |
|    | Wed 10/21 | Discussion — <b>Group 3 presents</b>                          |                          |
| 10 | Mon 10/26 | <b>JSA</b> — 2000 / 2000                                      | Sun 10/25                |
|    | Wed 10/28 | Extended discussion; JSA and Shiri compared                   |                          |
| 11 | Mon 11/2  | <b>The Host</b> — 2000 / 2006                                 | Sun 11/1                 |
|    | Wed 11/4  | Discussion — <b>Group 4 presents</b>                          |                          |
| 12 | Mon 11/9  | <b>Cart</b> — 2007–08 / 2014                                  | Sun 11/8                 |
|    | Wed 11/11 | Extended discussion                                           |                          |
| 13 | Mon 11/16 | <b>Inside Men</b> — fictional / 2015                          | Sun 11/15                |
|    | Wed 11/18 | Discussion — <b>Group 5 presents</b> ; draft conferences      | Project draft            |
| 14 | Mon 11/23 | <b>The Bacchus Lady</b> — 2016 / 2016 (combined)              | Sun 11/22                |
|    | Wed 11/25 | <b>THANKSGIVING — no class</b>                                |                          |
| 15 | Mon 11/30 | <b>Birthday</b> — 2014 / 2019                                 | Sun 11/29                |
|    | Wed 12/2  | Discussion — <b>Group 6 presents</b>                          |                          |
| 16 | Mon 12/7  | <b>Parasite</b> — 2019 / 2019; course synthesis (final class) | Sun 12/6                 |
|    | Fri 12/11 |                                                               | <b>Final project due</b> |

*The Week 15 post (Birthday) is due Sunday, November 29 — the end of Thanksgiving weekend. Watch the film before you travel.*

*This schedule may be adjusted. Any change will be announced in class and posted in Canvas.*