

Reply 1997's Directorial Decisions and Their Upbringing of Social Awareness of Modern Korean Issues

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ASIA 367: Final Paper

1. Introduction

As a versatile medium, drama has preserved itself as one of the many expressive medium in society and as the world veers towards the end of its next decade, the growth of technology becomes the common words for many; one of which is the medium of Korean dramas. Between the large screens in people's homes to the ever-growing ones on the palms of each smartphone owner's hand, drama becomes a medium that is not only versatile in nature, but also extremely easy to consume. As such, certain aspects of this medium can be exploited. Threaded through the actions and dialogue, many social issues can be derived from many dramatical pieces. As a result of such advancements, it is to no surprise that the popularity of Korean dramas has drastically risen due to the current phenomenon known as the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*). As a country that promotes the idea of unification and 'one-ness' (Jo and Cho 2007, 465) Korean dramas could be seen as a soft therapeutic release that speaks the words of others without being overly assertive in the message due to the entertaining nature of dramas themselves. In this way, many dramas have come out to reveal thought provoking messages that speak to the social, ethical and economic issues of today's Korea while also being easy to digest albeit hard to swallow. Out of the many dramas that could accomplish this, the award-winning drama directed by Shin Won-Ho *Reply 1997* (2012, tvN) stands to be a prominent example that covers a variety of prevalent social issues in modern Korean society. With comedic captivation, issues regarding homosexuality, *sasaeng*¹ behaviour and Korea's views on the academic success become themes explored within the show's plot. As such, in this essay I will discuss the directorial decisions taken in the show's execution and why they were designed to promote provocation of thought; adapting into further connotations to the issues that modern day Korea faces.

2. Gang Jun-Hui: Struggles of Korea's LGBT community

Homosexuality. The past taboo of a modern ghost still strikes discomfort in the minds of many when spoken about in modern day Korea. It is to no surprise that ever since the move towards a liberal and capitalist democracy, the LGBT community have developed into a large subculture that is disappointingly shunned in the modern era (Yi and Phillips 2015, 125). Ever since the mid-twentieth century, the solidification of binary and hierarchical concept of gender became the foreground that deemed homosexuality as foreign and 'un-Korean' (Yi and Phillips 2015, 125). Because of this, the separation of values become a rising issue that modern day Korea faces. In this section, I will explore the director's choice to include a homosexual character as part of the story's main plot and how the plot's unfolding helps in revealing the undeniable real-life struggles of the LGBT community in modern Korea.

¹ Korean pop fans that have devoted much of their lives in obsessive behaviour towards their favourite idols



Figure 1: Yun-je expresses his feelings moments after Jun-hui confesses to him.

“So why do you like Shi-won?” Yun-je turns to Jun-hui as he asks what has been on his mind for the longest time. “I’m not into her,” Jun-hui stares back at Yun-je with honesty, “I don’t like her... there’s someone else I like.”

“Who is it?”

Jun-hui took a deep breath before facing the one he most admired, ‘you.’ A long pause followed but before long, a smile cracked through Yun-je’s face, “you’re out of your mind! Fine, I’m not curious anymore!” ...” you crazy punk! You scared me!” The audio fades as Jun-hui closes up the scene narrating, “the reason I like you?... because it’s you”

In this scene, Gang Jun-hui (Lee Ho-dong) is seen to be confronted about a misguided assumption from Yun Yun-je (Seo In-guk) whereby he mistakenly thought that Jun-hui was attracted to Seong Si-won (Jung Eun-ji); Yun-je’s admirer however, after hit with an unexpected reply, Yun-je bursts out laughing at how ridiculous it was, ridiculing it as some form of cruel joke while Jun-hui resorts to playing it off as though he was right. Successfully capturing the nostalgia of many viewers, *Reply 1997* employs a homosexual character to illustrate the struggles one affiliated with LGBT would face when faced with the tendency to assimilate to the heteronormative lifestyle back in 1997. This is reflected by the multiple times in the show where Jun-hui confronts his emotions as he hesitates to let them out in fear of the social norms and stigmas existing back then.

Youn notes that, “While overt homophobia has not been a prominent feature of Korean society to date, as homosexuality becomes increasingly visible, our enormously strong internalized homophobia may begin to find external expressions.” (Youn 1996, 6-7) and this is gradually evident as the scene progresses which leads to Yun-je’s outburst. Moreover, while it confirms the widespread belief of the absurdity of this confession, Jun-hui’s repression of his emotions further emphasizes on the uncomfortable nature of the topic in general. As such, the director’s choice to include Jun-hui’s plotline is seen by many as one of oppression which resulted from the customary norms. While the success of such exposure does vary on how well one is aware of the issue, the actor Lee Ho-dong himself has come

out expressing that the experience of playing the character went as far as to traumatize him as he was confronted about his sexuality over a year after the drama's finale².

Overshadowed by the widespread belief that speaking about LGBT is taboo, LGBT in Korea still faces a vast number of discrimination and the show helps propagate the ongoing negative stigma. While the gay and lesbian movement has been around since 1993, it was woefully under-represented in the literature of Korea's democracy due to the oppression surrounding the stigma rather than the movement's significance. (Kim and Cho, 209). On a slightly more promising note however, there have been several noble attempts to use the mass media to portray homosexuality positively and to dispel homophobic myths, albeit with uneven success (Youn 1996, 7). This in turn brings upon us to question the effectiveness of drama as a medium in communicating controversial issues and whether it may be needed to use more assertive methods to produce a more positive outlook.

3. Sung Si-won: The Normalization of Sasaeng Behaviour

While the drama industry flourished in its newfound fanbase, another existing fanbase had already begun influencing the masses through an even more digestible medium; music. Though the existence of Korean pop music stands to be the pinnacle of the Korean wave, it is paramount to note the driving force behind the now all-known genre of music; the fanbase and with it, its darkness that is fueled by obsession, extremity and their resulting consequences.



Fig 2. Si-won is caught camping right outside her favourite idol, Tony's house.

² Mnet K-POP, YouTube, February 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQu4LlrJc7k>.

In *Reply 1997*, Si-won is portrayed as the embodiment of a fan in a more extreme order known as *sasaeng*, a common term used in Korea to describe the obsessive behaviours that a portion of a fanbase harbours which would come off to the public as worrisome and in some cases, extreme. In the picture above, Si-won is caught by one of her friends while she sets up a camp alongside various other *sasaeng* fans outside her favourite idol Tony's house. Although the scene is executed in a comedic fashion, it is unjustified to not think critically about Si-won's actions in reflection to how Kpop (short form of Korean pop) fans behave nowadays. It is in their idolization that these fans have reportedly stalked artists, effectively intruding into their private lives, leading to their physical and emotional states tarnished. In order to stand out of crowds of fans, they have gone to extremes to the point of trying to meet them at the airport, practice space or even the hair salon (Williams and Ho 2015, 82). In relation to the drama, Si-won's character depicts the initial outburst of the Korean Wave, effectively posing as a critical character whose actions become relatable to in the 21st century. Through this example, I argue that the director's decision to develop Si-won's character in that way provides viewers a platform to easily digest both the absurdity of the behaviour as well as its resulting consequences which in effect leads the masses to think critically before falling into the lifestyle that Si-won adapts in the drama.

In the same scope, the issue of Si-won's behaviour can also be perceived as the normalization of *sasaeng* behaviour. From the way the drama portrays Si-won's behaviour, her actions are seen more of antics and acts of foolishness which entirely contradicts their perceptions in reality. Moreover, it comes off as a worrisome issue that in turn evolves into implications outside of Korea. It is interesting to note that to scholars, *sasaeng* behaviour is embedded within larger discourses of fear and stigma where they adapt a 'virtual social identity' which are rooted in stereotypes (Goffman 1963, 3); 'abnormal' and 'irresponsible' being two of the many negative values attributed to the fans. Moreover, studies have shown that such behaviour has consequently been adapted in other parts of Asia, namely Singapore; one of the most successful economies in the South-East Asia region.

Williams and Ho note that "as mass-mediated spectators, K-pop fans and non-fans alike build up an image of revulsion and appall despite a seeming lack of first-person experience with self identifying *sasaeng* fans. Mass and social media quickly diffuse the *sasaeng* fan identity. And to the extent that such Othering discourses circulate unchallenged, the myth of the *sasaeng* fan is strengthened, further limiting assumptions about "right" and "wrong" ways to be a K-pop fan." (Williams and Ho 2015, 87). As a result of such, due to their geographical distinction, Singaporean Kpop fans were said to find their mediate fandoms insufficient to sustain their desire to participate in Kpop culture. In this sense, two consequences arise: first being Singaporean fans' tendencies to create their own opportunities when possible, increasing their likelihood of them being labelled as *sasaeng* fans and second being the fans' tendency to find it necessary to compare and evaluate their personal identities and practices to the mediated social identity of the extreme fans found in Korea (Williams and Ho 2015, 88); effectively challenging their authentic identities.

Though I am certain that the main intention of Si-won's *sasaeng* behaviour was to characterize a Kpop fan in 1997, it is hard to ignore the hints that her character provides the audience with in relation to the 21st century. It is evident that her character also provides a basis of belonging which solidifies as evidence of pop nationalism and a sense of lifestyle belonging³. As a result, this way of life inherently

³ Saeji, CedarBough. "Transnationalism: Nationalism in Korea." Lecture, Vancouver, September 19, 2017

adapts into other regions consuming the medium and the sense of belonging begins to resonate with the youth⁴ amongst others.

4. Yun Yun-je: Academic Culture and Identities

Education for Korea has always been a crucial part of its community in terms of financial success and future security. So it is to no surprise that *Reply 1997* employs this notion to emphasize on how much of a cornerstone academic success is in order to bring out the work culture that we know about their lifestyle. In the past decade, university academics in South Korea have experiences structural changes whereby a policy was put through to internationalise education with perceptions of ongoing globalisation (Kim 2005, 6). It was made clear that the policy's vision was to make South Korean universities upgrade to the level of a global standard of excellence, deeming South Korea's reputation as one of the region's "knowledge economies" (Kim 2005,6). As a result, Korean children spend on average at least 220 days a year in school versus the 180 in United States⁵ and this is excluding the after-school cram school known as *hagwon*.

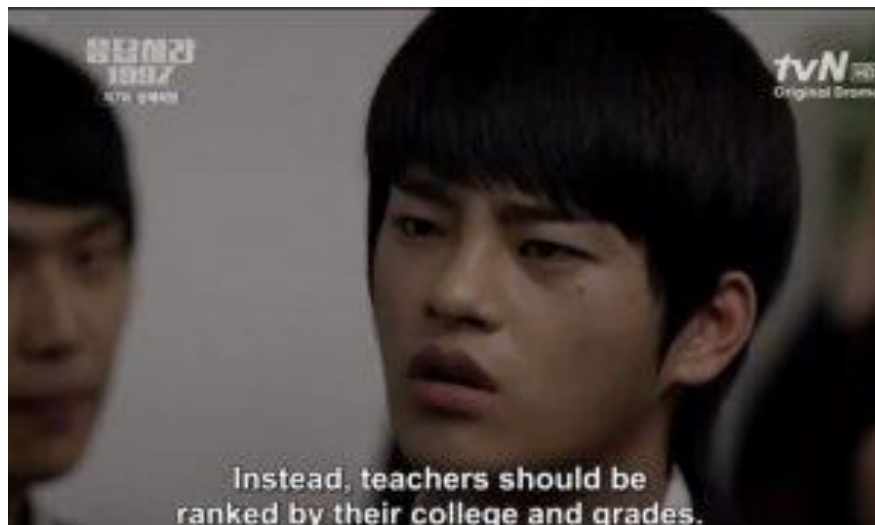


Fig 3. Yun-je confronts his teacher about his views on students' academic standings

"This is crazy. Our seats are allocated based on the order of our school records." Seung-jae complains as he skims through to find his name, "What?!" he yells, "I'm last!... this is a violation of human rights!" he continues to whine, "happiness doesn't come in grades!" but he was cut short. "Happiness does come in grades, you idiot." A teacher chimes in as he overhears Seung-jae's complaint, "your life is going to be shit if you don't go to college."

⁴ Elizabeth Soh, "'Sasaeng Stalkers' (Part 2): Obsessed K-pop fans in Singapore?" Yahoo! August 07, 2012, , accessed December 16, 2017, <https://sg.style.yahoo.com/blogs/singapore-showbiz/sasaeng-stalkers-part-1-sasaeng-singapore-084138184.html>.

⁵ Nick Clark, "Education in South Korea," WENR, May 05, 2017, accessed December 16, 2017, <https://wenr.wes.org/2013/06/wenr-june-2013-an-overview-of-education-in-south-korea>.

Figure 3 illustrates the scene shortly after the excerpt whereby Yun-je confronts the teacher about his own standings relative to the other teachers in the school. In Yun-je's mind, he feels that it isn't justified how students' standings become one of the main factors that define hierarchical academic success in high schools and he feels that if it were to apply to students, then teachers should receive the same treatment. As a result, one can see that there is a clash of conceptions about academic success between the two generations which effectively highlights the importance of academic success as a mentality that has been adapted into modern Korean society. (Baeka and Choi 2002, 127)

Intertwining with the nostalgia, *Reply 1997* tries to bring together a mixture of as many aspects in life in 1997 as possible. In this case, the directors have used the character Yun-je (and his brother Tae-ung) to illustrate the academic pressures faced by the students to bring awareness about the societal norms regarding this matter. In retrospect, it is known that Koreans believe in effort, discipline and persistence as the means to achieving academic success. Emotional support in the form of encouragement, praise, security and understanding were valued as key aspects in promoting success (Kim and Park 2006, 291).

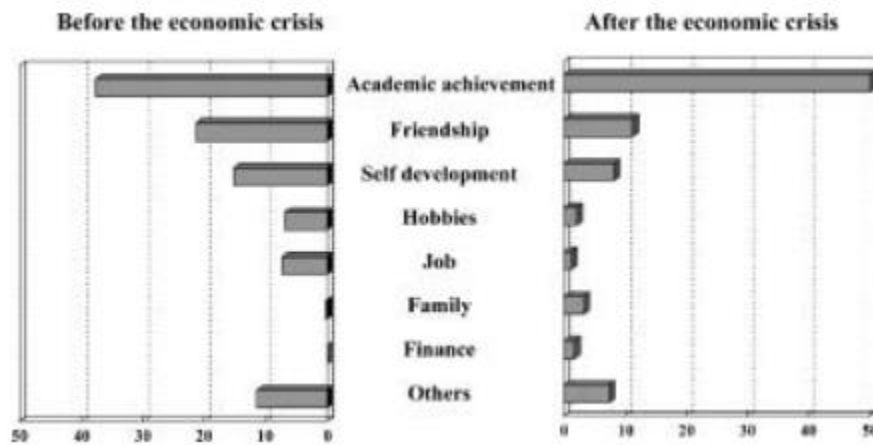


Fig 4. Questionnaire about their most proud achievement.

An empirical study was conducted in 1997, prior to the economic crisis, to explore Koreans' perception of success and failure and factors that contribute to the outcome. A follow-up study was conducted in 2001 using open-ended questionnaire sampling 730 students in 1997 and 481 students in 2001. (Kim and Park 2006, 290). Figure 4 shows the results of each student's most proud achievement and it is evident that their most frequent response was their academic achievement, especially after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. As such, it could be argued that the actions of the teacher were justified as he reacts with the mentality of the financial crisis being an imminent threat to both him and his students' futures. In effect, the directorial decision to display it in such an aggressive manner reassures the audience the severity of the issue, further propagating the notion of how academic success lies as the prime foundation of securing a prosperous future.

On a similar note, Yun-je's brother Tae-ung portrays the director's intentions through his characterization of a 'sacrificial hero'. In the 8th episode "D-DAY", Tae-ung is seen to comfort his brother before he takes his final exams, the Korean SATs. While they both reminisce on their journey of losing their parents, the audience is intentionally reminded of Tae-ung's sacrifice in order to get to his brother to where he is now. However, instead of sympathizing with Tae-ung, the scene is brought out to be a success story which reveals the merits of the sacrificial nature of Tae-ung's life. In its entirety, Tae-ung has been seen by many as the parent figure in their relationship despite them being only brothers.

A 2005 Korean Educational Longitudinal Study found that "when parents get involved more in school activities such as parents' meetings and volunteers, teachers have higher expectation of educational attainment for their students and give higher evaluation scores for their academic efforts. It is interesting that parent involvement in school has only indirect association with students' academic performance through teacher related variables. Specifically, teachers' expectation of students' educational attainment and teachers' perception of students' academic efforts was affected by parent involvement in school." (Hwang and Kim 2012, 130). *Reply 1997* once again effectively promotes Tae-ung's narrative as one of sacrifice in order to achieve the best outcomes while still in the notion of academic success being the cornerstone of securing a bright future. By drawing contrast between Yun-je and Si-won's academic prospects towards the end of the episode, the audience is further reassured of the fact that effort pays off rather than just pure luck thus, cementing the drama's commitment to evaluate upon the success-driven culture that is still prominent in today's Korea.

5. Conclusion

1997 was an year full of ups and downs. Through the eyes of many who watched the financial crisis occur, many had lost their jobs as they watched their economy crumble. However, through the eyes of Si-won and her group of friends, all kinds of emotions were springing as they transitioned into their adulthood. *Reply 1997* while capturing the hearts of many through its nostalgia, had brought to attention a multitude of underlying issues that Korea had faced during its airing period in 2012. Through the four characters explored in this this essay, issues such as the LGBT community' struggles were explored through Jun-hui's repression of his own emotions. Likewise, the drama draws attention to the extremities of *sasaeng* behaviour displayed by Si-won while the Yun brothers carried on an evaluative commentary on Korea's success-driven culture. Television had always served as a crucial medium in shaping South Korean public's response to the success of the Korean wave (*Hallyu*) and with *Reply 1997* being so successful, the public is quickly becoming aware of media as a powerful institution that has the interest of the state and corporate capital embedded into it. (Cho 2016, 2329) A drama, while powerful in entertaining, also harboured the underlying intentions that the director had in mind in order to educate the masses. By bringing these issues to surface, we can only hope to look forward to a more progressive Korea in the near future.

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