

Parasite, Bong Joon-ho's Movie Revisited: 'Han' Culture as the Spirit of Nationality

Xiaohan Wang^{1,a,*}

¹The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, 100032, China

a. wangyongfu@unistec.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: Bong Joon-ho directed the film *Parasite*, which won the Palme d'Or at the 72nd Cannes Film Festival and the Best Director Award at the 92nd Academy Awards. Set in contemporary Korean society, the movie is a stark expose of the problem of class division and the difficult life of the underclass, which arouses deep thoughts among the audience. Deconstructed from the viewpoint of fate, the movie is delicately designed with the interlocking pull of predestination, reflecting the traditional East Asian concept of destiny, which is in contrast to many Western movies. In addition, the inner portrayal of the characters deeply reflects the self-internalization that characterizes the Korean "Han" culture. The intertwining of fate and hate becomes a thread of the protagonist's changing state of mind, which is visualized by the director through the spatial narrative.

Keywords: *Parasite*, "Han" culture, view of destiny

1. Introduction

Former South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung has publicly stated, "In my opinion, Korean culture has become a culture of 'Han'. Throughout history, we have been living in 'Han'" [1]. When thinking of hate, the picture that comes to mind is a Korean movie in which the intermittent light in a dark semi-basement hits the faces of two shadowy people [2, 3]. The woman's long nails stabbed at her clenched fist in her white palm, she opened her mouth and inhaled heavily, not knowing how much was due to the sting of the nails, and how much was due to the grief that lingered in her heart. The man sipped a small cup of tea, his eyebrows with a knife wound frowned as if the tea was blood flavored. If he uses just one more ounce of strength, his teeth will be bitten into pieces. They sat opposite each other, both silent, but their minds coincided in planning over and over again how to use the dagger into the chest cavity of the wicked [4]. Such "Han" scenes are common in Korean artworks and have given the rest of the world a bad impression of "angry Koreans".

The exact definition of "Han" could be a puzzle of collective memories. Over time, "Han" has developed into the most essential emotional characteristic of Koreans [5-7]. It is not just one emotion; rather, it is the outcome of several sensations. Resentment, sadness, regret, and optimism are all part of it. But what makes the Korean "Han" culture different from that of other countries is that it is internalized and not directed at anyone. Director Bong Joon-ho, as a witness to the social changes in Korea, has also incorporated the culture of "Han" into this movie [8]. He delicately weaves the two threads of fate and "Han" to visualize Korean society and culture through spatial narratives.

2. Different Views of Destiny

Eastern and Western cultures lead to their understanding and view of fate. Firstly, in terms of change and control of fate, some Eastern cultures emphasize the inevitability of fate as a force that cannot be fully controlled [9]. As a result, people may be more inclined to accept and adapt to unchangeable fate. The stone serves as a symbol of Ki-Woo's destiny throughout the movie. When the fake stone comes into contact with water, it floats, symbolizing how Ki-woo's true identity is always exposed and how he is powerless to change the fact that he is indigent. Ki-woo has made a concerted effort to push his family into an upper-class, affluent atmosphere because he thinks that he has advanced socially by being raised in a wealthy family. He and his family would treat their villa as their own home while their hosts were away, enjoying themselves and having fun as they pleased. But as soon as the hosts came home, they fled around like cockroaches again, hiding in the shadows (1 hr 16 min 45 sec, with the official edition of the movie *Parasite*, all details mentioned below are of the same version of the movie). When he sees the floating stones, he seems to realize that no matter how hard he tries, he can't escape the pull and control of the so-called "fate". This is typical of the East Asian view of destiny, where Ki-woo can only follow his fate, not change it. On the contrary, in Western culture, people emphasize the autonomy and agency of destiny and actively seek to change and control their destiny in pursuit of personal success and achievement. The movie *Shawshank Redemption* is a movie example. The main character, Andy Dufresne faces extreme difficulties, but he uses his wisdom, courage, and friendship to get rid of the bondage imposed on him by fate and successfully rewrites his destiny which should have been to endure unjust treatment in prison.

Secondly, there are also different perceptions between Eastern and Western cultures when it comes to fate and social systems [10]. In Eastern cultures, there is a strong connection between social class and fate, and people's social status is likely to influence or determine their destiny [11]. In the movie, Chung-sook, Ki-woo's mother, says something like "If all this money was mine, I would have been kinder" (59 min 8 sec). This quote shows that in their minds, social status and financial status have a great influence on a person's character and behavior. This is very evident in Ki-taek, the father. He always has a poor man's stink that he can never get rid of. The master's family expresses their distaste for his odor on numerous occasions, demonstrating that fragrance serves as a metaphor for the wealth disparity. No matter how much he tries to hide it, his miserable condition is always brought up by this semi-underground stink. His hatred for his odor instructs him to finally kill his master Park Dong-ik, a man who has never directly harmed Ki-taek. In contrast to the Western view of fate, although social status is also very important in the West, the influence of the social system on fate is probably more indirect and is determined more by individual effort and opportunity.

3. The View of Fate and the Culture of "Han" in the Movie

In the spatial narrative, the movie portrays the characters' fateful path from the low to the high, and finally back to the bottom. It is this kind of circuitous life that makes them realize more strongly the gap between the rich and the poor and the class division that brings them hatred for themselves. The psychological changes of the character Ki-woo and his father Ki-taek are typical of this.

Ki-woo's experiences and actions as the older brother of the family and as the first "parasite" reflect his endless hatred and sadness for the fate of the poor. When Min-hyuk, Ki-woo's rich friend, comes to visit him, the director utilizes a variety of techniques to create a stark contrast between the two men in the very first scene (from 6 min 14 sec to 44 sec). In terms of physical position, Ki-woo is halfway underground and needs to look up at the window to see his friend Min-hyuk's arrival. Lighting is used in such a way that Ki-woo's surroundings are shadowy, while Min-hyuk's motorcycle drives in with a dazzlingly bright flash. As the two confront the rude behavior of a drunk, Min-hyuk loudly berates the drunk until he drives the other away, while Ki-woo chooses to suffer in

silence. When his father, mother, and sister all tease Ki-woo for not being as bold as Min-hyuk, Ki-woo arches his back, lowers his head, and stares at the table with his hand propped up for a few seconds. It is clear that Ki-woo subconsciously feels inferior when faced with his friend Min-hyuk, a college student, and this sense of inferiority is even more visible during their chat (from 8 min 12 sec to 10 min 56 sec). In this two-minute-plus conversation, the director reflects on Ki-woo's inner self through the literal emotions in his lines. When Min-hyuk asked Ki-woo's sister, Ki-Jung, why she didn't go to cram school, Ki-woo said, "It's not that she doesn't go to cram school, but we can't afford to go." When Min-hyuk asks Ki-woo to take over his tutoring job, he says, "Don't you have a lot of classmates in your school, so why do you have to come to a hobo like me?" In this part, Ki-woo clearly recognizes that he is at the lower end of the social scale, and he feels envious of Min-hyuk's affluent life, but at the same time, he also has a deep inferiority complex. At this juncture, Min-hyuk gives Ki-woo a "landscape stone", and from this point on, Ki-woo's struggle against his lower-class status begins, and his destiny is linked to the stone. Like this "precious" stone, Ki-woo starts his way up from the lowest point to become rich.

He becomes a tutor to a wealthy family and forges a prestigious identity. Gradually, in his shrewd plan, he brings his own family into the rich family, where they each assume a different high-class identity of their own: a brilliant university student, an art therapist, a chauffeur with many years of experience, and a personalized homekeeper. They are paid well in this family as if their destinies were on the road to the "upper class". In contrast to his previous low point, Ki-woo begins to have the courage to fight back. When he encounters the drunken man again (from 53 min 01 sec to 53 min 50 sec), Ki-woo walks out in a rage, and he and his father throw water at the drunken man in a frenzy, yelling and shouting. In this way, they seem to be venting their long pent-up resentment and indignation. Nowadays, they dare to rebel because they have managed to find a host. A fixed income and a fake identity boosted their confidence and courage. At this second point, the Ki-woo family's mentality begins to rise.

Ki-woo thinks his life is stepping into a better class with this stone, and he and his family take advantage of the owner's absence to enjoy themselves recklessly in the villa (from 55 min 22 sec to 1 hr 2 min 43 sec). The director utilizes several long shots of Ki-woo's family drinking and playing in the living room. During the conversation, Ki-woo and his father Ki-taek express, "This is our home." At this moment, they are immersed in fantasy, and Ki-woo's state of mind is at its peak, as he begins to lose sight of reality and imagination.

When the hosts suddenly come home, they re-enter the real world and rush towards their semi-underground (from 1 hr 32 min 4 sec to 1 hr 33 min 6 sec), where the director once again utilizes a coherent sequence of seven shots of seven different scenes, descending step by step from the rich neighborhood until pulling down to the slums. Also accompanied by the sound of rain and a darker soundtrack, the director uses the high-to-low physical space to depict the gap between the rich and poor from the high class to the low class and expresses the sense of absurdity and irony brought about by the strong contrast. When Ki-woo is walking towards the semi-basement of his house, he suddenly stops in the middle of the road (1 hr 34 min 49 sec to 1 hr 34 min 55 sec). Ki-woo arches his back again and lowers his head silently watching his sneakers being washed by the water. The director skillfully amplifies the sound of the water running, as if the cold water brings Ki-woo back to full reality in an instant. But he has defaulted to his leap of identity, he thinks he belongs to a better environment to live in, and he can't seem to go down the road to re-accept his true destiny. His state of mind continues to drop until it hits its lowest point when he returns to his feces-filled home, where he sees the supposedly expensive landscape scenery stones floating on water. The director utilizes a 10-second long close-up shot of Ki-woo's hand blankly lifting the stone (1 hr 37 min 20 sec to 1 hr 37 min 30 sec). It then filmed the actor's mood as he stared blankly at the stone under a flickering light (from 1 hr 37 min 30 sec to 1 hr 37 min 38 sec). The stone's fame is fake, just like Ki-woo's

fake identity, and when the water comes, they all float up to nowhere. In the square where millions of poor people gather, Ki-woo holds the stone and says “I’m sorry” to his father (1 hr 40 min 32 sec), and the actor’s facial expression shows that his lips are trembling and his eyes are staring at his father in guilt. Ki-woo blames himself for what he thinks happened because of himself. Coming back to reality, he once again feels hatred towards himself. He holds the stone tightly and says, “It’s always following me” (1 hr 41 min 2 sec). In the shot, his tears are swirling around his eyes, showing many complex feelings. In reality, the stone is his destiny of struggling in poverty, a destiny he can’t escape even if labeled as noble. When he realizes this, his state of mind reaches a very low point.

Instead of outright compromising himself, Ki-woo for once tries to escape such a fate. At Da-song’s birthday party again, he walks towards the basement with a stone, trying to kill the former homekeeper Moon-gwang’s husband with it, sparing his own family from the consequences (from 1 hr 49 min 40 sec to 52 min 2 sec). Instead, he is smashed between pools of blood by Moon-gwang’s husband with this stone. This seems to signify a destiny that Ki-woo will never escape. When Ki-woo realizes that his father is hiding in the underground tunnel of his master’s house after committing a crime, the director films his hands putting the stone between the running water of the creek (from 2 hr, 4 min 36 sec to 2 hr, 4 min 41 sec). The scene is as if Ki-woo has managed to put his fate on hold. Just as the letter he wrote to his father’s heart filled with plans and hopes for the future. His mind is temporarily relieved. But in reality, it’s just an empty dream of his future, and his fate and his hate are still haunting him.

The movie uses space to follow the highs and lows of Ki-woo’s state of mind as his fate unfolds. From the sober cognizance of his low class when he delivers the stone, to his elation when he finds a forged identity, to his rise to the highest point when he enjoys his master’s home alone, his mind continues to become hypocritical and fastidious. However, the master’s unexpected homecoming shatters his dreams and reopens his eyes to the uncontrollable nature of fate, and his state of mind falls to its lowest point. In the end, when the chaos triggered by his hatred is over, he begins to rethink how to get rid of his poor fate, and his state of mind begins to return to what it was at the beginning. Such a fluctuating attitude towards fate reflects the traditional East Asian concept of fate and the unique Korean culture of “Han”. They cannot escape from the bondage of fate, and at the same time internalize hatred in themselves.

The internalization of hate is more evident in Ki-taek. Ki-taek is a very subtle character as a father; he is better than others at holding back, and better than others at keeping his hate bottled up. His apparent self-hatred is related to odor. The first time Da-song (the son of the host family) remarks that Ki-taek smells the same as the home keeper Chung-soo and the art teacher Ki-Jung (from 51 min 34 sec to 52 min 19 sec), Ki-taek sniffs it over and over again by tugging at his clothes; it’s a semi-underground smell that none of them can get rid of, and he’s been paying attention to smells ever since.

The second time when the owner came home unexpectedly and hid under the table, he heard the man and woman discussing the smell of his body (from 1 hr 27 min 18 sec to 1 hr 28 min 29 sec). The room was very quiet, with only the sound of the two masters talking. Ki-taek is lying quietly under the table less than 1 meter away from the two masters, listening to them holding the sofa and critiquing his smell. The director gave him two close-ups, one where he gently tugged his shirt to his nose and after sniffing it he popped it back on. The other was of him squeezing his eyes shut and his lips slightly opening and closing when he heard the male lead dislike his odor. The details of these two micro-expressions show the pain of being talked about that he bears amid the gap between the rich and the poor. He perceives that the smell represents his poor fate adsorbed on him and how it will not dissipate. He closes his eyes to suppress his hatred and low self-esteem; he shares Ki-woo’s dissatisfaction with his so-called destiny, and he hates his inability to change it.

The third time is when the hostess takes Ki-taek shopping for her son's birthday party, and their behavior contrasts greatly. Mistress kept Ki-taek busy while she laughed and talked to her friend on the phone. In the car on the way home, Mistress puts her feet up in the front seat and chats with her friend while Ki-taek drives grimly (1 hr 43 min 35 sec to 1 hr 45 min 1 sec). At this point, the hostess seems to smell that poor man's order again, and she performs an expression of disgust and opens the car window (1 hr 44 min 50 sec). Her every move reminds Ki-taek of the smell of poverty that he can't get rid of, causing Ki-taek to sniff his clothes again and to grow more and more stony and gloomy in his facial expression.

The fourth flavor-related movie episode comes when the host Park Dong-ik goes to get the car keys from the husband of his former homekeeper, Moon-gwang. Once again, the man makes a disgusted face and holds his nose as he goes to get the keys (1 hr 54 min 40 sec). This image is seen by Ki-taek, at which point the director gives Ki-taek a close-up shot, and the corners of his mouth momentarily droop and his expression becomes heavy. Ki-taek's ultimate choice to take the knife and stab the host is not actually because he hates Park Dong-ik, it is because the Park Dong-ik's demeanor reminds him of his inescapable scent and destiny, inspiring low self-esteem and hatred for himself. Although he stabs the male owner, he is not relieved. He runs away confused and cries in the basement because he hates himself, never anyone else.

4. Conclusion

As a narrative of the modern Korean mind, the movie work is not intended to occupy a central place in the writing that illustrates the culture of 'Han'. Just as the modern globalization of Asian cultures has resulted in the transformation of many local mentalities and values, it is difficult to accurately judge whether the cultural genes portrayed in a film are less than the full presentation of historical reality. Yet the movie presents a modern vision of the Korean national spirit in terms of narrative, spatial imagination, and plot tension. As presented in this paper in the analysis of specific details, this national spirit portrays the face of the nationals who are at the bottom of the social ladder and the valley of destiny, and at the same time maps the fortunate ones who are at the high ground and are temporarily exempted from the mockery of destiny. This cultural portrait of the modern national citizen is undoubtedly of sufficient value for modern cultural anthropological investigation, and this foothold is the core value that this study attempts to uncover.

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