

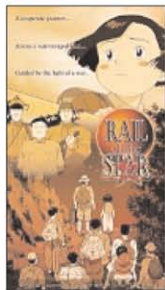
A true story of children and war

Rail of the Star

Director: Toshio Hirata
80 minutes, A.D.V. Films, 1998
Not rated

War is often condensed for us in movies; dumb-ed down to a story of good versus evil. It makes for a more accessible movie, as it's much easier to root for an attractive hero fighting an unattractive enemy than to see all of the messy, complicated history which leads to war.

But war in Korea has never been so easily simplified into such an easy, movie-friendly good vs. evil dichotomy. I don't think we'll be seeing a Korean Disney picture à la "Mulan" or "Anastasia" any time soon. For this reason, the makers of *Rail of the Star*, a highly entertaining animated film set in Korea during World War II, are to be commended.



The animated video, from an autobiographical novel by Chitose Kobayashi, the second World War is looked

at through a unique perspective - that of a young Japanese girl, Chiko Kobayashi, living in Japanese-occupied Korea in 1940. All of her friends are Japanese, and she wonders why the neighborhood boys are always picking on a particular Korean boy, and why Ohana, her family's Korean maid, has a Japanese name.

As the war progresses and Japan's political stronghold weakens, Chiko's carefree life is taken away

from her. Basic resources become scarce, and the bright red backpack she longs for on her first day of school comes in the form of a drab camouflage bag. Her younger sister Miko is stricken with typhoid, and her father, no longer a young man, is drafted into the Japanese army.

Though conditions are bad, they turn even worse when the war ends and the tables are turned on the Japanese in Korea. Chiko's family must leave their comfortable home and move into a one-room apartment for Japanese only. The city they live in happens to be north of the 38th parallel, so the Soviets are the new occupants, and immediately go about rounding up the Japanese colonial leaders in the process of setting up an independent (wink, wink) Korean government.

The Kobayashis long to return to Japan, but they are forbidden to move

from their quarters. Soon Chiko's father, who returned from the front early because of a medical disability, begins to organize an escape to the U.S. occupied South. This escape is dangerous and heart wrenching, as they try to survive both the Soviet police and the harsh elements, with no map and little food. Travelling by train and on foot for many miles in unknown terrain, the group realizes that they have traveled in a circle, right back to where they began. They are discouraged beyond belief, until Chiko looks up and sees the beautiful, clear stars that can guide them southward. Thus, the stars become the group's railway to freedom, and also give the film its title.

The makers of *Rail* do a good job of presenting the history fairly; the Japanese were hardly patron saints in Korea. As a child, Chiko has all the basic, sincere questions that a good student of history asks: Why

is her family in Korea? Why are they economically so much better off than their indigenous Korean neighbors? Why can't they travel back safely to Japan to be with their extended family and friends?

For these reasons, presenting the story through the eyes of a child is a clever idea. However, this use of a child as narrator and the use of animation should not be translated into a call to young audiences. *Rail* is not a children's story. There are adult themes here that always accompany war stories: death in the family, violence, and heart wrenching loss. This is not light family fare, but a candid look at history: one chapter of the messy, complicated story of Korea and Japan. *Rail of the Star* is available in mainstream video stores. Or consult the website of A.D.V. films at: www.advfilm.com ●