

HOPE OR SILENCED? — HOW SOUTH KOREAN CINEMAS LAUNCH A FUTURE WITHOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Xichen Wang

Culver Academies, Culver, IN, USA

ABSTRACT

Although South Korean cinemas and shows are famous for their thoughtful social commentaries, they are often overlooked and regarded as simple commercial tools. Fortunately, in recent years, the movie Parasite and the Netflix show Squid Game have brought such a unique phenomenon in South Korea to the rest of the world. Other than social status, South Korean films often comment on child abuse, including domestic violence and sexual assault. Emerging as a tool to combat the lack of child protection laws in South Korea, directors and writers began and continue to carry the burden of seeking justice. This paper surveys several works of South Korean films focusing on child abuse to highlight how societies responded politically to films. The finding found that the combination of film techniques, Asian countries' cinematic approach, and government reaction make South Korean social films unique in the world of cinematic arts.

KEYWORDS

South Korean Cinema, Child Abuse, Political Reactions, Cinematography Techniques, Film and Impact.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bong Joon-ho kicked 2020 off with a bang when his film *Parasite* won Best Picture at the Oscars. The success of *Parasite* not only brought the brilliance and beauty of South Korean cinema into the purview of the average worldwide cinema-goer, it also raised awareness of the place film plays in that society's system of social critique. Korea has always been famous for producing movies heavy with great social commentary on issues including child abuse, sexual assault, class divisions, and the like.

A shocking number of such films are about child abuse. In 2020, there were 42251 reported child abuse cases, showing a continuously growing trend from the 41389 cases in 2019 and the 29674 cases in 2016. Besides these confirmed cases, reported incidents rose 13.7 percent from 2018 to 2019. Behind many of the reported incidents are valid cases that were ignored due to either police nonfeasance or if the offenders were the child's parents, it became hard to find proof.

The 2013 drama *Hope* recounts the story of the "Cho Doo-soon case" of 2008, where an eight-year-old girl Na-young was raped in a church's bathroom; the 2011 drama *Silenced* shed light on the child abuse case in a school for the deaf and mute; the 2019 film *The First Client* depicts domestic violence that happened in 2013. It is not uncommon for writers and directors around the world to use movies and television shows to grapple with social problems, often allowing audiences to envision futures in which a particular social problem has gone unchecked, or by bringing attention to a meaningful but little-known story. The Social Network in 2010 by David

Fincher reveals the menacing side of social media, and *Dog Day Afternoon* in 1975 by Sidney Lumet touches both on both the Lavender Scare and social divisions in America.

However, Korean films are unique in that they have gone even further as a cultural phenomenon—even managing to incite the public to push for altered laws or making an actual tangible social impact in other ways, such as parades and revolts followed by the reopening of investigations on many cases. In the course of my research, I have not only explored how directors can use the elements and techniques of their craft to create compelling movies based on true stories but also the patterns of social commentary in these films, with an eye toward answering the question: why have societies responded politically to some films instead of others, and how has the government responded to the public's emotional responses and calls for action?

This paper surveys recent films made in South Korea, directed by South Korean directors. Impacts of films like *Hope* and *Silenced* extended beyond South Korea, however. Many western critics and media have responded, including NYT and letterboxd. In the 21st century, the impact of these films keeps expanding and their social impact, both domestic and overseas, is becoming more tangible.

2. HOPE - “WE WON’T LET HER SHED TEARS AGAIN.”

Directed by Lee Joon-ik (이준익), *Hope* is a heartbreaking movie based on the true story of how an 8-year-old girl named Sowon had to recover and learn to find hope and peace after being sexually assaulted. Despite her young age, Sowon had to grapple with fear and grief throughout the film, and Joon-ik recreates a dramatic version of her journey towards eventually finding hope and light at the end of this dark period in her life.

Sowon is not the "perfect child," but she is vivacious and authentic. Sowon, like many girls of her age, would make funny faces at her friends, laugh about how big her friend's face was, and get mad when her dad Dong-Hoon did not braid her hair in the morning. Doon Hoon, Mi-Hee, and Sowon live in a compound house. On the first floor of their house is a grocery store that the parents run. While they do not live the wealthiest life and Doon-Hoon and Mi-Hee would get into arguments regarding the nitty-gritty, Sowon's brightening character supports the family and keeps the parents going.

The tragedy happened on a grumpy morning—Sowon's dad did not have time to braid her hair, so she had to walk to school with it undone. She was running late, and it was pouring outside. Mi-Hee, Sowon's mother, asked if she should walk her to school, but Sowon rejected the kind offer and took the journey with a bright yellow umbrella. Starting here in this domestic scene, the director reminds the audience that this could be any family. That we never know when our lives are about to change drastically. The characters are humanized so that when audiences realize there is an actual true story behind the case, they feel like they already know the people involved and want to help them.

"Remember to walk on the main street! Don't go into the small alley for shortcuts!" Mi-Hee yelled as she watched Sowon disappear into a little black dot. In the act of foreshadowing, Sowon ventured off the main road as soon as she was out of her parent's sight. Her peers ran by her yelling, "We're gonna be late!" Sowon looked towards the school gate and walked a little faster, trying to catch up with the group of boys. This was when a pair of soggy, dirty slippers appeared, blocking her way. The director immediately places the audience in Sowon's perspective, here, allowing us to identify with her so that when we realize what horrible thing has happened, it's as

if it's also happened to us. This is a psychological effect related to empathy and one of the many ways the director's techniques led to such great public interest in a relatively older criminal case.

Drenched in rainwater, the man asked Sowon if she would hold her umbrella with him. Sowon, being a kind kid and feeling bad for him, said yes. The man then brought her back to his house, and the next thing we see is the disturbing ambulance whistle and Sowon's mom Mi-Hee kneeling on the hospital floor, bawling. This is just another example of how the director can use his craft to affect an audience emotionally: the jump in time allows our imaginations to think the worst, rather than showing the attack, which might cause some to walk away or close their eyes. Older audience members are also able to empathize easily with the mother's response and pain.

The film was based on the Cho Doon-soon case that occurred in Ansan, South Korea, in December 2008. "Na-young" (a pseudonym for the girl who was attacked), the real person behind the character of Sowon, was eight-year-old when she got dragged to a bathroom inside a church by Cho. Cho was 56 years old, and he had a horrendous amount of criminal records, including minor crimes like stealing and sexual crimes such as raping a 69-year-old woman to where she needed almost a year of treatment for recovery. Cho spent merely three years in prison for that crime, but then he committed more crimes when he got out. Cho assaulted a bar hostess and raped a man to death. Because he claimed that he was drunk during every single one of his crimes, his sentence was always cut short, and he never got a life sentence even though his total of 18 crimes was well above the threshold of getting one.

"Na-young" suffered from the extreme damage Cho had caused to her body. Her lower abdomen and anus were permanently damaged, and she needed to use a colostomy bag up until she got an artificial anus through surgery. She went through 8 months of painful treatment, but that was just the damage done to her physical body. "Na-young" also experienced severe mental distress after the assault, and she continued to suffer from depression and anxiety attacks years after the event happened. Furthermore, the incompetence of the jury during the court's testimony caused further unwanted impacts on "Na-young's" mental health. The poor girl had to sit with her colostomy bag in court, in a crowd made up of the public, and answer the same questions regarding details of the incident four times due to the prosecutor's failure to record.

During "Na-young's" testimony, she indicated that Cho smelled like alcohol—a fact that no one thought would possibly change the course of the decision—but based on this fact, the court proceeded to reduce Cho's sentence to 12 years. The court reasoned that since Cho was under the influence of alcohol, he didn't commit the crime out of his own will.

"I am not the type of a sick monster who rapes an 8-year-old girl." Cho shamelessly stated 300 times to the judges.

3. AFTERMATH, REACTION, AND INFLUENCE

The public was not happy with the court's decision—enraged by such light punishment for Cho, and many movies and songs were produced in response to the case, including the movie *Hope* and a song called "Nayoung" by ALi. After his release in 2020, people went on protests and began stalking him for attacks, throwing and shouting things at him. The anger only grew when the crowd discovered that Cho was under heavy protection by the police, who advised him to wear a hat and a mask, so he did not have to answer any questions from the media.

"What kind of country is this, protecting rapists?" was shouted out from the crowd while Cho was released from prison.

The crowd threw eggs at the van and whatever they could find. Some even lay on the ground in an attempt to block the van. However, all the “obstacles” were soon removed by the police. Cho began to receive death threats from South Korean citizens, especially those living in Ansan. The government realized that they had to do something to calm the public.

The “Cho Doo-Soon Law” got passed by the National Assembly in 2020 upon Cho’s release from prison. It banned all criminals who assaulted minors from leaving their houses during school hours or at night. The law also eliminated their chances of going near schools— a direct response to the tragic incident that happened to Na-young. In addition, the police and the government worked together to monitor all Cho’s activities. He now needs to wear an ankle band at all times, and 200 million KRW was spent monitoring Cho over four months.

4. HOW A FILM CAN CREATE EMOTION

So the question remains: how did Lee Joon-ik create a film that emotionally impacted its viewers? Yes, he used some psychological techniques to build empathy with the characters. However, there are many other techniques the director used to trigger anger, sympathy, and—ultimately— an urge to create change in his audiences.

Lee uses colors cleverly throughout the movie to make the main character, Sowon, stand out and accentuate the innocence and pureness of the little girl. Towards the beginning of the film, right before the rape happens, Sowon is carrying a yellow umbrella that contrasts significantly with her gray and depressing surroundings. The bright yellow umbrella is a fun and "childish" color compared to the austere and serious black and white tones associated with old movies and earlier generations. The film also plays with the idea of colorful=innocence by having Sowon wear bright colored clothes throughout the movie, except during her time in the hospital where she has to wear a white and uniform dress. The stark nature of her hospital gown makes her stand out easily from the crowd in every single scene, further showing her alienation. Painter and Theorist Wassily Kandinsky once said, "Colour is a power which directly influences the soul," and Lee definitely utilizes the color techniques to its max.

Kim Tae-Kyeong is the cinematographer of the film and avoids playing with experiential or "groundbreaking" cinematography, choosing instead to frame shots in an understandable manner that can ground audiences and deliver a sense of Hope. As pointed out earlier, the movie is kind enough to not explicitly show the sexual assault, but a long dolly shot is used to insinuate the violence, building tension by showing a series of items on the muddy floor—bloody shoes, Sowon's ripped clothes, and her pink phone—until there is no doubt in the audience's mind what must have occurred by the time it reaches its ending place. The dolly is a moving piece of equipment that allows the camera to record smooth clips. The smooth nature of the shot allows the audience to easily follow the action and make judgments about what they are seeing, versus handheld or other quickly changing shots, which can make an audience feel confused or stressed. As the dolly carries the camera and hones in on Sowon, Kim has already made the audience concerned about Sowon, so they now feel protective of her situation.

Similarly, in the movie *Interstellar*, Christopher Nolan used a dolly shot to hone in on Anne Hathaway's face to make audiences feel the "power of love." In *Hope*, by using a long take and dolly, Lee wants to amplify the empathy the audiences feel for Sowon. Right after the sexual assault, the film cuts to a series of short clips of the mother crying and fainting as she sees Sowon lying on the hospital bed. Since quick cuts can convey frustration and confusion, they amplify the mom's grief and mental state of confusion, fear, and denial. These are just a few examples of how

Hope uses good cinematography to convey emotions. However, they show how Lee and Kim worked to match the intended emotions with camera movements.

5. “SILENCED”—MOUTHS CAN BE MUTED BY HEARTS CAN’T

Unfortunately, *Hope* is not the only film touching on the subject of child abuse in South Korea. *Silenced* directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk, is one of the films that gets compared to *Hope* most often. With leader actor, Gong Yoo, *Silenced* paints the story of students being sexually assaulted at a Gwangju Inhwa School— a school for deaf kids. Being deaf and mute, students in the school can't easily express themselves or even always comprehend what the principles and the faculty are doing to them. In addition, the students were more vulnerable because most of their parents work in cities far away, and other visitors like grandparents were easier to confuse regarding the students' actions and responses.

In the movie, Kang In-ho, played by Gong Yoo, is an art teacher from Seoul who just arrived in a small town called Mujin to teach at this boarding school for deaf kids. The school's principal has an identical twin that works there as well. Kang soon realizes this school is not "normal" because all the students react strongly when he takes even one step toward them. He then witnesses a student being beaten in the office by a teacher, yet because the student is deaf, he cannot produce understandable words to argue for himself. Meanwhile, none of the teachers in the office even turn their heads as if they are all too well used to such sceneries.

Kang discovers a video recording by the school principal, in which he and his twin brother force one of the young female students to watch sexually explicit videos first and then rape her. After getting the kids' consent, Kang is deeply disturbed by the video, so he contacts a child protection organization and decides to report the principals to the police.

Kang faced extreme difficulties trying to grapple with the judges and protect the student's rights. He faced opposition from the local government, the child protection organizations, and even his mom. These obstacles prove that what *Hope* conveyed is not a single case in South Korea.

Silenced depicts a true story that happened in 2005. The film is accurate in most details, and the case started with a teacher's report. With nine victims speaking up, six teachers were put forward for investigation. However, most of the suspects were immediately released as the court thought their assaults happened too long ago and did not meet the requirements for a formal investigation. The principals were sentenced to five years, but the court once again reduced their punishments to a 3 million *won* (=2163.74 USD) fine. The victims were kicked out of school after the trial ended, and many teachers who went to prison were hired back into the school. The school kept running until 2011, even receiving 1.8 billion *won* (=1,298,242.31 USD) in funds every year from the government.

In October of 2011, just one month after *Silenced* came out, the national assembly of Korea passed the "Dogani Law," which translates to "The Crucible" since *Silenced* was based on a book about the case name. Dogani Law increased the degree of punishments for sex-crime offenders that assaulted disabled children under 13. Prison terms increased from 7 years to life imprisonment. In addition, if the sex offender is a head of an organization or educational institute, they face even more severe punishments. The law also reinstated the pre-existing law of "inability to resist,"—which was meant to protect children victims who cannot protect themselves and fight back. After the public's response to *Silenced*, the national assembly finally realized how such a clause had been used in favor of the offenders because the court often asks for proof of the inability of the victims to resist. Last but not least, "because many welfare facilities where the disabled stay are not properly monitored, like Gwangju Inhwa School, as depicted in the film,"

the assembly decided to create a committee of 18 lawmakers from both parties in South Korea to focus on investigating human rights infringements of the disabled, according to a member of the national assembly.

When the film *Silenced* came out in 2011, the Gwanju city government made a decision that should've been made six years earlier. The Gwangju Inhwa School finally closed—two months later due to pressure from the public.

Like in *Hope*, *Silenced* also utilizes camera angles to convey emotions to the audience. A lot of low and high-angle shots are used in the movie to establish the power dynamic between the deaf students and the principal. In a particularly disturbing scene, a girl is hiding in the bathroom stall, holding her breath as she prays that no one will find her. However, when she looks up, the principal's face is right above her, as he had broken into the girl's bathroom and was looking down at her with a smile on his face. The camera tracks the principal's face, and the audience is being put into the poor girl's POV—low, scared, and hopeless. The height difference successfully establishes the theme of the movie and how no matter what the girls do, they cannot escape, not even by hiding in a tiny bathroom stall.

Both Lee and Hwang are excellent examples of how the directors can play with the colors and camera movement to accomplish what they want.

Silenced is unique in that it portrays a picture that people don't want to admit seeing. When children in South Korea face abuse and discrimination, bystanders don't stand up. Lawyers would try to find holes in the laws to protect the culprits, since they are most likely the richest. Social organizations remain blinded when reports come in, as they are often aligned with the central government to maintain the deceived image of a peaceful society.

6. CONCLUSION

Upon Cho's release on December 12, 2020, Na-young began to live in fear once again. Cho will be required to wear an ankle monitor and be watched for the next seven years. However, the ankle monitor alone is insufficient for erasing the scar from Na-young's, or anyone else's, heart.

As Na-young and her family continue to live in fear, it is vital for the country to ponder what has caused them to come to such a place: especially the government-and-law-enforcement-backed societal attitude of blaming the victim of sexual assault cases and the hopeless and silenced masses who are too scared to stand up when needed. Movies like *Hope* and *Silenced* no doubt played an essential role in changing related laws in South Korea, but films and the art industry can't and shouldn't be the only solution. Although art-films included—is an effective way to cause audiences to know about a societal problem, for true change to take place in society, the government and legal system must work more proactively to protect minors and the disabled. Every day, people must stand up and fight against injustice wherever they see it: down the street, on the big screen, or even on the nightly news.

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