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Social Inequality and Income Disparity in *Parasite*

Despite being one of the world's leading economies, South Korea faces some of the highest levels of income inequality— a disturbing reality which is portrayed in the 2019 film *Parasite*. In his film, Bong Joon-Ho creates a stark contrast between the two families to illustrate these issues, using their interactions and living conditions to highlight the deep-rooted class divisions in South Korea. *Parasite* serves as a social commentary on the pervasive issues of social inequality and income disparity in South Korea, and the moral compromises families may need to make in the pursuit of wealth.

Since the early 2000s, South Korea's economy has consistently grown, reaching a GDP ranking 14th largest in the world.¹ However, the seemingly strong economy did not alleviate the financial struggles of ordinary citizens, who once made up the middle class.² After the financial crisis in 1997, South Korean "chaebols," or large industrial family-owned conglomerates, concentrated on accessing government-subsidized loans and entitlement privileges.³ Though it helped bolster the economy, the practices were corrupt, leading to a widening gap between the rich and poor in South Korea. In his film, Joon-Ho portrays this income gap by contrasting the living conditions and lifestyles of the Kim and Park families. The Kim family lives in a cramped, semi-underground apartment. Their living space is cluttered and dimly lit, and the opening scene

¹Herh, Michael. "South Korea Slides to 14th Place in GDP Rankings in 11 Years." *Businesskorea*, 30 Apr. 2024, www.businesskorea.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=216158#:~:text=The%20Gross%20Domestic%20Product%20of,notch%20from%20a%20year%20earlier.

²Lee, Hae-Young, Jongsung Kim, and Beom Cheol Cin. "Empirical analysis on the determinants of income inequality in Korea." *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology* 53.1 (2013): 95-109.

³Chon, "The Election Process and Informal Politics in South Korea," 66-81

shows the family desperately trying to connect to nearby Wifi. They clearly suffer from economic hardship, taking jobs like folding pizza boxes in order to make ends meet. The wealthy Park family lives in a modern-style mansion with large, open living spaces and nice furniture. The striking differences between the two families' lifestyles reflect South Korean society's vast gap in social status and privilege. Along with economic disparity, the film also reflects the influence of corruption in South Korean society. *Parasite* depicts how systemic inequalities and moral compromises are perpetuated by both the elite and underprivileged members of society. Over time, the corruption in Korean politics and economics has become normalized. In the book *Informal Politics in East Asia*, Chon writes, "The country's remarkable economic success in the past was part of the reason that the general public was willing to tolerate the corruption and contradictions . . ." Essentially, as South Korea rapidly developed into an economic powerhouse, there was a widespread perception among the public that the ends—economic growth and stability—justified the means—corruption and contradictions. This mindset allowed informal and often unethical practices to persist, as they were seen as necessary for sustaining and advancing the country's economic prosperity.⁴ We can see this portrayed in the Kim family's pursuit of employment by the Park family. Each family member takes on a false identity, even forging documents to reinforce the backstories of the characters they create. Ki-woo, son of the Kim family, forges a university degree to tutor the Park family's daughter. He goes on to strategically introduce the other members of his family, under false identities, to work for the Park family. Not only does the Kim family lie about their identities and qualifications, but they also displace the current employees for the Park family through careful planning. They get the current driver and housekeeper fired, and then position themselves as the only suitable replacement. The Kim

⁴Jun, In-Woo, Kyoung-In Kim, and Chris Rowley. "Organizational culture and the tolerance of corruption: The case of South Korea." *Organizational Corruption in the Asia Pacific*. Routledge, 2020. 76-95.

family capitalizes on the privileged Park family and their naive perspectives and manipulates the situations to their advantage. Additionally, the Kim family is not the sole entity deceiving the Park family for economic advantages. Moon-gwang, the long-serving housekeeper of the Parks, along with her husband Geun-se, have been secretly living in the mansion's basement bunker for years, unbeknownst to their employers. Through this, Bong Joon-Ho highlights the lengths people may go to and the moral compromises they may make in pursuit of wealth in South Korea.

At the conclusion of the film, Joon-Ho uses powerful symbolism to underscore the film's theme of social inequality and economic disparity. The climax shows a violent confrontation occurring between the two families at the youngest Park son's birthday party, with devastating consequences for the Kim family. This scene illustrates the eruption of underlying tensions between the two families, stemming from their disparate social statuses and the deception that enabled the Kim family's infiltration. Ultimately, Ki-woo suffers a head injury and, along with his mother, is placed on probation for fraud. His sister tragically passes away, while his father escapes to the bunker of the mansion. Despite the Kim family's efforts, they remain trapped in their original socio-economic circumstances. By choosing this resolution for his film, Joon-Ho comments on the unfair and cyclical nature of poverty in South Korea. *Parasite* critiques the widespread social inequality and income disparity in South Korea, shedding light on the ethical dilemmas families face while striving for financial success.

Sources

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