

Hugh, Soo, dir. *Pachinko*. Season 1. Aired 2022 on Apple TV+.

When the novel *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee came out, a friend of mine—a third-generation Japanese American—suggested I read the book. The first thought I had was, “I wish somebody would turn this into a drama.” I hoped someone would portray the stories of minorities, which are often mystified yet remain on the margins of society, and thus give life to these stories. Five years after the book was published, Apple TV+ filmed a story of four generations of a Korean family and offered it through a streaming service. It is a drama titled *Pachinko* and is based on Lee’s novel.

As an immigrant living in the United States, my story resembles those of characters in *Pachinko* in many ways. It sounds far-fetched and even unfair to compare the story of my life—as a female Korean immigrant in the U.S. in the twenty-first century—to the story of a Korean family living in Japan during the period of Japanese colonialism, more specifically that of the period of the collapse of the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) and of the short-lived Korean Empire (1897–1910). I have to admit, however, that I had deep sympathy when I read the stories of the characters in *Pachinko* who had to endure hardship and who carried the feeling of loss as aliens in a foreign country.

I had a feeling in my gut that the pain of Sunja, the main character of *Pachinko*, was not foreign to me, an Asian minority living in the U.S. today. Immigrants uproot and transplant themselves into a new land as they leave their home country behind. Just as the survival of a plant is at stake when it is transplanted into a new environment in which the water, air, and nutrients are unfamiliar to that plant, the process of inculturation and accommodation is never easy.

Sunja, who had to endure much turmoil during the Pacific War, is the protagonist of *Pachinko*. It is mindboggling to imagine how difficult her life must have been. As for many others in that turbulent time, her life was full of tears and tragedy. Sunja had to witness Japanese brutality against the people of Joseon and endure the exploitation of the Korean peninsula by the Japanese Empire. She was haunted by the fear of being enlisted to be a sex slave (a.k.a. comfort woman) during the Pacific War. She was not educated because she was a woman. She was despised because she was a Korean. She lost her husband, Isak Baek, because he refused to recant his faith and join the mandatory Shinto ceremony. Though it has not happened yet in the television series, the patriarchal system and societal injustice cost Sunja her son.

It is nearly impossible to watch *Pachinko* in peace and tranquility. It is heartbreaking to follow the life of Sunja, who has to bear the enormous weight of history on top of family loss and tragedy. Surely, survival was the priority for Sunja and subsequent generations. This requires the audience to remember their own stories as living history by bringing their own lives and hardships to light.

*Pachinko* begins with Joseon under Japanese colonialism in the 1920s. Koreans have often associated this period with the March 1<sup>st</sup> Independence Movement, forced labor, forced mobilization, comfort women, material extortion, torture, spying, surveillance, etc. I often wonder, “One hundred years later, we have these keywords. But, is this really what the 1920s was all about?” History remembered by keywords is like an animal preserved by a taxidermist. We should be afraid when history is taxidermized because then it loses its life—it stops breathing. History that is not alive means nothing to me. No matter what is written in this type of history, it becomes a story that happened in a distant time and space. It has no relevance and no significance. It slips away from our memory. Breathless history, therefore, has no life. It is dead.

The television drama *Pachinko* breathes life into taxidermized history and turns it into a living being. Layers of history, which we were previously unable to identify and clarify because they were bundled up and hidden underneath the surface, are carefully unfolded and brought to light. There comes a time when a story in history is not floating in the air but hitting home. That is when the breath hidden between the layers of time comes out and carries its message to us in a story.

History cannot be restored, as the people of the past wished later generations would know, until people's faces and voices emerge. This living, breathing history in its story form is impossible to capture when we merely memorize dates and places. *Pachinko* is not the story of a hero who overcame hardship and despair. Rather, it is the story of ordinary people—"life as an event"—beginning with Sunja, whose life was uprooted at a tragic point in history, and continuing with the subsequent three generations of her family. When we pay attention to the story of an individual, history finds its rightful location in a given time.

If you would like to learn about important historical issues—how to understand the modern history between Korea and Japan, including comfort women and forced labor, how World War II impacted Korea and Japan, how Koreans are discriminated against by Japanese in Japan, why conflicts between Korea and Japan still continue in the twenty-first century, and above all how hard immigrants struggle to survive in a foreign land—I highly recommend that you watch the drama *Pachinko*. Sunja's story will definitely answer your questions.

Apple TV+ has released season 1 of *Pachinko*, with 8 episodes. I am looking forward to the forthcoming stories that will be screened soon. I am waiting for the stories of real people who struggled and survived in the past. When I watch *Pachinko*, I sense the breath of history coming back to life. It is not a lifeless history buried in letters. Rather, it is a living history that we all need to remember—a story of people like me who struggle to live and thrive in the face of difficulty and challenge.

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