

‘Parasite’ highlights issues in Singapore too

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Bong Joon-ho’s movie ‘Parasite’ made huge waves during the 2020 Oscars, being the only film in the organisation’s 92-year history to win the Best Picture award as a non-English language film. It also won several other awards, including Best Foreign Language Film and Best Original Screenplay.

By now, most of you would’ve already watched this South Korean movie, in which we see how the poor (the Kim family) will do anything to survive in a world where the rich (the Park family) seem to have bottomless pockets. While many see this as a uniquely South Korean phenomenon that illustrates the divide between the rich and poor, it also happens around the world – even in Singapore.

For starters, there are many similarities played out in the movie that reflect everyday life in Singapore, like:

Hiring domestic helpers is normal

In the movie, it seems that hiring help – for chores, tuition, or driving – is normal for the wealthy. Then again, hiring maids is so normal in Singapore that you don’t even need to be wealthy to be able to afford a live-in helper. In fact, every fifth Singaporean household hires a domestic helper, and there are now well over 250,000 foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore.

Many argue that FDWs are a necessity for some families, reflecting that Singapore as a whole is wealthy enough to hire that many live-in maids. But the reason live-in maids are so prevalent could lie in their salaries, which averages S\$600 a month. It’s a salary that not even students – whose rent and food are also taken care of – are willing to take for jobs like that. Does this mean that, in relation to ‘Parasite’, Singapore is the wealthy family that hires domestic helpers from our poorer neighbours?

‘Parasite’ asks if the Parks—wealthy idiots who are dependent on a lower class—aren’t the real “parasites”, who give nothing back and don’t really care about anyone other than themselves.

Forgery A Degree gets you ahead

One scene in ‘Parasite’ depicted how Kim Ki-woo (the son of the poor family) forged his university degree in order to get a job at the Park household. In South Korea, as in Singapore, having a degree is a requirement to get jobs while those who’ve exited the education system before diploma level are often shunned from the workforce.

In a paper released last year by the Institute of Policy Studies, only 44% of those with a degree were hopeful of upward mobility in 10 years’ time, with the figure falling to 40.6% for those with vocational training or a polytechnic diploma.

This has of course raised issues with not only the education system and the fierce competition to get into local universities. And you don't have to go far to find social media comments lamenting the lack of spaces for local students at local universities.

Since degree holders are held at high esteem, it's also no surprise that you'll find foreign talents forging their degree papers in order to secure employment here.

The rich/poor divide

The wealth gap portrayed in 'Parasite' is one that every nation is familiar with, even wealthy ones like Singapore (did you know that half of Singapore is in the world's richest 10%?). In 2019, the average Singaporean had US\$300,000 to their name, thanks to high savings, increased asset prices, and a better exchange rate.

If that's an average amount, surely this means that most people are living a comfortable life, right? Sadly, this is far from the truth – the elderly are still cleaning tables for a living, for instance. And surely if you even have half that amount, you'd be living in a big landed house already.

So who has all this money? Households with accumulated wealth and connections over past generations are passing on advantages to their offspring, helping them to shine. Those without the same social capital and safety nets are forced to toil much harder to achieve the same – and it's not exactly a guarantee either.

That's what makes the fantasy scene at the end of 'Parasite' such a gut-punch: we know that Ki-woo will never earn enough money to buy the house because economic mobility is dead.

The root causes of economic inequality is a complex issue to solve, but it can simply be reduced to people not having enough empathy or being snobbish. In Singapore, you'll see that kids from elite schools don't often mingle with kids from neighbourhood schools – with this class divide it's no wonder that half of us don't know the other half live. In the film, Park Dong-ik (the patriarch of the rich family) often comments on the 'smell' that comes from the poor.

The poor are poor because they're lazy

A common criticism for the poor is that they're lazy – when it comes to both education and work. However, like in the movie, the Kims aren't a "lazy" family who are simply avoiding hard work. But look around us – the old aunties cleaning canteens, the riders delivering food, or foreign workers cleaning our streets. Are they lazy? The Kims may be conniving, but they don't expect others to do their jobs for them, which is more than can be said for the Parks.

'Parasite' is a lot more than just a movie that talks about the wealth divide – it's a movie that seems to document social issues that all of us in Singapore can relate to. It's also a reminder to all of us that no matter how low on the social ladder we think we are, there are others lower on the rung.