

Social Class in South Korea and *Parasite*

From a broader perspective, wealth, occupation, and education symbolize an individual's status in society. Other stereotypes include knowledge of multiple languages, various living spaces, types of clothing, vehicles, and the quantity of these items, among other things. Vicky Dianiya, a communications researcher who studied the film *Parasite*, mentions that social class is “divided into two large opposing camps, into two great classes which are directly opposite each other. The two classes are called the bourgeois (capitalist) class and the proletarian (working) class...”¹ *Parasite* depicts many of these indicators of wealth, ranging from one family owning a mansion in the hills to another struggling in the fast food industry living in a sub-basement apartment. Cleverly, Bong Joon-Ho's film specifically employs the concepts of balance, space, boundaries, mise-en-scène, and camera distance to depict cultural and social class inequality in South Korea, highlighting the tensions between the classes.

South Korean culture and economy differ from their Western counterparts, where Korean culture values their elders, the importance of family, ancestors, and the concept of tradition. Since the 1990s, a similar trend of growing inequality has been demonstrated in South Korea. Both the income inequality standard and the relative poverty rate were consequences of economic liberalization during the 90s.² Most countries, in general, have declined in achieving class equality. In the 80s, there was “a strong nexus between labor oppression and successful export-oriented industrialization [that] continued until the political crisis of the military regime in the late 80s.”³ Although labor oppression may never terminate altogether, political unrest and

¹ Dianiya, Vicky. “Representation of Social Class in Film (Semiotic Analysis of Roland Barthes Film *Parasite*).” *Profetik*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 212–224. <https://doi.org/10.14421/pjk.v13i2.1946>.

² Kalleberg, Arne L, *Precarious Asia: Global Capitalism and Work in Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia*. Stanford University Press, 2022.

³ *Ibid.*

warfare have consistently caused an economic decline, drawing a thicker line between the different societal classes. The wave of strikes and potential union formations in South Korea challenged the workplace despotism fostered by the state, thus demonstrating how workers would no longer tolerate poor working conditions and low wages.⁴ Indeed, work environments had become highly disputable terrains. In terms of poverty, conditions are related to the size and type of household. In South Korea, single-earner families are common, whereas dual-earner families make up less than 35% of all households, as of 2017. By having more than two household members employed, the additional income notably decreases the poverty rate.⁵ As of today, South Korea is more subject to an interdependent and collectivist life, while America is more individualistic.⁶ In *Parasite*, the Kim family endures a harsh reality in and outside of their occupations, drinking the cheapest soda and sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, surrounded by decaying pizza boxes.

The dynamic of social class in South Korea is drastic, with an implied emphasis on the lower and higher classes, leaving the middle class to fade into the background. Kyoung Ae Kong studied Neo-Marxian social class inequalities and focused on the behavioral, material, psychosocial, and workplace environmental factors in South Korea. His study referenced Erik Wright's social class model and highlighted the inequality of self-rated health in men. Among the upper-class and unskilled workers, the risk of poor self-rated health was the highest due to the environmental and material factors of the workplace.⁷ Another factor that currently still affects

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Teichman, Judith. *Social Forces and States: Poverty and Distributional Outcomes in South Korea, Chile, and Mexico*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

⁷ Kong, Kyoung Ae, et al. "Neo-Marxian Social Class Inequalities in Self-Rated Health among the Employed in South Korea: The Role of Material, Behavioral, Psychosocial, and Workplace Environmental Factors." *Bmc Public Health*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4269-9>.

class hierarchies and systems is the class itself and how survival changes depending on who is in what class. This can be seen in *Parasite* when looking at the living styles of the two families and how drastically different their priorities and needs are in terms of survival. Given the rising infiltration in retail and food services in South Korea, the economic environment has become more competitive, pushing toward the life of the bourgeoisie.⁸ *Parasite* shows the Parks maintaining single, consistent, and stable jobs, whereas the Kims struggle through a series of minimum-wage jobs with narrowly suitable working conditions. Jonathan Tudge notes how “well-educated professional families are likely to live next door to less educated workers.”⁹ Yet this is not the case in Bong-Joon Ho’s narrative. The Kims have to walk a bit to get to the Parks’ house and invariably move up in more ways than one. The Park’s house is located on a hill, causing the Kims to climb said hill and enter an almost “new” atmosphere. The most effective and prevailing form of inequality arises when one social class can dominate another.¹⁰ This is shown through the types of jobs the families maintain, where the Kims move from folding pizza boxes to working for the Parks. Thus, through location and societal stereotypes, *Parasite* heavily emphasizes the class inequality between the two families.

Many elements show the class inequality in *Parasite*, yet two accentuated ones are balance and space. The Kims live in an underground house with a view of adjacent homes and public roads, grouped with the rest of society. Thus, people look down on them physically and figuratively because of their societal status and where they live.¹¹ The Parks, on the other hand,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tudge, Jonathan. *The Everyday Lives of Young Children: Culture, Class, and Child Rearing in Diverse Societies*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

¹⁰ Teichman, Judith. *Social Forces and States: Poverty and Distributional Outcomes in South Korea, Chile, and Mexico*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

¹¹ Chan, Yat. *Self-identity, Class, and Social Stratification in the Movie Parasite*. Rutgers University Library, 2021 <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/66711/>.

live higher up with views of spacious greenery and are located in a more isolated environment, symbolizing the divine upper-class life. In some countries, traditionally those susceptible to natural disasters, living in a platformed area allows a form of immunity from those dangers.¹² One scene in the film shows the Kims having to leave the Parks' home in the middle of a storm. The farther they run to get back to their home, the more emphasis there is on where they stand socially and how far they are from the upper class. When they arrive, the whole street is flooded, including their home.¹³ Hence, the Kims and the rest of the lower class are more susceptible to floods due to the dense population and location of their home, while the Parks stay protected in their higher, more open environment.¹⁴ With the layouts of the living spaces, the Parks' home shows how vast a space they attempt to maintain. The film shows how multiple shots are needed to capture and piece together the entire layout of the home. The audience hardly sees a full wall, room, or window, and a limited amount of personal items or clutter is shown beside a few expensive paintings hanging to symbolize their lavish taste in the arts.¹⁵ The Kims, however, are knee-deep in clutter and have no shame in hanging their socks as a makeshift chandelier or sleeping in one room where the only space between them is the air in their empty FiLite beer cans. For the Parks, everything is put in its proper place, revealing only what they want outsiders to know.

Another factor that serves as a significant motif of social class is boundaries. Within any society, social boundaries are “objective forms of social difference manifested in unequal access

¹² Dianiya, Vicky. “Representation of Social Class in Film (Semiotic Analysis of Roland Barthes Film Parasite).” *Profetik*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 212–224. <https://doi.org/10.14421/pjk.v13i2.1946>.

¹³ Chan, Yat. *Self-identity, Class, and Social Stratification in the Movie Parasite*. Rutgers University Library, 2021 <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/66711/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

to and unequal distribution of resources (material and non-material) and social opportunities.”¹⁶ This translates into the film with the use of glass walls. A line on a mirror or wall defines a boundary between the two families, thus also implying a difference between the upper and lower classes. Various scenes in *Parasite* show one relative of the Kim family chatting with a member of the Park family, where the edge of a wall acts as a non-diegetic device and splits the screen, thus dividing them. The Parks also show a few physical boundaries, such as their home having high walls and closed gates.¹⁷ A wall, specifically with a gate, stresses the idea of a boundary within a boundary. Behind the gate, a third barrier of bamboo runs along the stairs, taking visitors up to an open view of their backyard.¹⁸ Backyards act as an additional minuscule symbol of wealth. The Parks are wealthy enough to be able to change the outside of the living space into what they want others to see, a typical notion the upper class still holds today. This signifies their wealth and how they can afford to inhabit a vast space away from the lower class, setting multiple boundaries between the two families.¹⁹ Parking garages further indicate wealth and division. Private compounds and high walls reinforce the idea that outsiders, or the lower class, do not belong. Compared to the street outside of the Kims’ home, the street outside of the Parks’ home is less public and gives an innuendo that the owners also own the street.²⁰ Thus, the social inequality allows the Parks to stay protected and untouchable from the Kims—for the most part—causing the upper class to be oblivious to the realities the lower class faces.

¹⁶ Dianiya, Vicky. “Representation of Social Class in Film (Semiotic Analysis of Roland Barthes Film *Parasite*).” *Profetik*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 212–224. <https://doi.org/10.14421/pjk.v13i2.1946>.

¹⁷ Chan, Yat. *Self-identity, Class, and Social Stratification in the Movie Parasite*. Rutgers University Library, 2021 <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/66711/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Director Bong Joon Ho sensibly uses mise-en-scène and camera distance to physically display the inequalities between the two classes shown in *Parasite*. In various scenes, Joon Ho depicts to the audience the constant separation of structure between characters. For example, in Ki Woo's interview with Yeon Gyo, there is a line that separates the two.²¹ This line is seen between the glasses, standing lamps, and the middle of the refrigerator doors. All of these create a steady differentiation between the upper and lower classes.²² Joon Ho additionally utilizes stairs to depict status as well. The highest point the Kims reach in their basement apartment is the raised toilet in the bathroom, which sits on a platform. Even then, they are bent over and limited in mobility and space. This is shown in one shot, and the distance between the camera and the characters affects the plotline as well. When each family member of the Kims parasitically attaches to their correlated member of the Parks, the camera stops zooming in and no longer focuses on the individual characters.²³ Before this, the camera slowly pushed forward toward each actor, the shot slowly getting closer and closer. After every member of the Kim family is hired by the Parks, the camera becomes steadier and is at a consistent distance from the characters. Joon Ho plays with the camera language and shows how the camera movement and characters' relationships correlate.²⁴ This illustrates how the Kims move up in their social position, even if it is just for a moment, and obtain a sense of freedom from poverty. These shifts in societal positions between the characters indicate the brutal realities of classicism in South Korea and inspire the development of the intricate storyline of *Parasite*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Chan, Yat. Self-identity, Class, and Social Stratification in the Movie Parasite. Rutgers University Library, 2021 <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/66711/>.

Even today, we still have those implied, unconscious boundaries and stigmas within the concepts of class and culture. Bong Joon-Ho's film *Parasite* brings more awareness to these ongoing notions and accurately uses the concepts of balance, space, boundaries, mise-en-scène, and camera distance to depict South Korean culture and class inequality.

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