



## New Connection Between Korea and Japan With the Movie 'Parasite'

### Crossing the National Border and Moving the Boundary

On January 10 this year, one of my Japanese friends living in Tokyo kept in touch. “It was really good. It was worth the wait!” On the first day of the movie ‘Parasite’ (Japanese title, <Parasite Semi-Underground Family>) was released all across Japan, the friend who first came to the theater to watch the movie is a woman in her 40s and a fan of actor Lee Sun-Gyun and Korean movies and dramas. Apparently she has been deliberately avoiding all spoilers and news since the opening of ‘Parasite’ in Korea in order to watch the movie in theaters without any prejudice. Last summer, for a friend who was worried about the rapidly deteriorating relationship between Korea and Japan and anti-Korean sentiment, the fact that you can watch a movie starring your favorite actor in Japanese theaters, coupled with the fact that many Japanese people are going to theaters to see the movie must have felt really enjoyable for her.

In fact, starting with the preliminary showing on December 27, 2019, the movie ‘Parasite’ was released officially in Japan on January 10, 2020. And now, in mid-March, the movie ‘Parasite’ is still being loved in Japan and is breaking the record for most viewing of Korean movie in Japan.

Various explanations have already been given to the reason why ‘Parasite’ has become popular in Japan. The most promising answer would be the fact that the wholesome level and cinematic fun of ‘Parasite’ were shared all over the world, and Japan was no exception. The cinematic perfection that satisfies both work and box office success, and the ‘Parasite’ and director Bong Joon-ho’s fandom, which grew rapidly through word

of mouth in the SNS era, clearly show that Korean cinema is one of the global cultural phenomena.

On the other hand, some Japanese mass media, which focus on the fact that the box office was more empowered after receiving the Academy Award, emphasized Korea's 'national policy' to support for the film industry, and criticized why Japanese films have not yet received the Academy Award. Some anti-Korean Japanese people argued that 'Parasite' revealed the embarrassing side of Korea and claimed that they should know the miserable reality of a "super-gap society". In addition, those who pay attention to the fact that 'Parasite' contains a critical message on the class problem and super-divided society in modern Korea, became interested in learning the perception of meanings of modern Korean society exposed in 'Parasite' such as Taiwan Castella, semi-underground home, chapaguri, and furthermore, realized that the extreme class differences and competition depicted in the film were not just exclusive stories of others. Many movie reviews say that while 'Parasite' is completely different in content or style, the movie's theme reminded of Hirokazu Kore-eda's 'Like Father, Like Son,' which won the Golden Palm Award in 2018. Regardless of whether the reaction within Japan is positive or negative, the film 'Parasite' focuses on the aspect of Korean society different from Japan. In other words, they are watching the movie 'Parasite' as a symbol representing Korean society from the perspective of the Japanese.

However, this kind of explanation alone cannot fully understand the atmosphere in Japan surrounding the film 'Parasite'. This is because the appreciation of the movie 'Parasite' is never clearly classified according to the national boundaries. This fact can be easily understood if you recall the fact that there have been debates about the commercialization of poverty or the portrayal of female characters in Korea as well. The 'Parasite', which is a Korean movie, is not seen and reacted by the Japanese, but the film attracts some Japanese and some Koreans. Or maybe they have already been attracting 'Parasite' for a long time. Therefore, we need a new perspective on this phenomenon. It is worth paying attention to the fact that it is not a homogeneous group that divides along the borders of Korea and Japan that supported the success of the movie 'Parasite' in Japan, but a cultural force created by meeting certain Japanese people with certain Korean people. In Japan, they were different from Korean drama fans or K-POP idol fandoms represented by the existing 'Korean wave'. Because of this group of people, the movie 'Parasite' has been able to gain a lot of support despite 'right now' the spread of the conflict between Korea-Japan relations has continued since last summer along with the spread of 'anti-Korean' sentiment, and the abolition of the mutual visa-free system after the recent coronavirus outbreak.

## Support Korean cinema with love for cinema

Korean movies first began to gain popularity in Japan, dating back to the early 2000s with the film 'Swiri'. Interestingly, unlike the 'Korean wave' that started with the NHK broadcast of Winter Sonata, followed by the Korean drama boom and the subsequent K-POP idol boom, Korean films have been introduced to Japan more independently, thereby forming a fan base. This is because, unlike other popular culture genres, movies are more poetic and artistic, and at the same time, they presuppose more active consumption (such as watching movies in a movie theater or purchasing separate contents on the Internet, etc.). Compared to Korean dramas and K-pop, which can be easily accessed through terrestrial/cable TV or YouTube, even without special interest, Korean films were considered relatively unknown as 'the third world's films' to Japanese audiences.

Another aspect that reinforced this perception is that Korean films have the characteristics of dealing with violence more directly and actively dealing with social issues. Compared to Japanese films that are calmer and focused on daily life, there are many opinions that Japanese audiences feel unfamiliar or drawn back by Korean film's emphasis on the message that has more violence and bloodshed and deals more directly with modern history or social issues.

However, the presence of Japanese audiences and movie officials who have not been preoccupied with such prejudices and have been steadily watching and loving Korean films is an important point when understanding the basis for the popularity of 'Parasite'. The most representative example is Bitters End, an independent distributor who has been in charge of the Japanese distribution of 'Parasite' and has consistently introduced director Bong Joon-ho's films to Japan since a decade ago.

Those who would have been happier than director Bong to win the Academy Award for 'Parasite' in Japan supported Bong Joon-ho's 2008 Tokyo-based omnibus film, which has been introduced to Japanese society. In addition, in an atmosphere that the mass media does not deal with 'Parasite' well due to the spread of anti-Korean sentiment, they devised a marketing method to prevent spoilers and succeeded following director Bong Joon-ho's intention.

Specifically, a movie preview was held for Japanese directors, filmmakers, and actors who support Bong Joon-ho, and through their comments, the cinematic value and entertainment of 'Parasite' were actively promoted. As a matter of fact, Bong Joon-ho's appreciation and trust of Bitters End, a small company, played a big role in the distribution of the movie even after winning the award.

## People who are not Korean wave Hallyu fans but love Korean movies

Also there was the presence of movie fans who responded enthusiastically to the stage greetings of director Bong Joon-ho and actor Song Kang-ho at the time of the preliminary disclosure in December last year. They were mostly female fans in their 20s to 40s who loved movies, who wrote on social media that it was an honor to book the stage greetings of Bong Joon-ho and Song Kang-ho, who are not popular K-POP idols. These movie fans, who can be easily found on Twitter, are more open-minded movie fans who enjoy not only Japanese movies but also various movies from around the world, and the Korean movies after 2010s served as an important opportunity to stimulate interests about Korea.

These Korean movie fans are different from previous Korean film fans, who have been interested in Korean films as part of Asian films, or because they became interested in Korean history and politics. In an era when they could choose and watch movies from various countries, most of them became interested in Korean movies not because they were interested in Korea, but because they accidentally came upon seeing Korean movies and found the actors' acting excellent. In other words, there are many movie fans who were not necessarily related to Korean dramas or K-POP that became fond with Korean movies.

And part of their characteristics is that they are enthusiastic about the films that have been produced in Korea since the 2010s and classified as violent and male-oriented films such as 'New World', 'Asura: The City of Madness', and 'The Merciless'. They are enthusiastic about these Korean films and middle-aged actors such as Song Kang-ho, Hwang Jung-min, and Jung Woo-sung, who play main characters in these films, and enjoy creating parodies that interpret the ties between Korean men depicted in these films as homosexual relationships. Just as in Korea, there is a fandom of women who interpret the relationship between male characters in the US and UK mini-drama series in a 'bromance' way, they enjoy parodies of the relationship between men that Korean films have consistently described in their own imagination in various ways.

At the same time, as global movie fans, they highly value and actively enjoy movies as entertainment created by Korea's developed film industry. These fans were first drawn into Korean films that deal with the homosocial between men, as mentioned above, but most of them come into contact with various films and dramas as they gradually expand their scope with their favorite actors or directors. In particular, the influence of streaming services such as Netflix, which has recently spread around the world, is also important. People who are familiar with the Internet and SNS and want to actively access new content have begun to actively enjoy Korean content released on Netflix.

Furthermore, they have a lot of interest in the contemporary history of Korea and the

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socio-cultural background, which are continuously summoned to Korean films. Here, their interest is focused on Korean society as a contemporary society, and particularly sensitive to recent issues raised in Korea, such as feminism issues and social disparity issues. Even though the governments of both Korea and Japan are confronting political and historical issues, it is interesting considering the fact that they share simultaneous issues as a democratic society in East Asia and the difference in the way they approach these issues lead to continued interest in Korean films and contents.

On February 23, at a press conference hosted by the Japanese Journalist Club, actor Song Kang-ho said the following remarks about the 'Parasite' Academy Award. Song Kang-ho said that "while the once active cultural exchanges between Korea and Japan in the early 2000s have now weakened, I would be happy to return to the time when the works of the Korea and Japan are mutually supported with 'Parasite' as an opportunity." Contrary to the wishes of actor Song Kang-ho, my Japanese friend introduced at the beginning of this article planned a trip to Korea last year and this year respectively, but last year he gave up his trip to Korea because of the people around him were worried about the deteriorating relationship between Korea and Japan and the mutual visa-free system was suspended after the coronavirus outbreak, making it almost impossible to know when travel to Korea could be realized.

The consensus and contemporaneity formed through the film are often face setbacks in front of the barriers of reality. If this is the reality that we are facing, what is needed in Korea-Japan relations now is to find and confirm the foundation and genealogy of this belief once again.



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