

Using *Parasite's* Scholar's Stone (水石) in a Critical Race Decoding of Racism and Class

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Abstract

The 'Scholar's Stone' (*Suseok* 수석 水石) which is used as an extensive and pervasive motif in Bong Joon-ho's 2019 film reveals a good deal of what the concept of 'intersectionality' in Critical Race Theory (CRT) seeks to uncover. The Scholar's Stone functions also as a prism to see refracted through the movie the various hues and colors of Confucian culture still present in contemporary Korea, and these in turn can be further analyzed using aspects of CRT. To ground this thesis, I employ the established cultural anthropology concepts of 'fundamental values and root paradigms' along with 'excess of meaning' and 'fusion of horizons' from hermeneutical theory. These considerations can broaden our cross-cultural perspectives in both directions and facilitate some helpful cross-fertilization that may nurture both inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural analysis and synthesis.

2019년 봉준호 감독의 영화에서 광범위하게 사용된 모티브인 '수석 水石'은 비판인종이론(CRT)의 '교차성' 개념이 밝혀내고자 하는 것이 무엇인지를 상당 부분 드러낸다. 선비의 돌인 수석은 현대 한국에 여전히 존재하는 유교 문화의 다양한 양상들을 영화를 통해 굴절시키는 프리즘 역할을 하며, 이는 비판인종이론으로 통해 더 자세히 분석할 수 있다. 특히 본 논문은 수석의 의미를 이해하기 위해 해석학 이론의 '의미 과잉' 및 '지평의 융합', '근본적 가치와 뿌리 패러다임'이라는 문화 인류학 개념을 사용한다. 이러한 고려 사항은 우리의 범문화적 관점을 양방향으로 확장하고 학제 간 및 문화 간 분석과 종합을 고양시키기 위한 교차연구를 촉진할 수 있다.

Key words

Confucianism, Five Relationships, Critical Race Theory, Fundamental Values Hallyu, Suseok

Introduction: The Global Significance of the Korean Wave *Hallyu*

Bong Joon Ho's 2019 film *Parasite* made cinema history not only for its impressive list of awards, including the Academy Awards Oscar for Best Picture but for its condemnation by Donald J. Trump, the then President of the United States. At a big political rally in Colorado a week after the

2020 92nd Academy Awards, President Trump lamented, to roaring crowd approval, that the “American” Academy Awards had no absolutely business giving the Oscar for Best Picture to a “foreign” film.¹ Instead, Trump argued, the award should have gone to some American film, “ideally” one like the 1939 *Gone with the Wind*, which was a heavily romanticized retelling of the Civil War laden with a number of quite racist tropes and stereotypes.

Neither the Academy of Motion Pictures nor the majority of American voters seemed to have been convinced by Trump’s nativist rants, as the very next year Lee Isaac Chung’s *Minari* (meaning ‘water celery’) achieved both critical and financial success, scoring six Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Score, Best Original Screenplay, Best Actor (Steven Yeun), and Best Supporting Actress (Youn Yuh-jung, who went on to win the Oscar).

Clearly, the soft power Korean Wave *Hallyu* has reached foreign shores all around the world, as can be easily verified with so many other media successes, from PSY’s *Gangnam Style*, the first music video to reach over 1 billion views, to the “Army” of followers of K-Pop groups like the “Bullet Proof Boy Band” BTS as well as Netflix hit series such as *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* to Joseon dynasty period pieces like *100 Days My Prince* and *Rookie Historian Goo Hae-ryung*. The international audiences for all of these media hits continue to grow² and are no longer limited to Koreans living abroad or those who have had some prior experience living in the Hermit Kingdom. The ripple effect of the Hallyu has even penetrated the hallowed halls of academia.³

What we now are witnessing as well are the ongoing dynamics of what might be termed “reciprocal cross-fertilization” of the ripple and wake effects of the Korean Hallyu in which certain key elements in globalization spread out and influence each other in turn. Thus, we see that features of many Korean cultural artifacts, such as its media, are both influenced and are influenced in turn by similar media in other parts of the world. An easy example would be the phenomenal success of K-Pop groups such as BTS, which came about at least in part to that group’s uncanny skill to both mirror and model this genre as it was developed elsewhere and continues to develop around the world as well.⁴

Critical Race Theory (CRT): Racism Refined and Redefined in *Parasite*

While plot summaries and reviews of *Parasite* are easily found online, for the purposes of this article it is sufficient to note it is the story of two families—the impoverished Kims who are subsistence-economy gig workers living in a subterranean garden-level apartment (*banjiha*), and the wealthy Parks who enjoy upper-class luxury of a spectacular expansive home set in an enclosed estate in a very upscale Seoul neighborhood. Symbolism is strong from the first moments of the family as the Kims first latch on to the ‘free’ wi-fi of a neighboring coffee shop, to leaving their windows open to

get ‘free,’ though suffocating, fumigation from the city’s efforts to exterminate unwanted bugs—‘parasites’ on a different level. In fairly short order, the Kims are able to cleverly insert themselves one-by-one into the employ of Parks as tutors, chauffeur, and housekeeper. It would seem on the most obvious level that the Kims are the ‘parasites’ living off the Parks, but as the movie unfolds the viewers see that at best the relationship is reciprocal symbiosis with each family living off the other in significant ways.

Stark portrayal of the income disparity is obvious in the film and this has led many commentators to interpret the movie largely in terms of a capitalist critique of contemporary Korea.⁵ Without denying these assessments, it is my thesis that in fact a sharper and more probative interpretive lens can be found in the concept of intersectionality in Critical Race Theory (CRT). As a noun intersectionality refers to the ways in which various constructed social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, etc. intersect in their reference to given individuals or groups within a society. As used in CRT intersectionality adds the perspective of how these social constructs are intersect in either creating or maintaining overlapping, interdependent systems which can effect, maintain, or perpetuate discrimination or disadvantage in a variety of social institutions.

CRT began in the United States in the post-1960’s Civil Rights era to look more deeply at how economic and legal systems contributed to the perpetuation of racist structures in American society. However, because there is no single, sharp definition of CRT the mean mention of the term has now become a lightning rod in the increasing polarized contemporary American political sphere. Conservatives, especially those allied with the right-wing of the Republican Party, seek to blunt critiques of entrenched race-class power dynamics in the American South and proposed accommodations by first linking these efforts as inappropriate use of the academic social theory, and then seeking to outlaw its use in any area under state governmental control.⁶ While many would associate CRT with biologically based racial critiques, the broader concept of intersectionality can be separated out to shed light on some of *Parasite*’s class critique. However, before turning explicitly to this use of CRT we need to first outline a couple of key concepts from cultural anthropology and hermeneutical theory.

“Fundamental Values” is a long-established in cultural anthropology whose stipulative definition differs from the meaning of a “basic, important value.”⁷ In the linguistic milieu of cultural studies, Fundamental Values are NOT high order ethical principles, but rather furnish a complex description of our culturally formed worldview of how the universe “is” or at least “ought” to be.⁸ Fundamental Values thus are the sub-conscious assumptions, values, premises, etc. that usually are both implicit and unquestioned in our cultural worldviews. For example, “egalitarianism” is a “fundamental value” in American culture, and expressed in a variety of root paradigm institutions and social mores, such as “one person, one vote,” “first come, first served,” and jury by one’s peers. In other cultures, though both these individual fundamental values and their accompanying root paradigms likely would be different.⁹

In Korea, many of these Fundamental Values and corresponding Root Paradigms are grounded in Confucianism and Buddhism, and still exist today, and remain often like the Kim family's banjiha apartment at least partially out of view and underground. *Parasite* gives good evidence of Fundamental Values/Root Paradigms found in most Confucian cultures.¹⁰ Along with Fundamental Values and Root Paradigms, another aspect of hermeneutical theory evident in *Parasite* are the concepts of "excess of meaning" and "fusion of horizons" that are present in semiotically rich "classics." One of these "horizons" from the cultural past of Korea is the Confucian cultural backdrop against which the movie *Parasite* unfolds. While this particular horizon has not received all that much critical or scholarly attention, still unpacking this cosmology may aid us in tapping a bit more of the "excess of meaning" present within the movie—and therefore qualifies as a "classic" according to the criteria of hermeneutical theory.

The clearest initial fusion of horizons in the movie occurs with the arrival of Min-hyuk, an acquaintance of the Kim son (Ki-woo). He arrives on his own moped, quickly dispatches a drunk who is urinating outside the Kim family's window, and enters unbidden into their apartment bearing a rich ornate wooden box. This is a gift to Kim family and inside is the Scholar's Stone (Suseok, 수석, 水石). There are several levels of meaning in this gift-giving scene that frankly are rather lost in the movie's sub-titles translation. Unless one knows a bit more of the Korean language and culture it is hard to catch all that occurs in this first exchange. For example, it is impossible to translate fully into idiomatic English the rather flowery and formal language employed both on the part Min-hyuk and Mr. Kim in referring to Min-hyuk's grandfather and his gift.

Traditionally, in the Joseon Dynasty, a solitary Scholar's Stone¹¹ would be placed in the *Sarangbang*, the study room of a *yangban* (noble class of the Joseon Dynasty). Along with the artistic practice of calligraphy and poetry, cultivation and appreciation of these naturally occurring *suseok* rock formations was one of the marks of a proper Confucian yangban gentleman scholar.

In gifting this object to the Kims, Min-hyuk explains that his grandfather has been collecting these scholar's stones since his youth. Now they are stuffed and scattered throughout the house, upstairs, downstairs and in virtually every room. This "collection" hobby really does run counter to the careful austerity and minimalism of the traditional yangban scholar's study, and shows the failure of Min-hyuk's nouveau riche family to grasp the true aesthetic moral function of the Scholar's Stone. Ironically, in a certain sense, it is the Kim family, and especially Ki-woo who "get" the uniqueness and meaning of the Scholar's Stone. Of course this may be because they know they will never have a "collection" and they see this new possession as some sort of validation of their hopes of improving their social class status.

We see this motif carried over in the moments after the bestowal of the gift, and how it quickly becomes a prized possession—even a talisman—

for the family. It shows up in many of the shots of the life in the banjiha semi-subterranean apartment. As Ki-woo leaves for this tutoring job interview we see Mrs. Kim even scrubbing the Scholar's Stone—an action which would be a bit odd in terms of its normal, intended traditional use and placement in the Sarangbang. It's almost as if this cleansing ritual indicates that on some level the Kims suspected that no matter what the Scholar's Stone would never really "fit" into their lives.

A question arises as to just how Min-hyuk and Ki-woo established their acquaintance "friendship," given their obvious class and relative privilege differences. Public school might be one possibility, though it is more likely that they both did their compulsory military service at the same time and place. Both of these venues would provide a certain amount of "equalization" of social standing that otherwise would not be so promotive of this as a cultural value.

While the Fifth Confucian Relationship—"Between Friend and Friend there is fidelity (or faithfulness)"¹² usually is understood as being "egalitarian," this is not the case in the movie and often in Confucian culture as well. A key marker of creating and maintaining the 5th Relationship is the asking and responding to a *bu-tak*¹³ or "favor/request." After Min-hyuk presents the Scholar's Stone to the Kims, he and Ki-woo head to the corner convenience store (labeled in Korean as "*Uri Su-pa*" or "our supermarket"). These are "real" mom and pop type of enterprises still ubiquitous in poorer neighborhoods in large Korean cities.¹⁴ Of course, there is little that is "super" in this modest establishment—especially when compared later in the film to the luxurious high-end food and wine vendor Mrs. Park patronizes while procuring the comestibles for the ill-fated impromptu birthday party for their son Da-song. Mr. Kim joins her there, but only as a servant tasked with shouldering all of the items she has purchased in such a happy, carefree and spendthrift manner.

Returning to the corner Uri Su-pa mini-mart, it is interesting to observe that it is *not* the obviously more affluent Min-hyuk that pops for the snacks and a cheap bottle of *soju*¹⁵ but his more economically disadvantaged "friend" Kim Ki-woo. While there are certain elements in this scene that are probably "clear" to most audiences, other details might be caught only by those with some extended connection with Korea and/or Korean customs, such as the etiquette for serving the soju which Min-hyuk carelessly ignores, and Kim-Woo dutifully follows. This clearly is not a "friendship" of equals, but at best a transactional relationship in which Ki-woo has the weaker position. Certainly this is how Min-hyuk plays this encounter.

There are also lightly coded dynamics behind Min-hyuk's dialogue as lacking genuine friendship as well as the virtue of *shin* or "faithful trust." The viewers can see more clearly than Ki-woo himself the instances of hypocrisy, the low evaluation Min-hyuk has of him, and the use of the Scholar's Stone as a "bribe" or "manipulation" in executing this lop-sided *bu-tak*. In general a *bu-tak* has the clear nuance of a moral request that the one asking knows imposes a certain burden on the other person, who

hopefully will nevertheless magnanimously grant it. When Min-hyuk uses this word *bu-tak* to get Ki-woo to take over his job of tutoring the Park girl, he clearly is “flattering” Ki-woo to a point, granting him a slightly higher social status that they both “know” is not in fact the actual case. In reality, he believes Ki-woo would be a “safe” substitute that could never threaten Min-hyuk’s place in the hearts of the Park family as he goes off to the promised land of America to study.

This is also another illustration of the intersectionality framing concept of critical race theory evident in the plot line of the film. As the story develops we see the Scholar’s Stone intimately intertwined with these cultural Fundamental Values and Root Paradigms of Confucian moral cultivation. The goal of this self-cultivation is to become the archetypal Confucian “superior person” (*gun-ja*, literally “son of the ruler”).¹⁶ In Confucius’ view every person could become a “superior person” and no longer dependent on being born the offspring of the ruler. So it seems there is a certain “egalitarianism” built in theory to Confucian moral education. This cosmology of the Confucian Fundamental Values and Root Paradigms are metaphorically related to the employment of the symbol of the Scholar’s Stone. While a good deal of commentary on *Parasite* has focused on other symbolism used in the film, its critique of social class in Korea, income inequality, and related topics,¹⁷ very little attention actually has been given to probing the place of this principal symbol of the Scholar’s Stone within Korean culture itself.

While the Five Relationships (*O-ryun*) would be the fuller elaboration of the Confucian root paradigms, the Three Bonds (*Sam-Gang*) probably play a stronger role in the Korean ethos and clearly are foremost in the *Parasite* movie as well.¹⁸ In establishing the corresponding root paradigms to the Fundamental Value enshrined in the First Confucian Relationship between the Ruler and Ministers of State was the *Gwageo*, the civil service exam based on mastery of the Confucian classics. While this exam system no longer exists the current Korean University entrance exam preparation culture serves as a sort of contemporary reformulation of that bygone era.

Of course, in ancient times mastery depended on membership in a social class—a sort of non-biological “race” if you will—that was distinct from the “peoples” (*baek sung*)—in which education and leisure, as well as good tutelage were the inborn keys to privileged success. Here is where the perspective of CRT might be helpful, as through that lens we can see the necessary educational requisites for social advancement would not be readily available to those of the *baek sung* class, i.e., the non-*yangban*. It would be akin to Kim Ki-woo’s repeated unsuccessful efforts to gain university admission. It is also ironic that, in *Parasite*, the individual, tutoring care given to the two Park children, Da-hye and Da-song, was provided by the two Kim siblings who never would be able to enter that privileged class, no matter their own individual talents and accomplishments.

Education and moral self-cultivation, therefore, are the hallmarks of this Confucian social ethics, starting with the individual him/herself and then

moving out in concentric circles of moral growth to and through the whole world.¹⁹ In this context, we see the high value placed on university education in *Parasite*, to such an extent that a university transcript from a prestigious academic institution literally opens the door to economic opportunity and improvement to a degree probably not found elsewhere. This is illustrated by Kim Ki-woo's presentation of a forged Yonsei University transcript to Mrs. Park when he arrives for his tutoring interview arranged by his upper-class friend Min-hyuk who is heading to America for studies. As Kim Ki-woo ascends from his family's semi-subterranean dwelling he tells his father he doesn't regard the doctored transcript as a "forgery" but more of a pledge to his future academic success.

The "class" divisions and distinctions so obvious in *Parasite* go beyond simple financial status to the underlying causes of the cycle of poverty. Some recent work by social ethicists uses an emerging concept they call "moral luck" to speak about a number of these interconnections.²⁰ The Scholar's Stone at first may seem to be a quasi-magical talisman that will bring "luck" to the Kims to help them transition out of their cycle of poverty, but alas the story does not have this hoped for happy ending. Bad moral luck goes hand in glove with moral injury, and the evidence of this combination is striking in the film. This is another theme also embedded in the notion of intersectionality in CRT.

While in one perspective it is the Kims who all have falsified their life "transcripts," but actually on closer examination they show themselves to be more than qualified to earn their pay in the employment they garner in the Park household. Ki-woo is sufficiently adept in tutoring the high school sophomore Da-hye in both English, the contemporary analogue to the master of the Chinese classics, as well as a coming of age puppy love. His sister Ki-jung (usually just called Jessica in the movie) provides sound nurturing therapy for the youngest son (*magnae adu*) Da-song; Mr. Kim is a good and careful chauffeur and his wife Chung-sook proves to be an excellent house-keeper.

While in some "obvious" sense, the Kims could be termed "parasites," on a deeper level it is more the Parks who live off the lower strata occupied by the under-class represented by the Kims, as well as their former housekeeper Gook Moon-Gwang and her husband Oh Geun-sae. Geun-sae, who has been hiding out in the sub-basement "safe room" whose existence is unknown by the "second-owner" Park family. This getaway had been installed by the original owner architect to protect the upper-class denizens from possible attacks by the North Koreans or other undesirables. Its inhabitant Geun-sae serves as a sort of a foil to the Kim family and we learn that his failed business was partially to blame for Mr. Kim's earlier loss of employment. Geun-sae's de facto house confinement also foreshadows the ultimate fate of Mr. Kim, who will come to take his place after the movie's climactic birthday party scene.

In classic Confucianism, the stairs to both moral and social success suggest a committed student moves only upwards, but in *Parasite* the stairs

for the Kims ultimately descend further and further down so that the movie ends not only with Ki-woo and Chung-sook back in the banjiha garden-level apartment, while the mortal remains of Jessica (Ki-jung) are lodged in a small niche in a Korean columbarium that resembles a large scale economy Costco or Home Depot store aisle. Mr. Kim too is now as low as one can go—trapped in the underground bunker of the former Park home. He has slipped from “ban”(half) jiha to now totally underground in the “safe-room” and totally out of the picture.

From *Brutta Razza* (Ugly Race) to *Uri Nara* (Our Nation)

A number of years ago while working as a live-in counselor to a residential drug rehabilitation program run in southern Italy I had the opportunity to acquaint myself with another culture’s under-class, namely young men from the poorer quarters of the Naples area run by the *Camorra* (Neapolitan version of the Mafia). In many ways their socio-economic demographic was quite similar to that of the Kims in *Parasite*. One of the things I took away from that experience was how the Italian young men expressed their own views on what constituted “race” (*razza* in Italian) and accompanying social class. *Che brutta razza questi Milanese* was an expression I heard fairly often. Literally it means “what an ugly (*brutta*) race (*razza*) are these people from Milan.” For them the northern *Milanese* portrayed the more affluent, upper class of the Italian “race” while Naples far to the south was often depicted by the northerners as poor, ignorant and “African.” Thus for these men the “*brutta razza Milanese*” were akin to the Parks, while they saw themselves as the underprivileged, but more honest Kims.

In cultures that are more homogenous, like those of Italy and Korea, the notion of “race” is conceived differently from the biologized “black and white” version that endures in American culture. Here intersectionality can help to decode what is going on and to realize that “race” and “racism” are *not* necessarily melanin dependent. How then can “race” then be understood within a society that prides itself on the dynamics of what non-Koreans such as myself called the *Uri Nara* (Our nation) mentality?

Uri (Our) in Korean is the first-person plural possessive that expresses how Koreans themselves colloquially describe not only the Republic of Korea (*Dae-han min-guk*, literally “The Great Han People’s Country”), but a range of other identity markers from their own language (*uri mal*), to the corner convenience store *Uri Su-pa*. Even terms that in English are rendered in the first-person singular possessive (like “my neighborhood”) in Korean idiomatically become be *uri dongnae*. On the surface, it would seem that Korea may be one of the least racist cultures on earth. Yet *Parasite* seems to suggest a rather different reality.

It is far more than economic class that divides the Kims from the Parks, and this may point out one of the limits of the capitalistic critiques that many believe the movie shows. The movie shows so much more, such as

even the different “smell” associated with the Kims that the boy Park Da-song first discerns, and which his parents will discover later as well. It is not lack of hygiene, but something far deeper. Of course, it is the Kim and Park domiciles that are the most graphic examples of the different worlds, but indeed the inequalities are carried through to almost every aspect of their daily lives. Even the climate change of the thunderstorm impacts their worlds in strikingly different ways. Building on CRT’s notion of the dynamics of intersectionality we might call the class divide actually a type of “disability,” difficult, if not impossible to overcome.²¹ For example, it would take Ki-woo 564 years with his poverty class disability condition to save up enough money to buy the Park dream house.

Initially it may seem that these universes of the rich and the poor are running parallel to one another, but soon enough we see the collision course the two worlds are in fact on. *Parasite* has been widely used in academic classes and talks that center on globalization, income inequality and the like, and here the material is both plentiful and obvious. *Bi-ga o-sin-da* (literally “the blessed/honorable rain is falling”) is an older expression which expressed the traditional Confucian cosmology that when the rains come, the crops grow and so on, then this confirms that the rulers enjoyed the *Cheonmyeong* or Mandate of Heaven. Natural disasters like wide-spread floods, famines, etc. were interpreted as a divine judgment on the worthiness of the rulers—especially in their governance and care for the masses under their rule.

But like much of the Confucian cosmology it fails to adequately interpret what happens when the weather is a blessing to the rich, but a curse to the poor. Location, location, location! In other parts of the world shoreline locations are signs of class and privilege that could double, triple, and quadruple housing values. But in Korea proximity to the water traditionally is often considered “low rent” and even a curse. *Parasite* shows how and why this is the case. While the torrential rainstorm may have cancelled the Park’s camping outing to celebrate Da-song’s birthday, it did have the salubrious effect of cleansing the ever-present summer smog from the air around their compound.

“Plans” Gone Awry

As we follow the Kims down the many levels of stairs from the Park elevated estate back down to their “garden apartment” *banjiha* we see this descent to their home also submerged their hopes and plans for rising to the level of the Confucian Superior Person (*gun-ja*). The Kim paterfamilias frequently references having a “Plan” (*gyehoek*) to achieve these aims. Earlier in the film, Mr. Kim commends his son Ki-woo for his own “Plan” to go to college to get ahead in life. Even when things look the darkest after the struggle with Moon-gwang and Geun-sae, Mr. Kim assures his children that all will be well, because he has a “Plan” to deal with this set of unexpected, untoward events that have just occurred.

However, in the school gym where the Kims and the other underclass from the neighboring region take refuge after the devastating flood that Mr. Kim sagely opines that for them the only plan that will never “fail” is simply to have “no plan” at all (*mu-gyehoek*). The Kim class seems ineligible for realistic plans to get ahead. This is another example of the CRT Intersectionality divide in the film, as it is only the Parks and their “race” that have the luxury of plans that will come to pass.

This resignation can also be interpreted as a sort of quasi-Buddhist cosmological insight in the film. Mr. Kim’s use of the expression *mu* (not or none) to modify *gyehoek*, might seem to evidence more than the Scottish poet Robert Burns’ insight that the best laid plans of mice and men often come to naught.²² There are several ways in which one could say “I don’t actually have a plan” in Korean, such as “*Naneun gyehoegi eopda.*” Here Mr. Kim’s more refined literary expression implicitly references a key “Fundamental Value” in the Korean religious cosmology that comes more from Buddhism and Taoism. The concept of “mu” is not absence or negligence, but actually a sort of conscious adoption of a stance towards the universe. Mr. Nathan Park clearly was a man who never would say he had “no plan” but finally Mr. Kim belatedly realizes that it is not the privilege of his race/class to construct plans which can realistically guide one to a better future.

Thus, Mr. Kim finally comes to the realization that try as they might, he and his family are unlikely to ever escape the *banjiha* that both houses and imprisons them. He comes to accept the notion that the best “action” is in fact non-action, and perhaps his best approach would be to accept the Buddhist understanding of no-self (*mu-a*).²³ While Mr. Kim may have come to this moment of *satori* Enlightenment, his son is still a long, long ways off, trapped in his own understanding of what for him are simply the impossible practical demands of Confucian Filial Piety expressed in the Second Relationship of Between the Father and the Son there is Intimacy (*bujayuchin*).

Concluding Fantasy Plan

Spoiler alert: a violent set of scenes transforms Da-song’s impromptu birthday garden party into a carnage that leaves Jessica Ki-jung Kim, Geun-sae, and Mr. Nathan Park all stabbed to death and Ki-woo bludgeoned and nearly killed with the Scholar’s Stone wielded by a crazed Geun-sae, and Mr. Kim retreating to the subterranean bunker where he likely may spend the rest of his earthly days.

While in that safe haven, Mr. Kim composes a letter to his son and sends it out in Morse code each night via the switch that governs the stairway lights from the garage to the first floor of the house. The filial son (*hyo-ja*) Ki-woo has been making a faithful pilgrimage of sorts to the

Park mansion, and one night he sees a flashing light which he realizes his Morse code. He records it on his phone and rushes back to garden apartment *banjiha* to transcribe it, and then draft a reply.

Though realistically his message would be absolutely undeliverable, Ki-woo begins his fantasy reply letter by telling his father that he has finally made a “fundamental plan” or “*Geunbonjeogin Gyehoek*.” This plan is dramatized first by letting go of the Scholar’s Stone and returning this Scholar’s Stone (*suseok*) to its rightful and natural place in a stream bed. However, instead of realizing (and accepting) the utter hopelessness of this situation, his father’s letter stimulates a loving, and utterly fantastical epistolary response outlining how he will make lots of money and buy the Park house to free his father. A nice “plan” except for the troublesome detail that it would take half a millennium for someone in Ki-woo’s race to realize.

The “dreams” and “plans” the Kims had once entertained have all come to naught. Moreover, we see that the class divide cannot be overcome by following the path (*do*) of commitment, hard work, and diligent cultivation. The Confucian promise of the “Superior Person” while in theory open to all, in reality, CRT uncovers shows that it really requires one be to the manor born. The Gun-ja “Prince/Superior Person” turns out to be actually open only to the legacy *Wang-ja* or “Son of the King” after all. This final, final scene then gives us another incomplete Buddhist moment. Time and reality are cyclic, but instead of finding the freedom in the release of the Zen *Enso* (円相), Ki-woo seems destined according to his “fundamental plan” of having to spend several more lifetimes in the *samsara* (suffering-laden cycle of death and rebirth due to afflictive attachments and unresolved karma) before he can hope to enter the nirvana the Park mansion symbolizes.

Parasite, I believe, is destined to live on as a “classic” in the sense of hermeneutical theory of semiotics. This means that this work of art will continue to speak both across time and culture, and in this cross-cultural and transhistorical journey new meanings likely will continue to surface. My own interpretation here of the movie in terms of the intersectionality concept of Critical Race Theory and the analytical perspective of Confucian and Buddhist Fundamental Values and Root Paradigms still very much embedded in contemporary Korean culture give testimony to this “excess of meanings” present in a genuine classic. The Scholar’s Stone itself serves as a polyvalent symbol in the movie and if we hold on to it as Kim Ki-woo did throughout the movie it may continue to help us see other meanings and layers of this remarkable film.

Notes

1. Michael Levenson, "Trump Denounces Oscar Winner 'Parasite'," *New York Times*, February 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/us/trump-parasite-academy-oscar-south-korean.html#:~:text=President%20Trump%20delivered%20a%20nationalistic,Korean%20film%2C%20%E2%80%9CParasite.%E2%80%9D>.

2. For some explanation of this cross-cultural attraction of Korean romantic dramas see Chrystal Villareal, "Why the swoon-worthy romances of Korean TV are winning over American viewers," *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 2022 online; February 23, 2022 print, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2022-02-14/netflix-valentines-day-crash-landing-on-you-kdramas-romance>. A key feature is what in Korean is called "mildang" or dramatic tension of the "the push and pull of a relationship" which is a key feature of the dramas referenced here.

3. See, for example, James T. Bretzke, S.J., "Movemus ergo sumus: Riding the Korean Wave, Gang-Nam Style, from Seoul to MIT," *International Journal of Diaspora & Cultural Criticism* 12/1 (January 2022): 132-153 <http://dx.doi.org/10.15519/dcc.2022.01.12.1.132>. This article grew out of a presentation at the online international conference Global Mobility Humanities Conference (GMHC) Moveo, Ergo Sum: Imagination, Ethics, and Ontology of Mobilities, October 29-30, 2021, held under the auspices of Konkuk University in Seoul, Republic of Korea. This ongoing conference series is also sponsored by several other academic organs around the world. See their website at <https://www.mobilityhumanities.net/organization>. Accessed July 17, 2022.

4. Contrast their success, for example, with that of the more traditional "Korean" offerings of a group like Ak Dan Gwang Chil (ADG7). See the "Sori Artists" website at <http://sori.nyc/adg7>. Accessed July 19, 2022.

5. See, for example, John K. Kim, "Parasite: A Film Review on Capitalism," *Cinesthesia* 10/2 (2020) <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol10/iss2/1/>; Chang Liu, "Analysis of Social Class Inequality Based on the Movie Parasite," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 497 (2020) file:///G:/My%20Drive/KoreaNotes/Parasite/ParasiteResorces/125949420.pdf and Minjung Noh, "Parasite As Parable: Bong Joon-Ho's Cinematic Capitalism," *Cross Currents* 70/3 (September 2020): 248-262, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26975087>.

6. The bibliography in this area is vast and growing. For a concise overview of some of the problematic elements in American education see Jay Caspian Kang, "Can We Talk About Critical Race Theory?" *New York Times*, November 14, 2021 [Sunday print edition; November 11, 2021 online edition]. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/11/opinion/critical-race-theory.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

7. See William E. Biernatzki, S.J. "Symbol and Root Paradigm: The Locus of Effective Inculturation." In *Effective Inculturation and Ethnic Identity. Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, no. 9, edited by Ary A. Roest Crolius, S.J. (Rome: Centre "Cultures and Religions" - Pontifical Gregorian University, 1987): 49-68. Biernatzki was a cultural anthropologist who taught for many years at Sogang University in Seoul, Korea.

8. See Douglas Davies, "Ritual, Values, and Emotions," Chapter 2 in his *Emotion, Identity, and Religion: Hope, Reciprocity, and Otherness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

9. In this context see James T. Bretzke, S.J., "Teaching Cross-Cultural Ethics in a Context of Pluralism & Multiculturalism: Teaching Where Religion and Ethics Intersect," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48:3 (Summer 2013): 369-377.

10. Some of these Confucian Fundamental Values would include the Mandate of Heaven (*Cheonmyeong*), the "Way" (*do¹⁰*) and the Three Bonds and Five Relationships (*Sam Kang O Ryun*). For a brief treatment of these relationships as a Korean cultural root paradigm see James T. Bretzke, S.J., "The Three Bonds and Five Relationships: A Korean Root Paradigm," *Inculturation* 5 (Summer, 1990): 16-18.

11. Called *suseok* (水石) in Korean, the ideograms simply combine "water" (水) with "rock" (石) and highlight the role of mediation on nature in Confucian practice. The ideograms employed in traditional China are slightly different (Gongshi 拱石), but the essential meaning and practice are much the same.

12. In 5th Confucian Relationship *Bung-u-yu-sin* "Between friend (*bung*) and friend (*bung*) there is (*yu*) fidelity (*sin*), the ideogram 信 (*sin*) of the pictures the "radical" or organizer of the human person (two legs) off to the left, and then in the "body" we see a mouth (the square) and words coming out of the mouth (the horizontal lines above the square). Taken together this portrayal of the abstract concept of fidelity/faithfulness or trust is expressed by a "person" (人) standing by their speech.

13. This particular expression I believe is "pure" Korean, with no direct Chinese equivalent, though it is very similar to *Yogu* can also be translated as "request" and even "demand."

14. The store used in the movie actually exists. See "Where 'Parasite' comes to life: A visit to each of the award-winning film's iconic filming locations," *Korea Joong-Ang Daily*, February 17, 2020, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/02/17/features/Where-Parasite-comes-to-life-A-visit-to-each-of-the-awardwinning-films-iconic-filming-locations/3073919.html> .

15. Literally "burning liquor" (*soju*) similar to Japanese style sake or rice wine. It is the informal drink of choice among younger males, and especially college students.

16. Other common translations of this ideogram are "Gentleman," "Prince," "Lord's Son," "Superior Man." One of the best renditions in my view is that offered by Professor A.S. Cua in his seminal article, "The Concept of the Paradigmatic Individual in the Ethics of Confucius," *Inquiry* 14 (1971): 41-55. This article is also found in *Invitation to Chinese Philosophy*, ed. by Arne Naess and Alastair Hannay, (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1972): 41-55. Cua built on this foundational insight in his essay "Competence, Concern, and the Role of Paradigmatic Individuals (*Chün tzu*) in Moral Education," *Philosophy East and West* 42 (1992), which is also found as Ch. 8 in his *Moral Vision and Tradition: Essays in Chinese Ethics*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998): 138-155.

17. See Alireza Farahbakhsh and Ramtin Ebrahimi, "The Social Implications of Metaphor in Bong Joon-ho's Parasite," *CineJ Cinema Journal* 9/1 (Spring 2021) <https://cinej.pitt.edu/ojs/cinej/article/view/291> For a collection of various commentaries and many YouTube clips on aspects of the movie see: "Parasite Resources" https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Tf0msLFXSM0JAd4zAag3fR983_6YDnCW/edit?usp=sharing&oid=10351953710877764442&rtfpof=true&sd=true .

18. See the classic moral primer on the Three Bonds: *Sam-gang-haeng-sil-do*, an illustrated guide to the Three Relationships. An electronic version can be found at

https://www.academia.edu/715579/Printing_the_Samgang_haengsil-to_%E4%B8%89%E7%B6%B1%E8%A1%8C%E5%AF%A6%E5%9C%96_Illustrated_Guide_to_the_Three_Relationships_a_Premodern_Korean_Moral_Primer. Accessed February 21, 2022.

19. The *locus classicus* for this concept is found in Confucius' *The Great Learning* in the introductory seven paragraphs which are attributed to Confucius himself (with the remainder of the text being commentary by his disciples).

20. For an excellent overview of this literature, as well as a close analysis of the dynamics of income inequality in class see Kate Ward's *Wealth, Virtue, and Moral Luck: Christian Ethics in an Age of Inequality*, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2021).

21. University of Kansas Professor Chang-Hwan Kim gave an online talk on February 3, 2022 for the University of Pennsylvania Korean Studies Colloquium on family-based income inequality in the last 30 years. Interestingly while it grew sharply beginning in the 1990s and peaked in 2009 and has been diminishing somewhat since then. High poverty is a problem in S. Korea (45% below the poverty rate, especially among the elderly, which raises the composite poverty rate for the nation). Lee Jae-myung, the ruling liberal Democratic Party's presidential candidate has pledged to introduce a UBI as well as categorical basic incomes for youth and rural residents. Recently two scholars published a joint paper on the possibility Korea might enact a UBI (Universal Basic Income) policy. See Jong-sung You & Jieun Cho, "Will South Korea Be the First Country to Introduce Universal Basic Income?" circulated in advance of webinar by the Korean Inequality Research Lab & LAB2050 on this topic broadcast on February 21, 2022. The paper is available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FxHTwSWQrr-EtTV0twrB02p9QW_3xHZRc/view.

22. Robert Burns, (1759-1796), "To a Mouse, On Turning her up in her Nest, with the Plough," November 1785: But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane, In proving foresight may be vain: The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men Gang aft agley, An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, For promis'd joy!

23. This Buddhist concept is often rendered as Anatman, Anatta or Sunyata. Misunderstanding the true nature of self leads in turn to all sorts of attachments and desires, which then become the primary cause of suffering for sentient beings.

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Submission Date: 8/22/2023
Peer-Review Period: 10/06/2023-11/28/2023
Publication Confirmed: 11/28/2023