

Class Solidification and "Korean-Style" Dilemma

-- Analysis of Metaphors in the Film Parasite

Jialin Yang

University of International Business and Economics, Beijing 100029, China

Yangjl201712@163.com

Abstract

In 2019, the film *Parasite* directed by Bong Joon Ho drew great attention from the whole world and won multiple awards such as the Golden Palm and Oscar Best Picture. In addition to the ingenious artistic techniques applied in the film, the realistic problems of Korean society behind it have aroused people's in-depth thinking. There are many symbolic metaphors throughout the film, such as architectural space, smell, stone, etc. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the above metaphors combining with the specific plots in the film and get the detailed implications of a real Korea. Secondly, this paper will look into the causes of this class solidification dilemma, mainly from the perspectives of history and culture, politics and economy, and the values and ideologies of different classes in South Korea.

Keywords

Parasite; Symbolic Metaphor; Class Dilemma; Korea; Bong Joon Ho.

1. Introduction

At the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020, Korean director Bong Joon Ho received four awards including "Best Picture" with his work *Parasite*, which has undoubtedly created a new record, exceeding everyone's imagination. As the former president Moon Jae-in congratulated on the social platform: "The four Oscars owned by *Parasite* are the result of the continuous efforts of all Korean filmmakers in the past century". Indeed, from Hollywood to South Korea, Korean film and television creators have been looking for the best way to localize the Hollywood elements. Many of them have integrated the Hollywood narrative style into the discussion of Korean society, family, human nature and many other topics [5]. And Bong Joon Ho, majoring in Sociology himself, is no exception. His previous works: *Snowpiercer*, *Gwoemul*, *Memories of Murder*, or the recent *Parasite*, all reflect the social problems of South Korea, and the most common theme is the stories of the lower-class people [8].

The reason why *Parasite* has achieved great success is not only because of its realistic content, but also many outstanding and noteworthy artistic designs. For example, his use of different lights and colors is an allusion to the class differences. The place where wealthy Mr. Park and his family live is full of sunshine, while the basement where the lower-class Kim Ki-taek and his family live is very dark. Similarly, the film is also good at using either passionate or calm background music to express contradictions between the rich and the poor. In short, there are many elements in the film that deserve further analysis. Therefore, this paper will carry out an intensive study of major metaphors in the film to help the audience thoroughly understand the phenomenon of class solidification and contradictions in the Korean society, which is the current "Korean-style" dilemma.

2. Analysis of Metaphors in Parasite

Even though the theme of the film *Parasite* is straightforwardly presented to the audience, there are still many symbolic metaphors in the setting of the plot and the characters. According to director Bong Joon Ho's usual style, it's obvious that the symbols in his works tend to reflect the real world through allegorization. Therefore, a series of metaphors in *Parasite* are worth discussing. This paper will analyze some of the representative metaphors in the film as follows.

2.1. Architectural Space

The design of the architectural space in the film has many implications, and the most obvious one is the use of "high place" and "low place" to express the class gap between the rich and the poor [1]. The rich live in high places where the warm sunshine is always available. The poor live in low places where phones can be connected to Wi-Fi only by holding high in the air.

In the middle part of the film, there is an intriguing scene: when the Ki-taek family fled home from the villa during the rainstorm, director Bong intentionally extended the time span of this screen and added numbers of "going downstairs" elements in it. The Ki-taek family's moving from the "high place" to the "low place" further strengthens the gap between the two classes and manifests the dream breaking process of the Ki-taek family.

The "villa" where Mr. Park's family live in has the same space implications since most of the scenes in the film took place in it. Although the villa is built on a higher ground, it also has different classifications inside. For example, the second floor of the villa is the most "harmonious" place where bad things rarely happen. The rich family rest here, and Ki-woo and Ki-jung (the brother and sister in the poor family) pretend as teachers here to teach children from this rich family. Different from the second floor, the first floor is the living room and has a lawn outside where many conflicts and crimes occur. It is also the place where the Ki-taek family and the housekeeper couple (Moon-gwang and her husband, who has long been hiding at the basement of the villa) quarreled with each other. The last murder scene also happened on the lawn outside the villa. Such spatial classification does not end at the first floor. Under the villa, there is a basement that the rich family did not ever know. This is the last "parasitic" place for the housekeeper and also for Ki-taek. Certainly, it is a place full of hidden crimes. The above architectural space metaphor reflects the reality in today's Korea: the life of the lower social class is much darker and more unbearable.

2.2. Smell

The film has repeatedly portrayed Mr. Park and his wife's dislike of the smell of the Ki-taek family. The "smell" here not only refers to the bad smell of the Ki-taek family, but also represents their invisible "smell of poverty". It is a symbol to distinguish the rich from the poor, and an indelible humiliation buried in the Ki-taek family. At Mr. Park's youngest son's birthday party, Moon-gwang's husband Geun-sae, who had been parasitic in the basement of the villa for years, walked to the outdoor lawn with a knife and killed Ki-jung. And in the midst of chaos, Ki-taek saw Mr. Park's cold reaction towards Geun-sae's "bad smell" - which was also the smell of the Ki-taek family. At that moment, the discontent that had long been buried in his heart prompted and led him to kill Mr. Park in the end. Here, the "smell" of the Ki-taek family and Moon-gwang couple finally became the incentive of violence.

Because at the birthday party, only Ki-taek and Moon-gwang's husband had a "smell", the destinies of these two poor families were intertwined at that moment. Despite their previous resentment, the current sympathy for each other made them form an alliance. Perhaps for director Bong, violence is an irresistible "smell" of poverty that really exists at the bottom of society. When it finally emerges on the surface, it will uncontrollably go across the border and hurt both the poor and the rich.

2.3. Stone

The metaphor of "stone" in *Parasite* penetrates the whole story. The stone sent by Ki-woo's friend is the turning point of the fate of the family. At first, it symbolized good luck, since the tutoring work introduced by Ki-woo's friend did make the whole family successfully work in Mr.Park's home. Their fate began to change since then. However, dramatically, Ki-woo was injured by this stone in the end. And at last, Ki-woo chose to put the stone back into the lake, returning it to its original position.

In the film, "stone" has a surreal image, symbolizing the dream and plan of the Ki-taek family. On the night of the rainstorm, after returning home, they found that their basement had been submerged by sewage. However, in the despair, this heavy "stone" floated on the water surface against the common sense. As Ki-woo said, "it's not that I stick to it. It's this stone that sticks to me all the time." However, the stone finally led to the tragedy. When Ki-woo carried the stone to the basement to kill Geun-sae, he was instead injured heavily by the stone. At the end of the story, when Ki-woo gave up all the unrealistic fantasies of trying to become an upper-class member and put the stone back into the lake, the stone at this time could naturally sink to the bottom of the water. The truth and falsehood of the stone are uncertain, which makes people wonder whether it is possible for the poor to become wealthy and live a happy life. After all, their family has been moving towards the final tragedy ever since they had a plan and fantasies. The metaphor of "stone" implies that people of the lower class cannot have the illusion of breaking through the class stratification.

3. Analysis of Reasons for Class Solidification

In South Korea, there is a "spoon class theory" [10], in which people are classified into different levels described as "gold spoon", "silver spoon", and "copper spoon". The theory directly represents the serious issue of social class solidification in today's Korea. The causes can be analyzed from the following three aspects: history and culture, politics and economy, and class consciousness.

3.1. History and Culture

As a small country, South Korea was a subsidiary country of China dated back to the Han Dynasty. Therefore, its history and culture are deeply influenced by China. In Han Dynasty, China implemented a hierarchical system called "the Three Councillors of State and the Nine Ministers". Learning from this, Korea's hierarchical system divided all subjects into four classes, from the rich noble people to the lowest poor people. As a result, their awareness of class differences originated from that time. Moreover, since the Joseon Dynasty, Korea has implemented the "motherhood law", which means children can only follow their mother's status. This means that no matter how high the position their father holds and how noble his status is, as long as the status of the mother is low, the status of the child is low. Since women cannot change their status through the imperial examination, if they are born with a low status, they can only stay in the original class throughout their lives. Therefore, the next generation can hardly change their status, and only through the efforts of several generations may they change that.

In addition to the system, the Korean culture is also deeply influenced by China, and the most important of which is the Confucian culture. Compared with the Ming Dynasty, South Korea's respect for Confucianism and Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism is even stronger [2]. In ancient China, on the one hand, Confucianism emphasized the differences in generation, age, gender and patriarchal relations. But on the other hand, it also emphasized that status should be distinguished by talent, knowledge, morality and intelligence. Therefore, social classes in China can actually be circulated. However, in South Korea, people not only promoted Confucianism

but also formed a system similar to India's "Caste System", which strictly distinguished Brahman, Kshatriya, Vedas, Sudra and the untouchables without any circulation. This is the crucial reason why South Korea has formed a stricter hierarchical system than the ancient China.

3.2. Politics and Economy

Since the 1960s, South Korea has been on the road of modernization, and its economy is developing rapidly. However, with a series of problems of political reforms, government transformation and financial crisis, the social structure of South Korea is also undergoing tremendous changes, and the problem of class solidification is becoming increasingly serious.

In particular, the financial crisis breaking out in 1997 has brought profound changes to the society, whose influence remains to the present. At that time, the national economy was on the verge of collapse. Therefore, the Kim Dae Jung government adopted the "Neo-liberal Policy" to carry out various reforms [11]. With the intervention of the International Monetary Fund, South Korea was forced to open its domestic financial and labor markets, which exacerbated the polarization of the middle class. On the one hand, compared with large enterprises such as Samsung, LG and Hyundai, which account for half of the Korean economy, it is increasingly difficult for small and medium-sized enterprises to survive. On the other hand, most of the working-class groups that do not need professional skills are facing a cruel unemployment problem. This is because when the labor market is forced to open, other cheap labors from Southeast Asian countries have become their largest competitive group. In addition, many small and medium-sized companies have been closed down, and the number of unemployed workers is quite large. What makes this situation even worse is that the state has not well protected the vulnerable groups and has not effectively played the role of the government in promoting the smooth transformation of society.

Therefore, under such background, the phenomenon of class solidification in Korean society is becoming more and more obvious and is still difficult to change. The Korean academics call it a "vertical class structure", which leads to the phenomena such as "separation" and "social closure" described by Pierre Bourdieu and Max Weber [4]. The public, having a sense of separation, are averse to the rich upper class and thus further deepen the class contradictions.

3.3. Class Consciousness

Besides the influence of history and culture, politics and economy, there are also deeper reasons for the increasing class gap - the difference in the ideology and values between the classes. Since the 1980s, Korean scholars have noticed that the political attitudes of different classes also matter, and started to conduct researches.

They found that the upper class will pay more attention to personal initiative, power, hedonism, benevolence and achievement in terms of values, and relatively neglect the values of safety, compliance, and tradition [16]. Based on their own interests, they all support the Neo-liberal Policy. For the middle class, most of them support stable progress in politics and economy, but do not support rapid social changes. Finally, what is beyond our imagination is that the poor class also have a strong sense of cultural identity, so they do have certain confidence in the country. So far as democratic voting is concerned, the poor sometimes do not vote for progressive political parties that represent their interests, but instead support the conservative party [11]. This phenomenon was particularly evident in the 2012 presidential election, when many poor class groups voted for Park Geun-hye, a candidate of the conservative party. This is also because the Korean government has introduced such conservative moral values into the society, making the lower class willing to sacrifice their own economic interests to a certain extent to maintain national security and social order.

Secondly, for the poor class, education is considered to be the only way to achieve class leap-over. However, since the financial crisis, the stratification problem has become more and more

serious, and the competition in education has become severe day by day. The fierce competition in education has led to the proliferation of private education, making it more difficult for the poor to receive the same education [14]. Nowadays, the rise of the class can no longer be achieved by individual efforts. For example, the Korean TV series *SKY Castle*, which gained hot discussion in 2018, talks about a series of unimaginable “efforts” made by parents of Korean upper class to let their children go to SKY University. The reason why this TV series can get such high ratings is that its authenticity has aroused many people's resonance. We can see from it that wealth has already become a necessary and determinant factor of education, which makes the class leap-over even unrealistic.

4. Conclusion

The film *Parasite* shows a class-solidified society through its straightforward theme and delicate descriptions, and further evokes the society's rethinking of people's livelihood issues through various metaphors in the film. And such a Korean-style dilemma cannot be explained by a single reason. As early as in ancient Korea, people of the Joseon Dynasty were already classified and it was difficult to cross between classes. In the process of modernization, especially after the financial crisis, neo-liberal economic policies have made the polarization of Korean society more serious. This paper also analyzes the deeper reasons of the class solidification: because people of all classes have a strong sense of cultural identity, which makes the poor class willing to sacrifice themselves to a certain extent to protect national interests. These reasons add up to explain why the Korean society has become a "vertical class structure", and such imbalance has become a thorny problem for the country.

References

- [1] Chen Pengyu, Lin Yingzi. A brief analysis of the metaphor of modern architecture in movie scenes: Taking the movie "Parasite" as an example [J], *Perspective Research*, 2021(13), 2.
- [2] Huan Wei. The slave-maid system of the Joseon Dynasty under the background of "Huahua" and "Town Customs" [D]. Nanjing University, 2013.
- [3] Jin Suxi, Nan Dongzhe, Yang Liang. Times, Politics and Society: On Feng Junhao's Creation [J]. *Contemporary Films*, 2020(4).
- [4] Li Jin. Marx's class theory and Weber's theory of social stratification [J]. *Sociological Research*, 1993(2):8.
- [5] Ma Xiaoyi. The successful experience and enlightenment of Korean films--From the time when "Parasite" won the Oscar [J]. *China Radio and Television*, 2020(8):4.
- [6] Sun Haoran. An Interpretation of the Symbols of Class Mobility Anxiety in the Korean Movie "Parasite" [J]. *Mang Zhong*, 2020(7):3.
- [7] Wang Jiayuan. "Parasite"'s Realistic Observation on the Problem of Class Opposition in Korea [J]. *Western Journal*, 2020(15):3.
- [8] Xiong Fang. From "Snowpiercer" to "Parasite": A Study of "Class" Aesthetics in Director Feng Junhao's Works [J]. *Film Literature*, 2020(14):5.
- [9] Xu Yujiao, Guo Hong. Korean Reality Movies from the Perspective of Social History Criticism: Taking "Parasite" as an Example [J]. *Daguan*, 2021(4):124-125.
- [10] Xue Yangda. The "Spoon Class" in South Korea [J]. *Financial Expo*, 2017(24):2.
- [11] Yan Fei, Cui Elihe. The characteristics and trends of social stratification in South Korea [J]. *Foreign Theoretical Trends*, 2020(4):9.
- [12] Yin Kexin. "Parasite": A Class Fable in Korea [J]. *Western Radio and Television*, 2020(8):2.
- [13] Zhao Chunxia. Metaphors and Symbolic Art in Movies--Taking Angelopoulos's Movies as an Example [J]. *Film Review*, 2009(14):30-31.

- [14] Zhao Tongyou, Li Zhongjue. The Social and Cultural Code of Korean Education Craze--Analysis from the Perspective of Cultural Construction and Decoding [J]. Foreign Education Research, 2012(6):6.
- [15] Zhao Xiaofang. On the absurd writing of class antagonism in "Parasite" [J]. Film Literature, 2020(3).
- [16] Li Wei. A Comparative Study of Social Class Consciousness in China and Korea[J]. Sociological Research, 2004(5):16.