

The Spectrum of *Han*: Cultural Psychology in Korean National Cinema

Xiaotian Gao¹, Hamed Mohd Adnan¹, Changsong Wang²

¹Faculty of Art and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

²School of Communication, Xiamen University Malaysia, Sepang, Malaysia

Correspondence: Hamed Mohd Adnan, Faculty of Art and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 50603, Malaysia.

Received: October 11, 2023

Accepted: December 19, 2023

Online Published: December 24, 2023

doi:10.11114/smc.v12i1.6461

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i1.6461>

Abstract

Over the past three decades, Korean cinema has garnered increasing acclaim both domestically and globally and solidified its unique standing in the realm of filmmaking. This article delves into the intricacies of *han*, a cultural psychological Korean element that has significantly influenced Korean cinema. *Han* encompasses a distinct collective cultural psychology characterized by lingering resentment, pain, sadness, and anger. The persistent thematic exploration of *han* and societal darkness has played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of Korean national cinema. Korean national cinema is distinguished by its foundational core of collective trauma, exposing societal darkness, and expressing *han* in response to societal darkness. This article summarizes the significant implications of Korean national cinema's depiction of societal darkness from the perspectives of promoting societal progress and safeguarding the Korean domestic film market. The analysis further examines how Korean national cinema strategically employs plot, theme, and ending to construct a logical progression that articulates and intensifies *han* towards societal darkness. Ultimately, this paper advocates for the vigilance of Korean national cinema against cultural discounts in its proactive overseas promotion.

Keywords: Korean national cinema, *han*, cultural psychology

1. Introduction

Korean cinema has achieved remarkable success that has attracted global attention in the 21st century (Gee, 2017). The transformation in Korean cinema began with the abolition of film censorship in the 1990s that paved way for substantial industrial changes and growth (Jin, 2019; Moon, 2006). Over time, Korean cinema was recognized as a dynamic and prolific film industry (Moon, 2006; Matron, 2010). Remarkably, it emerged as a formidable competitor to Hollywood and reshaped the landscape of the Korean film market (Yecies & Shim, 2011). Korean cinema successfully resisted the dominance of Hollywood films in the domestic market in a country with an open film market.

Korean film industry not only fortifies its position in the domestic market, but it also proactively engages in international promotion (Jin, 2019). Many Korean films have received prestigious international awards that have solidified Korea's prominent standing in the global film industry (Moon, 2006). For instance, the film *Parasite* (2019) garnered widespread praise for clinching four Academy Awards underscoring the remarkable prowess of Korean filmmaking and marking a pivotal moment in the history of Korean cinema (Lee, 2022).

Existing scholarship highlights that the success of Korean cinema can be attributed to the portrayal of realism and the exploration of darker facets of society (Jin, 2019; Lee, 2019; Kim, 2017; Min, Joo, & Kwak, 2003; Kim, Unger, & Wagner, 2017). Korean cinema is renowned for its unique vantage point that often scrutinizes societal darkness from the perspective of the marginalized (Kim et al., 2017). Specifically, Korean films adeptly delve into the darker facets of society by employing narrative prowess that resonates with audiences on social injustices such as wealth inequality, entrenched class divisions, moral apathy among the affluent, and societal skepticism towards Korea's justice system (Lee, 2019).

Scholars attribute the core of realism narratives and the profound exploration of societal darkness in Korean films to the Korean cultural psychology, often referred to as *han* (Boman, 2020; Kim, 2017; Jung, 2010; Min et al., 2003). *Han* (한 in Hangul, alternatively spelled as *haan*), is a pivotal and significant concept within the tapestry of Korean history and culture that embodies a nuanced cultural and psychological construct (Boman, 2020). Kim (2017) characterizes *han* as

an important element of Korean cultural psychology that encompasses unresolved feelings of resentment, suffering, sorrow, and anger. Min et al. (2003) assert that *han* represents the psychological experiences of an entire nation enduring deep-seated anguish that is firmly entrenched within their innermost psyche. Boman (2020) further suggests that *han* can be conceptualized as rancor or grief that emerges from prolonged injustices stemming from asymmetric power dynamics or unresolved societal issues. Moreover, Gee (2017) contends that *han* embodies an emotion intricately linked to feelings of loss, pain, longing, and a sense of ethnic identity.

Scholars believe that the origins of *han* stem from the collective trauma endured by the Korean people over the period of a century (Lee, 2019; Kim, 2017; Moon, 2014; Yoon & Williams, 2015; Ha & David, 2014). A tumultuous twentieth century, including the Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, nearly four decades of military dictatorship, and excessively rapid urbanization and industrialization all traumatized the collective Korean consciousness for a long time (Lee, 2019; Moon, 2014).

Existing literature also indicates that *han* possesses some very distinctive characteristics. *Han* represents a distinctive cultural psychology found solely among the Korean population (Min et al., 2003; Yoon & Williams, 2015; Moon, 2014; Kim, 2017; Li, 1996; Yuan, 2015; Zhao, 2017). For many, *han* is regarded as an inherent national trait of the Korean people that serves as a foundational element of Korean culture and spirituality, and can be perceived as the essence of life which constitutes the journey from birth to death (Min et al., 2003; Moon, 2014). Moreover, *han* is more than an individual's personal emotion arising from personal suffering; it is a pervasive collective emotional state deeply embedded in the Korean cultural milieu (Yoon & Williams, 2015). *Han* encompasses the entire collective trauma of Korean history, contributing to a highly specific societal and national imagination that is unique to Koreans (Kim, 2017). Consequently, only Koreans comprehend its (*han*) profound significance and unique psychological expression (Kim, 2017). Scholars regard *han* as “the heartbeat, the cry, the song, and the longing” of the Korean people that is rooted within the Korean psyche (Min et al., 2003, p. 8). Therefore, Min et al. (2003) argue that a foundational understanding of the concept of *han* within the Korean populace is imperative to gaining insight into Korean cultural phenomena.

Considering the above literature, it can be deduced that *han* represents a distinctive facet within Korean cultural psychology that encapsulates unresolved emotions such as resentment and grief. The roots of *han* can be traced back to a century of collective trauma experienced by the Korean populace. The significance of *han* extends beyond individual experiences, evolving into a collective psyche deeply embedded in the communal fabric of Korean identity. It serves as an emotional construct uniquely apprehended by the Korean populace and stands as an intrinsic national trait foundational to Korean culture. *Han* is a foundational prerequisite for understanding the intricacies of Korean culture.

Translating *han* into other languages poses a significant challenge due to its distinctive character that makes it exceedingly difficult for any vocabulary from other languages to precisely capture the profound sense of suffering experienced by the Korean nation (Boman, 2020; Moon, 2014). Consequently, this study opted to employ the term *han* as is and not replace it with an English terminology. Although literature delves into the cultural psychology of *han*, limited research comprehensively and systematically investigates the significance of *han* within Korean national cinema. Existing literature also seldom explores the strategic intensification of *han* employed by Korean national cinema and the ensuing impact of *han* during the international communication process. Consequently, this study aims to address these gaps through a systematic literature review, shedding light on the importance of *han* in Korean national cinema, the deliberate intensification of *han* strategies employed, and the resulting impact during international communication.

2. *Han* in Korean National Cinema: Persistently Portraying Societal Darkness

Korean national cinema articulates *han* as a criterion that defines its essence. *Han*, as a distinctive cultural psychology, has profoundly influenced diverse forms of Korean artistic expression, notably cinema (Kim, 2017). Korean filmmakers have skillfully incorporated *han* within the realm of cinema as a pivotal cultural element and established it as a consistent central theme in Korean cinematic art over the years (Jung, 2010). The pervasive influence of *han* in the cinematic domain has played a crucial role in shaping a unique artistic style and aesthetic in Korean film (Zhao, 2017).

Han is primarily manifested in the depiction of societal and real-world darkness within in the realm of Korean national cinema and enhances a characteristic inherent to Korean national cinema – its genuine portrayal of societal conflicts and the challenges faced by its people. Film narratives, characterized by the expression of *han* deeply rooted in the collective trauma of nation and ethnicity, have been acknowledged as integral to Korean national cinema (Min et al., 2003). The ‘Korean national cinema’ concept was first used as a vehicle to rejuvenate Korean national spirit through films created during the Japanese colonial rule; however, a substantial redefinition of this concept was instigated by Korean filmmakers in the 1980s. Korean filmmakers recognized that Korean national cinema could serve as a powerful tool for exposing and confronting societal contradictions and motivating individuals to strive for social justice and equality rather than serving as a mere form of entertainment that diverts attention from critical societal issues (Min et al., 2003). Consequently, the foundational methodology of constructing Korean national cinema within this redefined

framework centers on the unyielding portrayal of societal realities (The Korean Film Council [KOFIC], 2010). Korean national cinema's central mission is to portray the lived experiences of oppressed individuals and reveal the inherent contradictions within Korean society (Min et al., 2003). In the 1990s, the advent of political democratization and economic liberalization as the Korean government progressively eased and eventually eradicated censorship on film content marked a pivotal shift in Korean national cinema (Sohn, 2020). Over the next ensuing three decades, a plethora of films that authentically expressed *han* towards societal darkness emerged (Jin, 2019).

Han in Korean national cinema is not merely an exploration of individual tragedies, but a portrayal of collective trauma rooted in the darker aspects experienced by a nation and ethnicity. Lee (2019) mentions that Korean national films consistently strive to portray or allude to Korea's collective trauma during colonization, the Korean War, military dictatorship, and the ongoing disruptions of social equity following rapid modernization and industrialization.

Korean national cinema intentionally steers away from simplistic superficial depictions of tragic events such as random unemployment or unrelated deaths and prioritizes narratives where unemployment or death is intrinsically linked to broader socio-political challenges and shadows cast by the nation and society. More specifically, Korean national cinema addresses issues such as the struggle for survival among the impoverished, the extravagant and mentally distorted lifestyles of the affluent, disrupted family ethical relationships influenced by both Eastern and Western cultures, the cold and cruel interpersonal dynamics within a money-driven society, the erosion of fairness and justice under political authority, the transformation of politics into a game of the powerful, and the manipulation of the law as a mere instrument. Boman (2020) argues that the manifestation of *han* within Korean films goes beyond superficial expressions of individual suffering to present itself as "a particular cultural expression rather than mere universal sorrow typical for films partly or predominantly including tragic events" (p.922).

In summary, a central characteristic of Korean national cinema lies in its portrayal of societal darkness and people's afflictions accompanied by an expression of *han*. Korean national cinema also transcends from a narrow focus on individual hardships to the broader realm of societal darkness within the context of collective trauma.

3. The Significance of *han* in Korean National Cinema

The thematic core of Korean national cinema lies in the expression of *han* towards the darkness pervasive in society. This cinematic undertaking places a particular emphasis on depicting the challenges experienced by ordinary individuals, providing a nuanced perspective on their encounters amid the complexities of societal challenges. The current study seeks to unravel the multifaceted implications of the storytelling techniques employed by Korean national cinema from the dual lenses of social impact and market competitiveness.

Firstly, Korean national cinema's expression of *han* towards societal darkness has the potential to evoke a sense of social responsibility and foster societal progress. While *han* originates from collective Koreans trauma, its intrinsic negativity coexists with notions of hope and inner strength that reflect a profound impetus to overcome challenges (Yoon & Williams, 2015). Notably, *han* is not merely a persistent sense of trauma, it serves as a mechanism for addressing and healing from the collective traumas experienced by the Korean nation (Kim, 2017).

Korean national cinema has catalyzed social progress by stimulating the public's *han* through depictions of societal darkness. In Korean national cinema, empathy with film characters facing the oppression elicits a profound understanding of their *han* that instigates a yearning for justice rooted in fundamental human values and compels audiences towards morally principled conduct (Choe, 2018). Korean national cinema accumulates *han* by intricately exposing societal darkness. When the resulting accumulated *han* within the national collective consciousness is unleashed through film, it manifests as a potent force to drive societal progress (Min et al., 2003), as validated in an analysis of the film *Silenced* (2011).

The Korean film *Silenced* (2011) illustrates how depictions of societal darkness in Korean national cinema have the potential to evoke widespread public outcry and instigate legislative reforms. The film which is based on a real event, depicts sexual offences committed against disabled children at a remote Korean school. It presents in stark detail the cruel assaults perpetrated by the headmaster and teachers, and the complicity of powerful figures who trade favors with the headmaster including judges, police, doctors, and lawyers. The headmaster in turn only receives minimal punishment when indicted by the child victims. The film unflinchingly portrays the dark realities in societies as exemplified through corruption among elites, decay in institutions, and the law's fragility. It deftly conveys the collective sentiment of *han* to Korean audiences. Moved by this powerful *han*, the public was stirred to action, demanding legislation to protect minors. Within 37 days of the film's release, Korea enacted new legal safeguards for children, dubbed "the law of *Silenced*" (Kim, 2011).

The transformative role of Korean national cinema has turned films into platforms for addressing contentious societal issues and societal advancement. It is distinctly different from commercially driven films primarily focused on

entertainment. Korean national cinema, that is inextricably linked with historical context, assumes a significant societal responsibility. Korean national cinema epitomizes a profound sense of societal obligation that uniquely centers on people's lives and is intricately tied to Korean nationhood, state, and society—a creed embraced by excellent filmmakers, reflecting a strong sense of social responsibility. (Moon, 2006).

Secondly, the articulation of *han* in Korean national cinema, has enabled Korean national cinema to defend its domestic market against Hollywood's influence. Hollywood films held a dominant position in the Korean film market throughout much of the 20th century (Min et al., 2003). In 1993, Korea's domestic film market share, which was confronted with an inundation of foreign films, particularly from Hollywood, plummeted to as low as 15.9% posing an existential threat to Korean filmmakers (KOFIC, 2010). The Korean film industry then embarked on an extensive endeavor to emulate Hollywood films in a bid for survival. However, despite a lot of efforts, certain high-budget Korean commercial films encountered significant setbacks at the box office. These large-scale commercial productions found it challenging to connect with Korean audiences by strictly adhering to Hollywood norms, emphasizing visual extravagance akin to Hollywood or merely extending Hollywood formulas (KOFIC, 2010).

After several unsuccessful attempts to emulate Hollywood, Korean filmmakers then aspired to craft a cinematic style that embodies unique Korean attributes and distinguishes itself from Hollywood. Korean national cinema, experiencing rapid development following the abolition of the film censorship system, offered them a glimmer of hope for safeguarding the domestic film market in Korea. According to Klein (2008), Korean national cinema captures social contradictions and conveys *han* towards societal darkness by deliberately diverging from the commercial elements often linked with Hollywood blockbusters—including substantial investments, celebrity actors, specific narrative styles, and visual spectacle.

Korean national cinema, grounded in societal darkness and the pain of the people, can thrive independently of Hollywood elements. Remarkably, Korean national cinema, has steadily increased its domestic market share in the face of Hollywood films (Klein, 2008). For example, *Spirit's Homecoming* (2016), a low-budget film depicting the distressing experiences of Korean women forced into sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese Army during the occupation of the Korean Peninsula, has garnered significant attention. This film, that was ultimately completed through crowdfunding, was on the verge of suspension due to insufficient funds. Regardless of its limited budget and the absence of international-level film stars, gripping narrative, or dazzling visual effects, *Spirit's Homecoming* (2016) authentically reflected the dark society under Japanese colonial rule and the painful experiences of Korean women. It attracted millions of Korean viewers and attained a commendable box office performance and at one point, outperformed two American films, *Deadpool* (2016) and *Zootopia* (2016), in weekly box office rankings.

In conclusion, Korean national cinema, which committed to portraying societal darkness rooted in collective trauma, has significant impacts. On the societal plane, Korean national cinema fosters social progress by effectively cultivating a heightened sense of social responsibility among individuals and compelling them to advocate for justice against the stark realities of social injustice and inequity. On the film industry front, Korean national cinema features a unique and distinctive Korean paradigm of expression that has allowed it to chart its course in a Hollywood-dominant film landscape and safeguard its position within the Korean domestic film market.

4. *Han* Enhanced Through the Plot, Theme, and Ending in Korean National Cinema

The following section focuses on how film content elements are employed to express *han* towards societal darkness. Existing literature scarcely discusses how *han* towards societal darkness is expressed in film narrative. This paper contends that Korean national cinema predominantly employs plots, themes, and endings to construct a logical progression that effectively expresses *han* towards societal darkness.

Korean national cinema often employs plots to depict the darker aspects of human nature. Commonly, these plots involve individuals in positive societal roles engaging in actions that undermine social justice and violate ethical norms. The stark contrast between their positive identities and the reprehensible behavior makes it easier for an audience to perceive the darkness within human nature, evoking a sense of *han*. For instance, in the film *Silenced* (2011), judges, who should uphold fairness and justice, engage in unjust activities; police officers, who are assigned the duty of combating crime, yield to bribery and engage in harboring criminals; teachers, entrusted with educating, commit acts of sexual assault against students. The portrayal of these positive figures engaging in such malevolent actions, as opposed to more stereotypically negative roles like thugs or criminals, intensifies the sense of *han* experienced by an audience.

Films also strategically arrange groups with positive identities within a plot to collectively engage in reprehensible behaviors to intensify the expression of *han*. For instance, in the film *Memories of Murder* (2003), multiple police officers are depicted participating in coercive interrogations, with mutual cover-ups among them to obliterate evidence of wrongdoing. This narrative technique prompts an audience to realize that such malevolent conduct is not an isolated act carried out by an individual but rather a shared behavior within a collective, thereby strengthening the expression of

han. Moreover, Korean national films frequently orchestrate plots where various groups with positive identities collaborate in committing immoral acts. For example, in the film *Silenced* (2011), police officers, judges, doctors, and lawyers collectively work to exonerate a school principal accused of criminal behavior. This deliberate storytelling choice serves to further intensify the expression of *han*.

Korean national cinema elevates the expression of *han* by transitioning from the theme of human darkness to that of societal darkness. In a more nuanced analysis, the narrative unfolds with a gradual accumulation of plots portraying individuals with positive identities engaging in reprehensible behavior, thereby illustrating darkness inherent in human nature. However, this thematic exploration that primarily focuses on individuals with misconduct remains superficial in nature. The film then progresses through plots with meticulous design to unveil the powerful, systematic, and intricately complex societal darkness that lurks behind the darkness inherent in human nature. The underlying message conveyed by film posits that societal darkness acts as the catalyst for the manifestation of the darkness within human nature. At this juncture, the film's expression of *han*, initially directed at the superficial darkness of human nature, undergoes a transformative evolution to *han* directed at societal darkness. This transformation represents the ultimate objective of the film in expressing *han* and signifies a crucial elevation of the thematic discourse. Such an elevation positions the film to critically examine societal flaws from the vantage point of national and collective trauma. Such an approach not only enhances the film's realism but also resonates more broadly with an audience and is likely to foster social progress.

For example, in the film *Silenced* (2011), the lenient punishment accorded to the school principal who committed rape, is attributed to the manipulation of societal elites; it exposes the fragility of the legal system in safeguarding the interests of vulnerable groups. In *Memories of Murder* (2003), the audacity of the police to arbitrarily arrest individuals is fundamentally rooted in the authoritarian government granting them the power to violate human rights. In *Parasite* (2019), the sudden outbreak of violence against the wealthy by the impoverished is fundamentally linked to severe socio-economic disparities and class tensions. In *Inside Men* (2015), conglomerates, officials, and newspaper editors dare to disrupt the societal order of fairness due to a tight entanglement of their interests.

Films that do not elevate *han* to the societal level may be criticized for ignoring societal problems. For instance, the Korean film *People in the Dark Streets* (1981) portrays the tragic life of a prostitute. Scholars Min et al. (2003) argue that although the film displays *han*, it confines *han* to the personal level of the prostitute, neglecting to explore the societal reasons behind her tragic fate. By not elevating individual *han* to the societal level, the film weakens its critique of reality and diminishes its societal value.

Korean national cinema often employs tragic endings to fortify the expression of *han*. The prevalent model within Korean national films depicts the main characters engaging in a strenuous struggle and making significant sacrifices to combat the societal darkness. However, the narrative trajectory commonly culminates with their defeat by the prevailing darkness of society. This paper argues that a tragic ending can deliver a poignant message: ordinary individuals are powerless against the pervasive darkness within society. The deliberate utilization of a tragic ending serves to elucidate the societal darkness more effectively and heightens the expression of *han*. The accumulated *han* manifested throughout the film reaches its zenith through a tragic ending without any potential release. The unreleased *han* always holds the utmost profundity.

A tragic ending, as highlighted by Zhao (2017), serves as a more profound means of societal interrogation. *Han* towards society brought about by the tragic ending is unparalleled compared to a satisfactory ending. In films ending on a positive and happy note, the accrued *han* generated through intricate plots and themes finds release at the ending of the film. The audience, devoid of *han*, leaves the cinema in a state of contentment without an emotional impetus to actively engage in endeavors reflecting on social issues and driving societal progress. The contemplation of societal issues sparked by a film is thereby limited, therefore such endings do not significantly contribute to addressing societal problems or fostering societal progress. For instance, in the ending of the film *Silenced* (2011), the principal who committed the heinous act of raping children receives only a minimal punishment eliciting a strong sense of *han* towards society's dark aspects. Had the film concluded with a death penalty for the principal, the audience would have likely welcomed the verdict, thus diminishing the cultivation of a deep-seated *han* towards society. Consequently, such an audience might lack an emotional impetus to advocate for the legal rights of minors and disabled children. The enduring societal status quo with the pervasive presence of darkness renders ostensibly cheerful endings of films devoid of significance and efficacy. Therefore, Korean national cinema, driven by a mission to depict societal darkness and the suffering of the people, tends to eschew the use of happy endings.

It is evident that Korean national cinema employs plots, themes, and endings to articulate a sense of *han* towards societal darkness. These three mutually reinforcing elements that are interconnected gradually build up to the climax of *han* expression. Therefore, plots, themes, and endings constitute a logical progression for expressing *han* towards societal challenges in many films in Korean national cinema. The subsequent analysis will elucidate the ways in which

Korean national films employ plots, themes, and endings to convey *han* towards societal darkness through the lens of the Korean film *The Host* (2006).

The Host (2006) achieved notable success in Korea, securing the top position in the 2006 Korean box office rankings. This accomplishment represented a significant landmark in the growth of the Korean film industry (Lee, 2011). The film also received the prestigious Best Film award at the Blue Dragon Film Awards, a highly respected honor in the Korean film industry. Despite its classification as a science fiction disaster film, *The Host* (2006) aligns with the paradigm of Korean national cinema, strategically centering its narrative around various dimensions of societal darkness (Chattopadhyay, 2023).

The film revolves around a family's struggle against a monstrous creature to rescue a girl, and within its plots, it vividly illustrates the darkness of human nature. The film unfolds several plots reflecting the sinister aspects of human nature: an American scientist coercing a Korean assistant to dispose of toxic chemicals into the Han River with no regard for its health consequences to many Koreans; the indifference of government officials to the girl's abduction by a monster at the expense of their duties; a forced brain surgery on the girl's father under false pretenses of a viral infection; and the utilization of lethal chemical weapons by the Korean government, following U.S. directives, that harmed numerous Korean citizens. The film expresses a profound sense of *han* in response to these moral transgressions by scrutinizing the dark human nature of scientists, doctors, police officers, and government officials engaging in reprehensible actions.

In exploring the theme of *The Host* (2006), the film transcends the depiction of the darkness inherent in human nature to delve into the more abhorrent darkness of societal reality. The film serves as a critical lens, that prompts an audience to recognize that societal darkness begets the darkness inherent in human nature. More precisely, the film conveys to the audience the idea that societal darkness in Korea is attributed to the Korean government's indifference to the people and the negative influence exerted by the United States, resulting in individuals with dark human nature. The expression of *han* escalates from the personal to the societal realm, offering a profound commentary space on the broader issue of societal malaise.

In the ending, the film concludes with a tragic resolution: despite the family's relentless efforts, including the sacrifice of the girl's grandfather, the young girl succumbs to death. The fully committed and emotionally charged rescue mission infused with familial bonds, ultimately ends in failure, and the underage girl meets a tragic demise—an ending seldom witnessed in Hollywood cinema (Klein, 2008). The tragic ending conveys that while the monster is the superficial cause of the girl's death, the fundamental reason lies in the government's indifference to the interests of the people and its blind obedience to the United States. This resulted in a delayed rescue for the girl, leading to her death. The deliberate incorporation of such a tragic ending in Korean cinema serves to reach a crescendo in expressing *han* towards societal darkness as the film draws to a close.

In summary, Korean national cinema is dedicated to illuminating societal darkness, and the expression of *han* in the cinematic context is deliberate and systematic. This paper posits that the articulation of *han* in Korean national cinema predominantly hinges on three key elements: plot, theme, and ending. Within the plot, characters with ostensibly positive identities are often depicted engaging in reprehensible behaviors to shed light on the darkness inherent in human nature and elicit *han* towards these characters. The films through skillful design, prompt an audience to recognize that the darkness inherent in human nature is merely superficial, and it is societal darkness that begets the darkness within human nature. At this juncture, the film's theme evolves from expressing *han* towards the darkness inherent in human nature to *han* directed at societal darkness, marking a thematic elevation. Ultimately, the film concludes with a tragic ending, conveying a powerful message: the struggles of ordinary individuals are devoid of meaning in the face of formidable societal darkness. The tragic ending serves as the pinnacle of the film's expression of *han* towards societal darkness.

5. Potential Cultural Discount: The Impact of National Cinema on International Audiences

There exists a notable gap in research concerning the potential negative repercussions of Korean national cinema articulating *han*. This study posits that of Korean national cinema's concentrated emphasis on societal darkness might encounter prospective cultural discounts during its global dissemination. The term of cultural discount could be described as, 'a particular program rooted in one culture, and thus attractive in that environment, will have a diminished appeal elsewhere as audiences find it difficult to identify with the style, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioural patterns of the material in question' (Hoskins & Mirus, 1988, p. 500). Thus, the elements that appeal to one cultural audience may not necessarily appeal to the tastes and expectations of another; audience inclinations vary among different cultures.

This study contends that Korean national cinema may encounter potential cultural discounts in its international dissemination due to three primary reasons. First and foremost, the cultural psychology of *han*, shared among the Korean populace, enables a comprehensive understanding of the expression of *han* in Korean national cinema by

domestic audiences. Nevertheless, audiences abroad external to the Korean cultural milieu may not accurately interpret *han* in Korean national cinema resulting in confusion or misunderstanding and possibly cultural discounts.

Secondly, audiences are often driven by entertainment and relaxation to view films (Wei, 2022). Consequently, Hollywood-style films, centered around the advocacy of universal human values such as love and goodness, resonate better with international viewers. In contrast, Korean national cinema's commitment to depicting societal darkness may elicit a sense of oppression within audiences. Such an incongruence between the pursuit of entertainment and the display of societal darkness could adversely affect overall film enjoyment, and give rise to cultural discounts.

Thirdly, the profound societal darkness depicted in Korean national cinema is intricately woven into the fabric of Korea's social reality. Korean national cinema demands that audiences possess a deep understanding of Korean societal culture to discern the nuanced expressions conveyed by the films (Boman, 2020). Nevertheless, many international viewers are unfamiliar with Korean societal culture. For example, the sequence of calamities portrayed in the Korean film *The Host* (2006) is grounded in the societal darkness arising from the Korean government's neglect of its people's interests and the coercive control exerted by the United States over Korea. International audiences who are unacquainted with the intricacies of Korean societal culture and the dynamics of the Korean-American relationship may not fully comprehend the film's incisive satire and diminish the film's perceived value.

Before the internet was well-developed, global viewers had limited access to Korean national films, reducing the potential for cultural discount. But the substantial development of the internet has disrupted traditional viewing patterns. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated movement restrictions also led to a significant surge in online movie streaming habits (Wang, Lucyann, & Rustono, 2021). Many international audiences now explore Korean national cinema through digital platforms. Hence, the Korean film industry must conscientiously consider the viewing experiences of its international audiences.

6. Conclusion

This study delves into an intricate exploration of the unique cultural psychology of *han* within Korean national cinema through a systematic review of existing literature. Korean national cinema, characterized by its foundation in collective trauma, intricately portrays societal darkness and expresses a profound sense of *han* towards societal issues. The article articulates two noteworthy implications arising from the depiction of societal darkness in Korean national cinema. Firstly, Korean national cinema instills a sense of social responsibility among domestic audiences thereby fostering societal progress. Secondly, Korean national cinema, which has safeguarded its share in the domestic Korean film market, is focused on the portrayal of societal darkness and successfully charts a distinctive path divergent from that of Hollywood. The paper systematically analyzes how Korean national cinema forms a logical progression in a narrative by strategically employing plot, theme, and ending to articulate and intensify *han* towards societal darkness. Specifically, Korean national films often unravel the darkness inherent in human nature by depicting individuals with positive identities engaged in unethical behavior. As the narrative unfolds, these films explicitly or implicitly reveal overarching and systemic forces—societal darkness—underpinning human darkness. The narrative thus represents a thematic shift from *han* towards human nature darkness to *han* towards societal darkness. Films typically culminate in a tragic ending that symbolizes the insurmountability of societal darkness and the pinnacle of expressing *han* towards societal issues. Lastly, this study posits, from three distinct angles, that due consideration should be given to the ramifications associated with cultural discounts in the active global promotion of Korean national cinema.

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge our gratitude to those who contributed to the completion of this paper. We are grateful for their guidance and support throughout the research process.

Authors contributions

Professor Dr. Hamed Mohd Adnan and Associate Professor Dr. Changsong Wang were responsible for study design. The manuscript was drafted by Ph.D. student Xiaotian Gao, and revised by Associate Professor Dr. Changsong Wang. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript. The authors contributed equally to the study.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Boman, B. (2020). From *Oldboy* to *Burning*: *Han* in South Korean films. *Culture & Psychology*, 26(4), 919-932. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X20922146>
- Chattopadhyay, S. (2023). The Rise of Korean Sci-Fi: A Critique of the Development of Films and Web Series in South Korea and America. *International Journal of English and Comparative Literary Studies*, 4(2), 32-50. <https://doi.org/10.47631/ijecls.v4i2.619>
- Choe, S. (2018). Ten years of philosophical thinking in Korean cinema. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, 10(2), 79-84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17564905.2018.1518690>
- Gee, F. (2017). Global intimacy and cultural intoxication: Japanese and Korean film in the twenty-first century. In R. Stone, P. Cooke, S. Dennison, & A. Marlow-Mann, (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* (pp. 44-58). Oxfordshire: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315688251-4>
- Ha, J., & David, J. (2014). A Critical Consideration of the Use of Trauma as an Approach to Understanding Korean Cinema. *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia*, 50(1), 16-50.
- Hoskins, C., & Mirus, R. (1988). Reasons for the US dominance of the international trade in television programmes. *Media, Culture & Society*, 10(4), 499-515. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344388010004006>
- Jin, D. Y. (2019). *Transnational Korean cinema: Cultural politics, film genres, and digital technologies*. Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press. <https://doi.org/10.36019/9781978807921>
- Jung, S. (2010). *Korean masculinities and transcultural consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-pop idols*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5790/hongkong/9789888028672.001.0001>
- Kim, J., Unger, M. A., & Wagner, K. B. (2017). Beyond Hallyu: Innovation, social critique, and experimentation in South Korean cinema and television. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 34(4), 321-332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2016.1241623>
- Kim, R. (2011). *National Assembly passes "Dogani Law"*, The Korea Times, Retrieved from http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/02/113_97529.html
- Kim, S. S. H. C. (2017). Korean *han* and the postcolonial afterlives of "the beauty of sorrow." *Korean Studies*, 41, 253-279. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.2017.0026>
- Klein, C. (2008). Why American studies needs to think about Korean cinema, or, transnational genres in the films of Bong Joon-ho. *American Quarterly*, 60(4), 871-898. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.0.0041>
- Lee, N. J. (2011). Localized Globalization and a Monster National: *The Host* and the South Korean Film Industry. *Cinema Journal*, 50(3), 45-61. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2011.0031>

- Lee, S. A. (2019). The new zombie apocalypse and social crisis in South Korean cinema. *Coolabah*, 27, 150-166. <https://doi.org/10.1344/co201927150-166>
- Lee, S. T. (2022). Film as cultural diplomacy: South Korea's nation branding through *Parasite* (2019). *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 18, 93-104. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00192-1>
- Li, X. S. (1996). A Song of Sorrows and the Aesthetic Consciousness of Korean Tradition. *Contemporary Cinema*, (04), 76-79.
- Matron, A. (2010). Transferability of Cultural Meaning: A Case Study on Contemporary German and South Korean Cinema. *Literature & Aesthetics*, 20(1), 26-37.
- Min, E., Joo, J., & Kwak, H. J. (2003). *Korean film: History, resistance, and democratic imagination*. Westport: Praeger.
- Moon, H. (2014). Genealogy of the modern theological understanding of han 恨. *Pastoral Psychology*, 63, 419-435. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-013-0574-0>
- Moon, J. C. (2006). The Meaning of Newness in Korean Cinema: Korean New Wave and After. *Korea Journal*, 46(1), 36-59.
- Sohn, H. J. (2020). Feminism reboot: Korean cinema under neoliberalism in the 21st Century. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, 12(2), 98-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17564905.2020.1840031>
- The Korean Film Council [KOFIC]. (2010). *History of Korean Cinema* (J. W. Zhou & Y. Xu, Trans.). Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- Wang, C. S., Lucyann, K., & Rustono, F. M. (2021). Film distribution by video streaming platforms across Southeast Asia during COVID-19. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(8), 1542-1552. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211045350>
- Wei, X. (2022). An analysis of the causes of the communication dilemma of domestic low-budget art films. *Film Literature*, (08), 37-41.
- Yecies, B., & Shim, A. G. (2011). Contemporary Korean cinema: Challenges and the transformation of 'Planet Hallyuwood'. *Acta Koreana*, 14(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.18399/acta.2011.14.1.001>
- Yoon, K. K., & Williams, B. (2015) *Two Lenses on the Korean Ethos: Key Cultural Concepts and Their Appearance in Cinema*, Jefferson: McFarland and Company Inc.
- Yuan, W. Q. (2015). A Study of Korean Revenge Films. *Journal of Xi'an College of Arts and Sciences (Social Science Edition)*, (04), 6-12.
- Zhao, B. Y. (2017). Korean Crime Cinema and Its Realistic Expression Based on Cultural Perspective. *Contemporary Cinema*, (06), 48-52.