

# Social Criticism in Korean Crime Comedies of the Post-IMF Era

LeeAnn Choi

82-252: Topics in Korean Culture

Beginning in the 1990s, the Korean film industry took a new step, presenting films that mix different genres as well as different sensibilities from “new-wavish stylization to blockbuster sensations and from art-house avant-gardism to commercial popularity” (Li 21). Especially in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis (or the IMF crisis), South Korean cinema began to thematize socio criticism through popular genres. Exemplary is the gangster and crime cinema, which has become a privileged form to comment on the reality of social injustice “through the lenses of urban crime and black humor” (Li 22). These films often touch upon the growing gap between the rich and the poor in Korean society. The unjust income levels of the poor and the rich are blatantly shown in, for instance, Kang Woo-suk’s *Public Enemy Returns* (2008) where police officers live off minimum wage while gangsters and former inmates become tremendously rich. Korean crime movies also frequently emphasize the growing number of unsolved cases in Korea, exposing the troubled minds of Korean citizens. While Korean post-crisis crime and gangster comedies successfully appeal to the mass public, using humor to lighten up the overall mood, they also cast strong socio-political critiques about the modern-day Korean society and its many forms of social injustice.

The IMF crisis brought Korea down to its rock-bottom, bankrupting the nation’s economy that had been experiencing fast and steady development for decades. Faced with accumulated debts, South Korea had no choice but to receive a bailout of \$58.5 billion from the IMF on the condition that Korea had to follow the IMF’s mandatory reform program that “required a wholesale reorganization of the country’s economic, financial and governmental systems” (Ibid.). This entailed the bankruptcy of many *chaebols* (conglomerates), the shutdown of numerous microenterprises and thus an escalation of unemployment in Korea. However, in the midst of the economic crisis, Korea experienced an oddly rapid growth in the cultural industries. As part of a long effort involving “governmental support, industrial restructuring, corporate

affluence and cultural exuberance” (Ibid. 23), Korea’s economy had shifted from the government-led investment model to a more market-oriented one. The newly thriving Korean cinema became the “driving force of the so-called ‘Korean Wave’, which has celebrated Korea as the new leading figure in the Asian pop culture scene” (Ibid.).

The major creative force of the film renaissance in Korean was the “386 generation,”<sup>1</sup> the baby-boomer generation of Korea. As witnesses of military dictatorship and the democracy movement (or the *Minjung* movement), they were conscious of political issues such as labor exploitation and public suppression. Yet they also “debuted with a knowledge of various film aesthetics and their self-consciousness of film styles” (Ibid.). Besides, the financial influx from big conglomerates and venture capitalists helped restructure the whole industry and increase its overall productivity. This series of events assisted the new generation filmmakers to accomplish their ambition to fuse socio-political concerns into genre experimentation. After Kim Sung-su’s success with his youth-centered gangster film *Beat* in 1997, a number of movies followed the same path focusing on male crisis, youth frustration, and social upheaval. Yet many of them fell short of critical voices until the post-crisis era due to “their often overt reliance on masculine sentimentalism and popular escapism” (25). The post-IMF crime films, on the other hand, took a different approach; they tended to combine comical elements with violent crimes to manifest highly sophisticated socio-political implications.

Drawing on Japanese yakuza films, old Korean gangster films used to deal with an “internal conflict within a gang or an external conflict between rival gangs, foregrounding the gangsters’ codes of conduct and their loyalty” (Choi 60). Gangsters evoked a sense of fear or repulsion. At the same time, however, the viewer often found pleasure in their exceptional faculty of action against social corruption. However, when the genre reemerged in the post-IMF era, it came back with new traits. Notable in this regard was the proliferation of clownish figures, as in films such as *Marrying the Mafia*, *My Wife Is a Gangster*, and *My Boss, My Hero*.

To be sure, the tendency to portray gangsters as successful “businessmen” continued in the post-IMF gangster films. Yet the new crime films are often marked by comic flavors stemming particularly from a “foolish clown figure with no clue about the criminal world surrounding him” (Li 26). Notably, Kang’s *Public Enemy Returns* centers on the life and work of Korean police officers, showing heroes as nothing more than “working-class laborers, whose job

---

<sup>1</sup> It refers to those who were born in the 1960s, went to college in the 1980s, and reached their 30s in the 1990s.

is dangerous, laborious, and poorly paid” (Ibid.). In the opening scene, Kang Chul-Joong, an impoverished police officer, is embarrassed during his visit to his daughter’s school by his daughter’s classmates who see gangsters as cooler than policemen—an image created by modern day films and dramas. Next, he meets a gangster he sent to prison years ago. The ex-convict now rides a Mercedes and runs multiple businesses. Thus accentuated is an irony: the people who serve their country live on an income that is not even enough to feed their own immediate family, while gangsters lead a far better life.<sup>2</sup>

Here, it is worth noting that the clownish characters in Korean cinema including Chul-joong often show the “inability to deal with money-related issues and their ignorance of the rules of the game in the capitalist world” (Ibid. 28). Chul-joong, for instance, cannot get a bank loan due to his poor credit, but he has no idea what the credit rate is and how it is determined: hence, a comedy of a cop arrested by a cop. Yet what is more important is that Chul-joong works as a prism that makes more legible the absurdity of society where righteousness repeatedly becomes synonymous with foolishness and those in power are often witnessed bending the law for their own benefits. *Public Enemy Returns*, along with many other Korean crime films, adds humor to the storyline perhaps to keep the film less serious and more entertaining. In doing so, however, it also continues to dig into social and economic injustice.

Indeed, crime comedies coincide with a strong tendency in Korean cinema today: the mixture of social critique and genre imagination. For instance, Korean cinema has been very vocal in criticizing Korea’s current police and justice system by creating movies based on real crimes. The Hwaseong serial murder case comes first to mind. O Korean cinema has been very vocal in criticizing Korea’s current police and justice system by creating movies based on such real cases. On September 15, 1986, a seventy-one-year-old woman was “found dead with her hands tied up with stockings and her face covered with her underwear” (Han). Since then, nine women had become victims of a serial murder until 1991. But the case still remain unsolved and the murderer is still at large. In 2003, Bong Joon Ho adapted the story into a horror film, *Memories of Murder*. Another recurring issue is the severity of punishments for certain criminals. Lee Joon Ik’s 2013 film *Hope* is based on the infamous Nayoung Case in 2008, in which an eight-year-old girl was raped and beaten by an intoxicated man in a public bathroom. The court sentenced the

---

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this irony echoes the real condition in Korea. About the half of all middle-class Korean households “risk falling into poverty as they are trapped by slow income growth and increased expenditures” (Chosun).

man to only twelve years in prison, which angered the country due to the level of brutality of the crime and the man's past records of physical and sexual violence. While these films keep a serious mood throughout the storyline, the central heroes in the films, either a police officer or the father of the victim, also maintain the naïve and foolish characteristics similar to crime-comedy protagonists. The inability of the main characters to understand the criminal world and the capitalist system seem to be a key element that allows the audience to feel closer to them.

Following the IMF crisis, the Korean film industry produced films that mix different genres to implement social criticism. In the post-IMF era, comedies have been taking over the box office. In particular, gangster and crime comedies have become a powerful way for new generation filmmakers to comment on social problems. These films often emphasize the growing gap between the rich and the poor within Korean society. Korean crime movies also frequently emphasize the importance of the growing number of unsolved cases in South Korea. Furthermore, Korea's justice system is often brought into question, as victims and the public often argue that the punishments do not justify the painful experiences the victims had faced. Korean crime comedies in the post-IMF era confirm that humor is not simply for lightening up the film and pandering to the public taste, but can serve as a powerful vehicle to deliver socio-political criticism.

#### Works Cited

- Choi, Jinhee. *South Korean Film Renaissance: Local Hitmakers, Global Provocateurs* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2010), 60-84.
- Han, Elizabeth. "Is the Law Always Right?: A Study of the Statute of Limitations and the Police System Through 'The Three Unresolved Criminal Cases.'" *PIT Journal*. 4 (2013). <http://pitjournal.unc.edu/article/law-always-right-study-statute-limitations-and-police-system-through--three-unresolved>. Web. 1 Mar. 2015.
- Li, Jinying. "Clowns, Crimes, and Capital: Popular Crime-comedies in Post-crisis Korea." *Film International*, 38 (2009): 20-34.
- Editorial. "Why Korea's Middle Class Is Collapsing." *The Chosun Ilbo*, (16 Apr. 2013). [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2013/04/16/2013041601219.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/04/16/2013041601219.html). Web. 01 Mar. 2015.