

## **Sociological Representations of Apartments in Korean Thrillers**

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### **Introduction**

Many things have changed in Korea since the Korean War. Yet the most visible representation of its evolution has been the extensive homogenization of its residential spaces. The country's horizon is dominated by high-rise apartment blocks that push into the skyline through all of its cities, towns and suburbs and many of its rural spaces. Today, almost 60% of residents in Korea live in apartment towers.<sup>1</sup> The symbol of the contemporary Korean dream, the high-rise apartment has supplanted traditional residential spaces, while at the same time fostering a new culture more in tune with the individualistic mindset that has become more pronounced in today's Korean society.

Modern Korean films, especially contemporary thrillers, have latched onto the unique architectural and thematic potential of the modern Korean apartment. By analyzing several genre films that foreground the social and structural impact of modern apartments in contemporary Korean his-

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1 "Housing Units by Type of Housing Units," Statistical Database, Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), last modified August 31, 2017, [http://kosis.kr/eng/statisticsList/statisticsList\\_01List.jsp?vwcd=MT\\_ETITLE&parmTabId=M\\_01\\_01#SubCont](http://kosis.kr/eng/statisticsList/statisticsList_01List.jsp?vwcd=MT_ETITLE&parmTabId=M_01_01#SubCont)

tory, this brief essay aims to explore the role that Korea's favored residential structure has played in reshaping social communities and behavioral patterns.

Before launching these discussions it is worth considering the rapid changes in Korea's residential landscape that have precipitated these psychological vagaries. Korea's shift to urbanization initially took hold in 1876, when the still unified country moved away from its policy of isolation as it opened up both port and inland cities to trade. Modernization followed during the Japanese colonial period (1910-45). The first apartment blocks in South Korea were erected after the Korean War in 1958 but it was in the 1960s that the government in earnest began to use apartments as a means of managing the urban population, beginning with the Mapo Apartments, built during 1961-64. According to *The Washington Post*, "apartments, initially, were a means to hold the nation together during its postwar growth."<sup>2</sup> The *Post* elaborates: "Government officials sometimes said that if people became dissatisfied with their living situations, they would be likelier to protest against the government, at the time controlled by military leaders." The results speak for themselves. While the occupancy rate of the Mapo Apartments failed to exceed 15% in their first year of occupancy, by 1990 22.9% of Koreans lived in apartment complexes. By 2015, 59% of the country's population did.<sup>3</sup>

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- 2 Chico Harlan, "After decades of economic growth, South Korea is the land of apartments," *The Washington Post*, September 13, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/after-decades-of-economic-growth-south-korea-is-the-land-of-apartments/2013/09/15/9bd841f8-1c55-11e3-8685-5021e0c41964\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.20120b0eea93](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/after-decades-of-economic-growth-south-korea-is-the-land-of-apartments/2013/09/15/9bd841f8-1c55-11e3-8685-5021e0c41964_story.html?utm_term=.20120b0eea93).
- 3 Andrei Lankov, "Mapo Apartment Complex: Change in dwelling style," *The Korea Times*, December 26, 2010, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/special/2011/02/113\\_78625.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/special/2011/02/113_78625.html).

## Building the Dream - Gangnam Blues

However, high-rise apartments have not always been the dream home for everybody. Initially, they were seen as low-class dwellings, but as living conditions improved and the government and major corporations became involved, the real estate landscape began to change very quickly. A case in point is the Gangnam region, South of the Han River, in Seoul. Now considered to be the most valuable real estate market in the country, in the late 1960s it was nothing but a vast patch of low-rent farmland.

One filmmaker who has made no secret of his obsession with the unique phenomenon of Gangnam's rapid development is Yoo Ha. He is known for a trilogy of works that explore the growth of Gangnam's real estate markets from different angles - *Once Upon a Time in High School* (2004), *A Dirty Carnival* (2006) and *Gangnam Blues* (2015). Prior to establishing himself as a filmmaker, he had been known for penning the architecture-themed poetry tome 'Love of the Sewoon Shopping Mall's Kid', which examines a site that is heavily featured in Jeong Jae-eun's documentary *Ecology in Concrete* (2017), another work that explores Seoul's complex urban planning history.

Among Yoo Ha's trilogy of films, *Once Upon a Time in High School* focuses on the errant child of a mother who decamps her family to Gangnam in the 1970s, in anticipation of the real estate boom. In *A Dirty Carnival*, a young gang captain enters the redevelopment business in contemporary Seoul to achieve financial stability for both his families, the one he works for and the one he was born into. *Gangnam Blues*, on the other hand, goes to the very root of modern Gangnam by exploring how criminal and government powers colluded to create the region as it is known today.

*Gangnam Blues* features TV superstar Lee Min-ho as Jong-dae, a youth who grew up on the streets with his best friend Yong-ki, played by Kim Rae-won. The young friends have their life of petty crime turned upside down one morning when the roof over their heads literally collapses as an excavator bursts through during a forceful eviction. Homeless, they stum-

ble on an opportunity for a quick payout as day enforcers for the same gang that kicked them out of their home but during a skirmish with protesters the pair are separated. Three years later, after each has risen the ranks through different gangs, the pair reunite just as Gangnam is gearing up for its real estate explosion.

Shortly after being reunited, the pair meet on a dirt road in the countryside where they hatch a plan to make a fortune in the real estate wars they find themselves in. As Jong-dae tears off on his motorcycle, he screams, "It'll be my land, as far as I can reach!" Meanwhile Yong-ki cries out after him "Alright! Land for you, money for me!" If it were not already clear to the audience, this brief exchange shows the dueling motivations of the protagonists. Jong-dae, the audience surrogate, played by the baby-faced Hallyu superstar Lee Min-ho, can foresee the future riches of the real estate game and aims to increase his social status and keep his family secure in the future by acquiring land (just like the lead character of *A Dirty Carnival*), which will be converted into apartment complexes, while the unscrupulous Yong-ki is only interested in fast cash and instant gratification.

These childhood friends are both driven by ambition, but each holds only one of the two keys necessary for success. Jong-dae has the foresight to anticipate the future riches of Gangnam, while Yong-ki is able to shove his moral scruples aside in favor of his greed. Jong-dae and Yong-ki are the characters we follow in this story, but ultimately it is the characters around them who succeed - peripheral figures such as the politicians who imagine Seoul spreading south of the Han River, as well as the gangsters-turned-businessmen who use their muscle to bring that vision to reality.

In the end, Jong-dae and Yong-ki are merely small cogs in Gangnam's real estate evolution. After successfully laying the groundwork for corrupt bureaucrats to hold the deeds to much of the land south of the river, just in time for the government to formerly announce the expansion of Seoul's city limits, they are both dispatched, having served their purpose. Yong-ki, sitting in his car, is shot in the head. While riding a train, Jong-dae is shot in the shoulder and abdomen and falls out as the train passes through a

tunnel. Staggering through the dirt, he looks towards the light at the end of the tunnel before collapsing and expiring. Jong-dae has been swept up in the roaring currents of the time. This metaphor of a train ride representing temporal progress is found in Lee Chang-dong's *Green Fish* (1999) as well, in which the lead character rides a train at the start of the film, as he returns to his hometown after completing his military service. During his two years away, the small rural community in Goyang, a region west of Seoul, has been swallowed up by apartment blocks, effectively turning it into a satellite city to Korea's capital.

The corrupt bureaucrats, who can both anticipate the real estate boom and mercilessly position themselves to benefit from it, are the characters who not only survive this narrative, which bitterly frames a focal moment in Korea's breathless modernization, but thrive beyond it. In an epilogue, one of these bureaucrats, Seo Tae-gon (played by Yoo Seung-mok) campaigns for reelection in present day Seoul. The film closes with an aerial shot of the now built-up Gangnam as Tae-gon's speech resonates over the soundtrack: "I am the son of Gangnam! If you give me one last chance, I will bring prosperity to Gangnam!" Though Tae-gon has already made a fortune for himself, his speech indicates that he is still conducting the same kind of business, and furthermore that his financially-motivated politics are so broadly accepted that they can form the basis of an effective campaigning platform for electoral politics.

### **Chasing the Dream - Hide and Seek**

In a country that prizes social mobility, modernity and keeping up appearances, the high-rise apartment represents the ultimate status symbol. Yet after decades of adoption, not just any will do. Important considerations for buyers include location, brand and age. Concerning location, good neighborhoods and school districts come at a premium. Just as with clothes and electronics, apartments with better brandnames in Korea - such as the Samsung Construction line 'Remian' - are highly sought after.

Yet an apartment's age may actually be the most important point for consideration. The average lifespan of a Korean apartment is just 20 years and improving living standards make brand-new apartments the biggest prize for residents. Thus, the age of an apartment is often linked to wealth and social status and this is often exploited by Korean filmmakers to reinforce the social positions of their characters.

Among recent Korean films, the work that best highlights the social value of an apartment complex's age is Huh Jung's 2013 debut film *Hide and Seek*. In this mystery-thriller, café entrepreneur Sung-soo (played by character actor Son Hyun-joo) lives in a sleek new apartment with his wife and two children. He suffers from an obsessive compulsive disorder which reawakens when he receives news of his estranged brother's disappearance. Upon hearing the news about his brother, Sung-soo and his family visit a shabby apartment dwelling outside of town where they meet suspicious residents.

In the film's opening scene, we are introduced to a young woman who lives in the same complex as Sung-soo's brother, a courtyard apartment block, which was a short-lived residential style in the 1960s and 70s prior to the standardization of modern apartment complexes. These apartments were "much smaller compared to linear types... ..courtyard apartment types ran counter to the tendency of preferring houses that face south. Courtyard apartments began to disappear thereafter," as described by Namsu Jang and Sungil Ham.<sup>4</sup>

This young woman speaks to her boyfriend on the phone, berating him for not having helped her move out yet. A person dressed in black and wearing a helmet enters the elevator with her but doesn't select a floor, which raises her alarm. When she alights at her own floor, the mysterious person begins to follow after her, eventually entering a unit beside hers.

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4 Namsu Jang and Sungil Ham, "A study on courtyard apartment types in South Korea from the 1960s to 1970s," *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 6, No. 2 (June 2017): 149-56, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2095263517300201#bib7>.

By the end of the opening sequence, this unknown character has killed the woman. This is immediately followed by establishing shots of a more upscale and modern complex, within which Sung-soo and his family engage in a game of hide-and-seek in a spacious unit.

By the time Sung-soo and his family visit the older courtyard complex, the audience is aware of the existence of a killer, even though it is not clear if the other residents are privy to the same information. Thus, when Sung-soo orders his family to return home while he stays behind, and a vehicle follows the wife and children, the audience is alerted to the danger they are in. The same character dressed in black from the opening proceeds to terrorize Sung-soo's family until the film's tense climax, which unfolds in their apartment.

Just before the finale, we discover that the killer is in fact a single mother living in the courtyard apartments with her young daughter. Her apartment is filled with stolen valuables and her dream is to live with her daughter in a nicer apartment. She gets her chance through Sung-soo and his family and momentarily succeeds in taking over their home. Notably, her downfall is linked to her fear of losing her new apartment and thus her usurped social status. In a showdown in the apartment, Sung-soo threatens to burn down the residence and when the flame of his lighter connects with the lighter fluid coating the surfaces of the kitchen, the woman is quickly consumed by fire as she desperately attempts to extinguish the blaze.

While the covetous mother does not survive the climax, any chance of Sung-soo's family reclaiming a sense of normalcy is put into question when it is strongly hinted that the killer's young daughter is still hiding in their apartment, echoing an urban legend uttered earlier in the film, about beggars who hide in apartments, sometimes without the family's permission. Thus, writer and director Huh points to the cyclical nature of greed and paranoia connected to aspirational high-rise living being passed down through generations.

### **Beneath the Dream - The Cat**

Korean cinema often focuses on personal trauma and how modern society attempts to ignore it. One way that filmmakers have visualized this tendency is by using island locations as places of repressed trauma, such as in Jang Cheol-soo's *Bedevilled* (2010), in which a woman returns to an island she visited as a child to escape her stressful life, only to ignore the daily traumas that her childhood friend experiences there, who eventually snaps and seeks bloody retribution. Another location that directors have employed toward similar aims has been the basement of modern high-rise apartment dwellings.

The island is an effective space to visualize trauma in cinema, as it places horrific scenarios in a location that is not easily accessible and seldom visited. Occupying a similar space in today's Korean cinema is the basement of the apartment block. Though they are within much easier reach than islands, residents are unlikely to visit these spaces and their physical attributes - dank, cramped and absent of light - make them an ideal place to stage horrific scenarios, not unlike the attics or basements of suburban homes in American horror films, such as Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984).

Examples include Bong Joon-ho's debut film *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000), which features a security guard butchering a dog in an apartment basement who also shares stories of the ghost of 'Boiler Kim'. In Kim Hwi's thriller *The Neighbors* (2012), an adaptation of Kang Full's webtoon of the same name, a killer lives in a first floor apartment that unusually has its own basement, where he carries out his murders. Another, more on-point example of this tendency is Byun Seung-wook's horror film *The Cat* (2011).

In Byun's work, a young woman named So-yeon (played by popular TV actress Park Min-young) works in a pet grooming store and suffers from claustrophobia, the result of a past personal trauma (similar to Sung-soo in *Hide and Seek*). One of her clients dies in an elevator after visiting So-yeon and it isn't long before more people who mistreat cats around her

meet their demises in mysterious ways in other confined spaces. At the same time she is terrorized by visions of a young girl with cat-like eyes.

*The Cat* effectively manages a dual-layered narrative, leading to a resolution to So-yeon's trauma - she must overcome her claustrophobia - as well as an answer to the mystery that drives the horror - who is the girl and where does her desire for revenge come from?

Both threads reach their endpoint in the basement under the apartment block that the girl (who's name we discover is Hee-jin) lived in when she was still alive. Hee-jin spent time playing with stray cats in the basement until the day the residents of the complex urged the building caretaker to deal with the cat 'vermin.' He does so by sealing the whole area shut with cement, with both the cats, and unknown to any of the humans, Hee-jin, who wants to protect her feline friends.

So-yeon succeeds in unraveling the mystery by confronting her fear and stepping into an enclosed space - the basement, and furthermore an empty boiler inside of it. Early on, the film informs us that a childhood trauma is the cause of her claustrophobia. However, beyond hinting that this trauma involves So-yeon's father - now a patient in a psychiatric hospital - and an enclosed space, we never learn what really happened.

We do discover the truth behind Hee-jin's death, an unlikely scenario, but the director seems to purposefully avoid telling us what happened to So-yeon. Since So-yeon's fears manifest through claustrophobia and all four of the residential spaces seen in the film are in apartment blocks (belonging to So-yeon, her friend, the first victim, and Hee-jin's family), it can be reasonably assumed that whatever trauma she experienced also took place in a high-rise apartment.

Rather than an omission, the lack of concrete details surrounding So-yeon's trauma could be seen as a way to represent the wealth of personal traumas that take place behind closed doors. Few people in Korea visit the basements of their apartment buildings, but by using the space for its climax, particularly as it is intentionally bricked off and abandoned, *The Cat* symbolically represents the wealth of personal traumas that society actively attempts to ignore.

## Conclusion

*Gangnam Blues* demonstrates how land plots (and subsequently the apartments built on them) were leveraged by governmental and other powerful forces to alter the distribution of wealth in Korea. This led to Korea's current real estate-obsessed society, which sets the stage for *Hide and Seek*, a film that shows us how citizens strive to reposition themselves within these restructured economic hierarchies. Finally, *The Cat* points out the divide between perceptions of material wealth and personal traumas - the first is flaunted for all to see, while the latter is hidden from public view and furthermore repressed by the individual.

Over the span of the last few decades, the high-rise apartment has been at the center of Korean society's radical change. These tower blocks have reshaped the landscape and altered the way that communities are formed and how people within them interact. In lock and step with the country's breathless change, Korea's cinema has also become dominated by these apartments. Whenever apartments appear in a Korean film, paying close attention to their age, style, location and decoration, not to mention how characters utilize them, can offer several useful clues for decoding a story's narrative and thematic goals. The apartment is here to stay and it is only likely to become an even more important tool for Korean filmmakers as they seek to tell new stories within and about contemporary Korean society.