

Social Criticism in Korean Crime Comedies of the Post-IMF Era

LeeAnn Choi

82-252: Topics in Korean Culture

Beginning in the 1990s, the Korean film industry t

affluence and cultural exuberance” (Ibid. 23), Korea’s economy had shifted from the government-led investment model to a more market-oriented one. The newly thriving Korean

is dangerous, laborious, and poorly paid” (Ibid.). In the opening scene, Kang Chul-Joong, an impoverished police officer, is embarrassed during his visit to his daughter’s school by his daughter’s classmates who see gangsters as cooler than policemen—an image created by modern day films and dramas. Next, he meets a gangster he sent to prison years ago. The ex-convict now rides a Mercedes and runs multiple businesses. Thus accentuated is an irony: the people who serve their country live on an income that is not even enough to feed their own immediate family, while gangsters lead a far better life.²

Here, it is worth noting that the clownish characters in Korean cinema including Chul-joong often show the “inability to deal with money-related issues and their ignorance of the rules of the game in the capitalist world” (Ibid. 28). Chul-joong, for instance, cannot get a bank loan due to his poor credit, but he has no idea what the credit rate is and how it is determined: hence, a comedy of a cop arrested by a cop. Yet what is more important is that Chul-joong works as a prism that makes more legible the absurdity of society where righteousness repeatedly becomes synonymous with foolishness and those in power are often witnessed bending the law for their own benefits.

man to only twelve years in prison, which angered the country due to the level of brutality of the crime and the man's past records of physical and sexual violence. While these films keep a serious mood throughout the storyline, the central heroes in the films, either a police officer or the father of the victim, also maintain the naïve and foolish characteristics similar to crime-comedy protagonists. The inability of the main characters to understand the criminal world and the capitalist system seem to be a key element that allows the audience to feel closer to them.

Following the IMF crisis, the Korean film industry produced films that mix different genres to implement social criticism. In the post-IMF era, comedies have been taking over the box office. In particular, gangster and crime comedies have become a powerful way for new