



Culture

"Squid Game" Is a Social Allegory Informed by Korean History

There's more to the game than gambling and violence.



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This year's *it* series, *Squid Game*, is an intensely violent Korean drama with a plot that has been likened to the dystopian setting of *The Hunger Games*. But the gory survival series — which pits debt-ridden underdogs against one another — can also be viewed as a microcosm of South Korea and its complicated history. (Spoilers for *Squid Game* ahead.)

Squid Game writer and director **Hwang Dong-hyuk has said** his series is an allegory for modern capitalist society. And his cast of misfits are people who don't fit into the high-tech narrative of what South Korea has become since its **poverty-stricken decades** during and after the Korean War. They are two-bit gangsters and drunken thieves. But they also are **migrant workers** trying to support their families, rape victims looking to survive, North Korean defectors escaping poverty, and everyday citizens trying to pay off insurmountable debts.

In short, there's more to the game than gambling and violence. Here are five examples of how *Squid Game* reflects some of South Korea's reality — and you might notice some familiar themes related to power structures all over the world.

The Financier

Squid Game is almost pornographic in how recklessly human lives are treated. But if you look past the blood and gore, you will see the hierarchy at play. At the top of the

heap is a rich and powerful man who made his fortune “by lending money,” and who started this sick game of death because ... he was *bored*. Even as he is dying, he refuses to take responsibility for any of the human lives lost during the sadistic games. “I never forced you to play,” he says. “It was your choice.”

Elder Poverty

Though Hwang started work on *Squid Game* in 2008, it premiered during a pandemic when South Korea topped 33 countries for elderly poverty, according to the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#). Even after South Korean president Moon Jae-in’s administration created jobs for senior citizens, the *Korea Herald* noted, their poverty rate was over 47 percent, according to Statistics Korea’s data from 2019. And at 46 percent, South Korea's net pension replacement rate falls below the OECD's average of 65 percent. Many of the senior citizens who had helped develop South Korea from a poverty-stricken nation into an economic powerhouse are unable to support themselves in retirement. Meanwhile, some Koreans in their 50s are ousted from their jobs and [replaced by younger employees](#). Childhood friends Gi-hun (played by Lee Jung-jae) and Sang-woo (Park Hae-seo) both have mothers well past retirement age, who have to work nonstop to survive.

1997's Asian Financial Crisis

This all plays into Gi-hun’s backstory. Until about a decade ago, Gi-hun worked for a factory that fired thousands of workers after the company experienced financial troubles. Like many unemployed Koreans, Gi-hun tried opening his own business (a restaurant) that failed, followed by another that had the same fate. The [Asian financial crisis](#) had repercussions that lasted for decades. And for uneducated men like Gi-hun, who didn’t have family money to rely on, his only option was a series of bank loans, followed by lendings from loan sharks – who made him sign over his organs (to sell on the black market) as collateral. Gi-hun has no idea where the prize money is coming from, nor does he care.

Imperialism

South Korea's history with U.S. imperialism is alluded to in episode 7, when the rich, entitled, and English-speaking VIPs arrive on the island to wager bets on who will live or die. The games had been set up for their enjoyment at the expense of Korean (and a handful of other Asian) lives. While the dwindling players are fed barely enough food to survive, the VIPs enjoy a lavish spread tended to by naked, body-painted men and women. One of the VIPs orders a server – a policeman who has infiltrated the compound – to satisfy him sexually. His colonial mindset dictates his ownership over this Korean man's body.

The Korean War

The most overt example of the Korean War's impact is the storyline of Sae-byeok (Hoyeon Jung), a defector whose mother is still trapped in North Korea; meanwhile, her baby brother is stuck in a children's welfare center in South Korea, waiting to be reunited with his family. But there's also a climactic scene near the end of *Squid Game*, where two brothers face off. Both have guns. You can see dread, fear and conflict in their eyes. There is no optimism, because survival for one means death for the other. That scene encapsulated the turmoil some Korean soldiers went through when their country was split into two, making enemies out of friends and relatives, and forcing them to decide whether to kill or be killed by loved ones.

Squid Game is not this year's *Parasite*, so much as it is a satire in the vein of *A Modest Proposal*. Just as Jonathan Swift pointed out the abject brutality of telling the poor to satiate their hunger by eating healthy, plump babies, Hwang depicts the cruelty of lording a huge sum of money – *literally* – over desperate people's heads, knowing that most will die as they lived: penniless.

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