

'Parasite' and Viewing a Film in One's Imagination to Overcome Cultural Barriers

Incheol Son
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You may be curious about the Korean movie "Parasite." The film and its director, Bong Joon Ho, won Best Picture and Best Director at the Academy Awards in February. Bong and "Parasite" also won Oscars for Best Original Screenplay and Best International Feature Film.

Their winning streak began at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival last May by winning the Palme d'Or. Wins followed at the Golden Globe Awards, the Screen Actors Guild Award (for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture), and the British Academy Film Awards, to name a few. "Parasite" became the first South Korean film to receive an Oscar, as well as the first in a language other than English to win Best Picture.



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"Parasite," or "*Gisaengchung*" (기생충) in Korean, was Bong's descent into the "real world" from his previous films about social inequality such as "Snowpiercer" (2013) and "Okja" (2017). "Snowpiercer" was impressive because well-known Western actors and actresses were cast. I wondered, "Did they follow Bong's direction with respect in every scene?" Later I learned they respected him a lot.

As Bong said, winning the Best Picture Oscar would not have been possible without the long-running success of the globalization of Korean culture or *hallyu* (한류, the Korean Wave) over the past 20 years. Especially, the boy band BTS has swept the Western world for several consecutive years. The West is now ready to recognize a new kind of cultural expression. I'm reluctant, however, to say that "Parasite" is from the East. It's because the movie is rooted in Western culture as a motion picture. It's like riding in a Hyundai sedan but never thinking it's Korean.

Bong's Oscar wins did not surprise me since I first started conceiving that *hallyu* could matter. It was especially because of the popularity of BTS, whose lyrics have touched global fans including Western women. Likewise, "Parasite" has successfully touched something in common among viewers around the world. K-Film has now made history on top of other big successes such as K-Drama (TV), K-Pop (music), K-Beauty, etc. It's true that "the most personal is the most creative" as Bong quoted Martin Scorsese in his Best Director Oscar acceptance speech expressing full of admiration for the legendary American director sitting in the audience (competing for the same award).

In many respects a black comedy, "Parasite" follows the four members of a once-middle class family, the Kims, who have fallen on hard times and now live in a cramped, damp, semi-basement apartment. They exploit a sudden opportunity and scheme to become employed as household help by a very wealthy family, the Parks, through infiltrating their home, posing as unrelated, highly-qualified individuals. From

there, the plot takes several unexpected and dramatic twists and turns.

Moviegoers should try this approach, which may seem a bit unusual but works well in my experience. Try first watching "Parasite" not on the big screen (or streamed on TV) but in the theater of your imagination. To do so, read the English *screenplay* of the movie (although the film's final English subtitles slightly differ as they were directly translated from Korean). The script contains only the dialogue with some scene description. But, soon you will become a director like Bong and set up each scene line-by-line in your mind.

One of the barriers in going forward to universal values is culture itself. Though very attractive to the world, Korean culture may also hinder a grasping of universal value. If so, we would do better to put it aside, to paraphrase Buddha. A unique culture can be maintained as far as it's helpful to understand what is behind a message. But unique cultural characteristics can also keep you from clearly understanding a message.

In Korea, Bong has re-released "Parasite" in a black and white edition. Removing the film's color is simply an artistic experiment, reminiscent of older black and white movies, but he believes this version will enable viewers to better focus on the action along with the dialogue that bears his messages.

About two-thirds through the movie, it turns from a black comedy into a dramatic thriller. The semi-basement lower-class family members invade the unsuspecting upper-class family by destroying their decent life little-by-little, just like a parasite. The most important sequence in the film is the "Belt of Trust" setup, in which the individual members of the Kim family quickly become employed in the Park household as tutors, chauffeur and housekeeper.

Something reminds viewers of how real trust is created. The parasitic Kims may be a bit exaggerated or over-simplified but the message in describing the family this way is clear: we are all unconsciously interconnected. Actually it's never easy to excise absolute evil from normality. And so, the poor eventually make us poor as long as they remain poor. That means we live on common ground, the earth, as interconnected beings, as *Divine Principle* states. A parasite becomes part of one's bodily system and thus eventually a life form in itself. It's ironic to feed a parasite for us to enjoy a happy life.

People are not born equal at all, as symbolically and so clearly described also in Bong's "Snowpiercer." Much like "Snowpiercer" with its segregated train compartments, the contrary setting between the grimy semi-basement and lavish mansion in "Parasite" vertically represents social hierarchy. I don't want to give away spoilers, but wish to respect director Bong's plea "to refrain as much as possible from revealing how the story unfolds."

Meanwhile, we must recognize who stood behind director Bong. Executive producer Miky Lee, a Samsung family heiress, heavily invested in the movie. This is why "Parasite" garnered so many film festival awards since last May. The movie speaks of social inequality. Yet the conglomerate, Samsung, characterized by the notorious term *chaebol* (재벌) in Korean, has long enjoyed unbalanced and preferential benefits from the national wealth that has been built upon what some see as exploitation of the public. Many critics call Samsung a state in itself, dubbing it the "Republic of Samsung." Madam Lee will enjoy all the fruits like any other investor. It was her instinct to recognize Bong's talent and invest in him and his picture. She surely deserved the central spot on stage last month during presentation of the Best Picture Oscar. A movie cannot be created without funding. Capital makes it all possible. That's an irony behind "Parasite."

Korean politicians have suddenly jumped on the "Parasite" bandwagon for the upcoming National Assembly elections in April. Koreans ridicule such a tendency with this expression: "Trying to put (just) a spoon on the table to eat," meaning they are like free-riders. One politician proposed building a museum exclusively for Bong and another suggested preserving his birthplace home. One thing is clear: they know the public is very proud of him and want to capitalize on it.

Ironically, not long ago Bong was blacklisted and put under domestic surveillance by previous administrations, which compelled him instead to spend considerable time in Hollywood, where he befriended famed American directors like Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino. Nonetheless, Bong refused such treatment proposed by the politicians and requested any commemoration of his work be discussed only after his death.

Another irony is he was born in Daegu, the epicenter in South Korea for the coronavirus (COVID-19) epidemic. In a sense, the coronavirus behaves also like a parasite that requires a host. It spread rapidly throughout the country mostly emanating from Daegu, centered on members of a controversial evangelical church called *Shincheonji* (신천지), literally meaning "New Heaven and Earth." Its members have been notorious for infiltrating other churches to recruit new members. This time it became an outright physical threat to society. It's been a long time since such religious organizations have caused worry for the South Korea public. That church has become nationally known as the real parasite.

Meanwhile the number of confirmed cases of the coronavirus in South Korea continues to mount.

A few weeks ago, Unificationists convened the great events commemorating the centenary of the birth of Rev. Sun Myung Moon and the 60th anniversary of the Holy Blessing of True Parents. The events had long been prepared and so the organizing committee was very concerned whether they should go forward or postpone them. Any single confirmed coronavirus case among participants would have caused huge blame to be poured on our movement, causing national disgrace. We reacted proactively and carefully screened all persons entering the facilities to our events. Since they took place in early February, we know of no confirmed case of the coronavirus among the tens of thousands of attendees who gathered at KINTEX, located in northwestern Seoul, and in Chung Pyung.



The official trailer for "Parasite" (courtesy Neon/CJ Entertainment)

Unificationists were entitled to gather last month to live for the sake of others, not to mention to do no harm to others. We are the "people who hope to live with others in a co-existent or symbiotic relationship" and "want to live a prosperous life together" in Bong's words. We are the dreamers eager to realize that ideal on earth. It's our strong commitment regardless of our actual capabilities.

As Bong admits, we live "in a world where co-existence is an increasingly difficult ideal to achieve." It's all because, as he says, "For people of different circumstances to live together in the same space is not easy." He laments that "humane relationships based on co-existence or symbiosis cannot hold, and one group is pushed into a parasitic relationship with another." He seems to be calling for cosmopolitanism by saying, "They are our neighbors, friends and colleagues, who have merely been pushed to the edge of a precipice."

After watching the movie in my imagination, a question has since been raised within me: "Are we free from such worries?" Religion can be so blind while chasing monetary contributions, building up new layers of hierarchies, and in effect creating more inequality. Former presidential candidate Andrew Yang's proposal for a "universal basic income" as the "freedom dividend" may be a potential means of overcoming severe income inequality. It focuses on guaranteeing human decency. No one should die of lack of resources; no one should starve due to lack of money. Society, whether government or civil society, should enable any individual to live a decent life.

In a sense, we may all be parasites to one another: the rich may exploit the poor in a system under the guise of legality. Then religion should function as the anti-systematic medium to take a countercurrent, that is, to encourage the voluntary flow of wealth from the upper-class to benefit the lower-class through various kinds of social capital such as scholarships, donations, mutual trust, etc. It naturally connects to the Universal Peace Federation's motto: interdependence, mutual prosperity and universal values. UPF has promoted these principles for a long time to bring about peaceful world.

We must look for a commonality that touches most of the globe: universal values. I think that values derive from the reflection of reality. It's like a hopeful desire which not only comes true in drama, film or religion, but also in the real world. Bong asks us whether "both sides can co-exist in a symbiotic relationship." It's our turn to cross the line to escape from remaining merely "local," as he describes. As one of "Parasite's" cast members confessed, it's not "Parasite" that crossed borders but the Oscars, and in so doing saved itself from being "local" or parochial.

Here's hope for our movement, as long as we can successfully deal with the "question of co-existence," in Bong's words, "that could very well take place in the real world," such as "the impossibility of people of

different classes living together in a symbiotic relationship." As long as we embrace universal values, we can win over people around the globe.

"Parasite" (rated R; Running time: 122 minutes). Directed by Bong Joon Ho; written by Bong Joon Ho and Han Jin-won. Main cast: Song Kang-ho, Lee Sun-kyun, Cho Yeo-jeong, Choi Woo-shik, Park So-dam, Lee Jung-eun, and Jang Hye-jin. See IMDb for full details. "Parasite" is currently in theaters and also can be streamed from iTunes, Amazon Prime Video and YouTube Movies, among others. It will be on Hulu in early April..

Dr. Incheol Son is the International Director of PWWA International and also works at SunHak Universal Peace Graduate University as a translator. He earned his Ph.D. in public administration from Kookmin University, an MBA from the University of Bridgeport, and his bachelor's in theology from SunMoon University.

Photo at top: *The Kim family folding pizza boxes to earn money in a scene from "Parasite" (courtesy Neon/CJ Entertainment).*