

## Parasite Korean Style

Michael Downey  
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Ah well, it was a huge night at the Oscars with Bong Joon Ho sweeping the major categories, including best picture and best director, for Parasite. It is, of course, very popular here in Korea. Anything that is produced in Korea and is recognized internationally is a great source of pride.

The movie itself is an indictment of the rigidly, stratified social, and class reality in Korea. The question is; is it an accurate portrayal? Maybe so but it has all the elements of identity politics so I cringe at the message.

Modern day Korea, after its miraculous rise to an economic and cultural powerhouse after the devastation of colonialism and war, is facing an identity crisis. If one's value is based solely on having lots of things, then lots of people are gonna be unhappy. Many folks are finding themselves stacking up at the bottom while the wealthy and elite are enjoying life in full view of the rest. How annoying.

Those stacking up at the bottom, at first glance, are the young people. After sacrificing their carefree youth on the altar of academic success, even if

they get into a top university, their future is not guaranteed. Korean society is nothing if not hyper competitive. That getting a prestigious well paying job isn't easy. Men are often out competed in school and in the job market. They are unemployed and under-employed. They are not attractive to more successful women and often give up on romance.

An increasing number of women don't want to and men can't get married. The result is the dismal declining birth rate. Good thing there are video games or young men wouldn't know what to do with their lives.

Just below the surface are the less than young who also have reached the limit of their ability to compete. Folks often are stuck working in regular jobs, God forbid, with no clear path for advancement. Then there are the elders who sell food stuffs on the sidewalk or collect recyclables. Those that do so have no expectations for a fine car, upscale apartment, or trips abroad. From what I've observed they just carry on in quiet dignity.

Such social and economic inequality could be said to be the inevitable result of modern free-market economies. A hundred years ago 98% of Koreans were equally poor. Today there is a wide gap between the have it all at the top and the rest of us. It just ain't fair, is it? What really pisses folks off is; those at

the top are often perceived as being there because of some form of privileged status. If their grandparents were rumored to have been part of those who collaborated with the Japanese during the dark night of colonialism, then you got a perfectly good reason to hate them.

The real cause of inequality is not so obvious. In any culture or society, some folks are going to rise to the top, whether due to talent, ability, luck, or power. Many more people are going to stack up at or near the bottom. In terms of wealth, accumulation of material, and even status, There doesn't seem to be a simple solution. It is clear that radical solutions like Marxism and it's kid brother socialism are not gonna solve the problem. We already know through bloody experience that these radical utopian visions don't solve the problem of inequality but just put the most psychotic murderers at the top.

It's an undeniable fact that we live in a world that is much better than the one our forefathers inhabited one or more hundred years ago. Yet for a lot of us we are still not content or satisfied. This should give us a hint that contentment or even happiness doesn't come primarily from material things. If you are like me, you want your life to mean something.

Sure, we need the material things that sustain us in our shuffle across this mortal coil but if we expect them to make us happy we're likely to be disappointed. If we value others and ourselves by how much we have and the social status owning things conveys, we will become foolishly envious, resentful, angry, and under the right circumstances, murderous.

On the other hand, if we value character and virtue in ourselves and in others the most, then we are more likely to strive for the best but avoid the envy and resentment that comes from blaming others for where I am. This point of view is primarily found in the realm of religion. Most religion is concerned with redemption, salvation, and justification. Folks often turn to religion because of the deep seated feeling that I am not enough, not all I should be, and thus in need of redemption.

A good example is Marxism. You probably never thought that communism was about salvation but it is. The entire system is built on a view of the history of class struggle. The reason you are miserable is because you are being oppressed by someone. Redemption is to eliminate the enemies of your class. Problem is you never run out of enemies. With religion, Christianity in particular, the problem is me. I'm the sinner, I've fallen short of my aim, and redemption starts when I repent and re-aim. We've been contesting the details for a long time now.

I got no problem with movies dealing with and pointing out problems in society. It's their job. I surely don't think we should jump to the easy answer that the government has the solution to complicated issues like social and economic inequality. Instead, I believe the answers have to come from the individual. We each have to find value in our lives by developing our character, pursuing virtue, and taking responsibility for ourselves and the world around us.

Congratulations Bong Joon Ho on your achievement. If you want to study English, I'm available and I got a great novel about Korea that could be your next project.