INTRO

South Korea has a heavy focus on collectivist behaviors due to their roots in Confucianism. Originally a Chinese colony, Korea has changed many hands through history. The Chinese ruled in Korea from around 100 BC to the early 20th century where Japan occupied the territory for it’s rich natural resources. Korea being so resource rich was ideal to support the Japanese war effort. This occupation ended in 1945, only to be occupied again by the U.S. and Soviet-Chinese forces shortly after. U.S. forces occupying the South, and Soviet-Chinese forces occupying the North. This set the stage for the Korean war. Now the Korean War was a proxy for the Cold War and lasted from 1950-1953 with millions of casualties. From this, the country was divided. South Korea became an ally to the U.S. and transitioned towards a democracy that culminated in a democratic constitution signed in 1987, and slowly transitioning the population into one with Low Power Distance especially compared to its Northern counterpart. With this is mind we’ll get into the values the South Korean people tend to hold.

South Korea remains a High Context culture with an emphasis on Filial Piety, which is a Confucian concept that basically means people have a moral obligation to their family. The people also have a great sense of National Pride due to their triumphs in surviving and thriving after war. It’s commonplace for Korean people to openly discuss and critique their society, but not accepted to have foreigners discuss these matters with them demonstrating a high context conversational style. Korea also has traditional gender roles as women are seen more as caretakers and housekeepers, but women joining the workforce is becoming more common in Korea, so attitudes are slowly changing. Even with roots in Confucianism, Korea, now being a democracy does not enforce any one religion, as such many of the populace has no religious affiliation at all. All of these values are reflected in their speech and rapport with one another. Equals are often jovial and friendly. But it’s the expectation to act with respect and use family names when talking with your “superiors”, like parents, teachers, bosses. These values and traditions shine through in their entertainment.

Starting with what’s seen as the foundation of the Korean film industry is Obaltan, otherwise known as, Aimless Bullet. This is a story of a family in post-war South Korea. The film depicts a man living a hard life after the war trying to support his pregnant wife, younger sister, younger brother, and mother who is suffering from PTSD. We see many of the tragedies of the time portrayed in this movie. There are themes of hopelessness, lack of perspective, and an awful financial situation. It paints a vivid picture of a country ravaged by war. There’s no work, no money, and no opportunities. We see how this family tries to navigate this environment and see their reactions to the struggle, and how long it takes for each one to break under this stress. It’s a slow burn movie, but it’s message and characters are strong. The film was banned in Korea for many years due to its downbeat depiction of post-war Korea. Though the movie lacks some of the finer craft of the Hollywood films, it’s a great foundation for the Korean film industry.

A more recent example of film being reflective and critical of it’s culture is the 2019 film, Parasite. This movie is pretty much a metaphor for classism. It’s a metaphor that’s vague enough though, that it doesn’t just apply to Korea, but everywhere, and the classism experienced through history. The movie is centered on two families, one rich, one poor. What makes it stand out for me is that neither is portrayed as plainly evil or plainly good. The poor family are essentially frauds, and the rich people have their share of problems, but they’re not villains. It’s a fairly uncomplicated story, but it’s well told, and shot very well. The movie also represents the Korean culture well. You see the collectivist nature of both families. The traditional gender roles they both abide by. And the High Context way they communicate. Even how the poorer family manipulates the richer one with using especially high context language. The movie also communicates a problem many young Koreans feel in that they’ve seen the hard work their parents have done not leading to a fulfilling life and feeling the disenfranchisement from that. The Korean industry is more often than not auteur driven, meaning that one singular person has influence so great over the project that the filmmaker is regarded as the author of the movie. This is in sharp contrast to something like a Disney film where something like a Marvel movie will have 3 directors and 5 different writers trying to assemble a story. This has it’s advantages, but it also means that a Korean film will likely never have the budget of something like a large scale Disney film.

The Korean industry is supported by the Korean Film Council. It’s a public institution that supports the planning, developing, and distribution for Korean movie projects. The government even gave a stimulus package during the pandemic, so productions didn’t have to cease. Private investors contribute if they believe in the project and that it will turn a profit. Streaming platforms have gotten involved as well with platforms like Netflix producing hit shows like Squid Game and Physical 100. The Korean entertainment industry is a force nowadays and is important to the Korean people and its culture.

The films and TV shows reflect the High context culture of Korea. And although there is a class divide present in Korea, there is certainly a Low Power Distance. Korean entertainment reflects the collectivist culture that emphasizes the family welfare over the individual, and importance of duty. Korean films also chronicle the attitudes many Koreans held throughout their history as shown in Obaltan. It’s an industry that is still growing as Korea itself is experiencing huge growth nationwide. I would love to see entertainment industries blow up across the world like Koreas has, as it’s definitely added to the diversity of the media I watch, and that’s a great thing.