

Textual Analysis of the Most Popular South Korean Films: Value Practice of National Subjectivity Through Diverse Heroes From Humanistic Perspectives

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Abstract

South Korean dramas have seen a strong rise in popularity on OTT platforms in recent years. However, in contrast to the resurgence of the Indian and Japanese film markets post-COVID-19 pandemic, South Korean cinema has faced a box office downturn. This indicates significant shifts in the factors influencing the popularity of South Korean films, prompting exploration into the distinctive characteristics of the most popular national cinema. One of the main features is the diverse style of heroic films, which are highly favored in South Korea. This study examines the top 10 highest-grossing South Korean films through the lens of humanistic values and the theory of subjectivity in public discourse. The analysis reveals that most popular South Korean films showcase a strong emphasis on various styles of heroism, offering insights into how South Koreans define and perceive themselves. The texts demonstrate a strong atmosphere of pragmatism, exploring the nation's historical trajectory and showcasing themes of anti-Japanese-colonialism, anti-dictatorship, anti-gangs, and resistance against oppressive conglomerates, portraying the enduring struggle of South Koreans for freedom. The texts portray a resilient national character, featuring historical figures resisting Japanese occupation, brave police officers, and ordinary individuals facing challenges in realistic or fantastical settings. There's a strong emphasis on heroism, unity, and patriotism, highlighting the inherent human worth in maintaining dignity and subjectivity in the face of challenges. The central theme of heroic figures transcends various genres, with a bold level of realism and taboo-breaking themes, placing South Korean cinema at the forefront in Asia.

Keywords: South Korean Film, Hero Analysis, the Most Popular Movies, Subjectivity of a Nation, Public Discourse

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Introduction

South Korean dramas have seen a strong rise in popularity on OTT platforms in recent years. However, in contrast to the resurgence of the Indian and Japanese film markets post-COVID-19 pandemic, South Korean cinema has faced a box office downturn. This indicates significant shifts in the factors influencing the popularity of South Korean films, prompting exploration into the distinctive characteristics of the most popular national cinema.

One of the main features is the diverse style of heroic films, which are highly favored in South Korea. The traits of heroes such as leadership, compassion, courage, integrity and self-sacrifice are commonly observable as values from drama or movies and these are the values we cherish heroes since they usually step forward in critical moments to support others and are resilient to adversity and difficulty. The definitions of heroes portrayed by the media are one of the sources that provides people's shared knowledge and goodness. In crucial moments of a nation, what kinds of most popular cultural products defined by fans may enhance or challenge society's existing collective memory and knowledge. The culture industries can produce texts or cultural resources for the formations of the people to use or reject the process of producing their own popular culture (Fisk ,2010 , P.19); however, the formation of "the people" is moving "fluidly" since individuals belong to different social categories and not only the people, but also the popular, and the popular forces are "a shifting set of allegiances" as people's felt collectivity. (p.20). Identity, independence and autonomy may be related to the issue of being homogeneous for the formation of the subjectivity of a nation. Scholars have been discussing the importance of how to find the public when the people face the issue of the eclipse of a republic or democracy (Dewey, 2016). Discourse ethics is also examined in the meanings of public life (Finlayson, 2005). Public sphere can be analyzed through following concepts such as forums, private citizens, conversion, public opinion, authoritative representatives, legitimation, people's will and the Common good. In terms of public heroes and the public's action, professional knowledge of governing the country and important issues in society related to whether people are able to judge and take action by common sense, knowledge, common good under the classic theories of democracy. This study connects the concepts of most popular movies and the public sphere by exploring whether the text of most popular movies in Korea have shown public connotations.

Literature Review

Dewey (2016) explored the public and its problems by emphasizing that aiming to be human is to develop "an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values" (p.155) which reflect the idea of " a shared interest." He explains through the work of conversion of associated behavior into a community of action by mutual interest in shared meanings, consequences which are translated into ideas and desired objects by means of symbol (p.154).

Schwartz (2012) identifies ten basic personal values from a circular structure that reflects the motivations each value expresses the conflicts and compatibility among the ten values (Table 1). Among these values are universalism, benevolence, conformity, tradition, security, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power which will be used to analyze the text in which public heroes are portrayed.

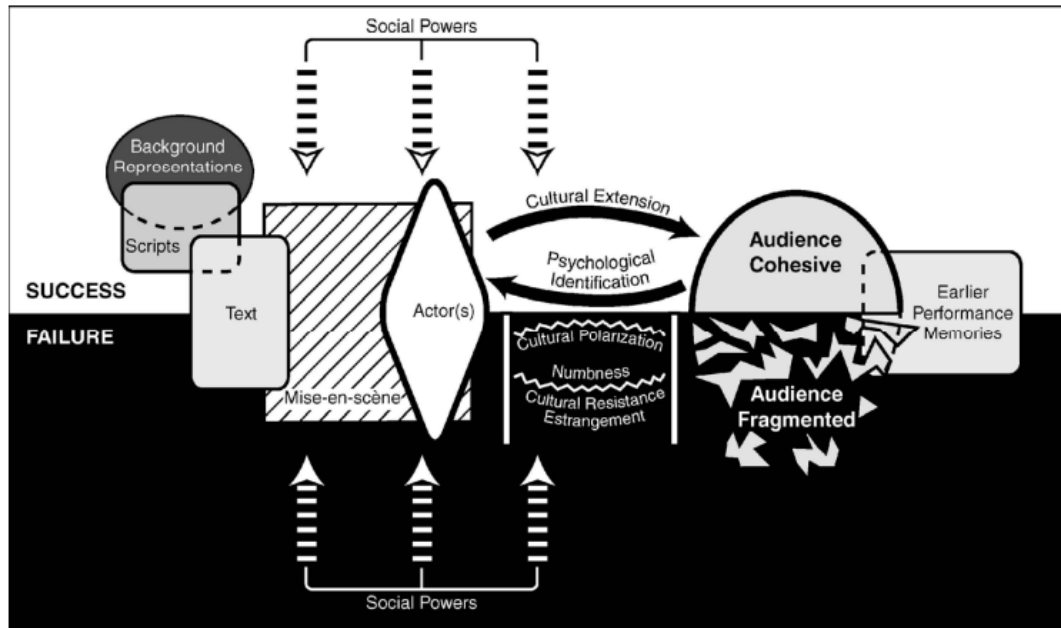
Table 1: The ten personal values and their defining goals

Value	Defining goal
<i>Self-Direction</i>	independent thought and action, expressed in choosing, creating and exploring
<i>Stimulation</i>	excitement, novelty, and challenge in life
<i>Hedonism</i>	pleasure or sensuous gratification for oneself
<i>Achievement</i>	personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards
<i>Power</i>	control or dominance over people and resources
<i>Security</i>	safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self
<i>Conformity</i>	restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms
<i>Tradition</i>	respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion provides
<i>Benevolence</i>	preserving and enhancing the welfare of those with whom one is in frequent personal contact (the 'in-group')
<i>Universalism</i>	understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of <i>all</i> people and for nature

Schwartz, S. H. (2022). Understanding values: Schwartz theory of basic values, retrieved from <https://i2insights.org/2022/05/10/schwartz-theory-of-basic-values/>

In addition, Schwartz listed the shared motivational emphases (listed as italics by the author) of adjacent values: as power and achievement--*social superiority and esteem*; achievement and hedonism--*self-centered satisfaction*; hedonism and stimulation--*a desire for affectively pleasant arousal*; stimulation and self-direction--*intrinsic interest in novelty and mastery*; self-direction and universalism--*reliance upon one's own judgment and comfort with the diversity of existence*; universalism and benevolence--*enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests*; benevolence and tradition--*devotion to one's in-group*; benevolence and conformity--*normative behavior that promotes close relationships*; conformity and tradition--*subordination of self in favor of socially imposed expectations*; tradition and security--*preserving existing social arrangements that give certainty to life*; conformity and security--*protection of order and harmony in relations*; security and power--*avoiding or overcoming threats by controlling relationships and resources*. This study uses adjacent values to explain different motivations for modes of behavior when facing the issue of subjectivity of a nation.

This research explores possible public humanism as the display of civic virtue and civility of a republic which is possibly the final fence against challenges of the subjectivity of a nation if all other political, defense, economic forces fail. Alexander (2006) cited Turner to explain how social identity is shaped mainly focusing on the intersection between performance, ritual and social action as a demonstration of the sociology of culture (See figure below.) The ability to sustain collective belief through ritual-like social performance and reinvigorate collective codes is important to interpret people's life and struggle. Cultural pragmatics as model and morality can be demonstrated in Figure 1.



The figure is readjusted and retrieved from Alexander, J. C. (2006). Cultural pragmatics : Social performance between ritual and strategy. In J. C. Alexander, B. Giesen, and J. L. Mast (Eds.), *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*. p. 77

Figure 1: Audiences and performance.

Most popular movies produced by a nation not only demonstrate the image of its nation to its nationals but also to the global audience. National symbols of a republic need to be socially embedded with cultural artifacts to remind its nationals as an imagined community. However, sometimes, the socially embedded networks are only limited to a corrupt or problematic circle; it may bring disasters for a nation. In contrast, within the corrupt context, the hero may take an action to resist the narrowly embedded network to conquer impossible missions. For example, in terms of the state and international relations, Hobson (2001) defined the domestic agential power of the state by referring to the ability of the state to shape the domestic realm and construct policy free of domestic social structural constraints; therefore, he asserted that so the international agential power of the state could possibly shape the international realm and construct foreign policy free of international structural constraints. He argues that states may enhance their governing capacity with synergistic linkages with reflexive domestic agential power, “where the more reflexive or embedded the state is within society, the more both benefit” (p. 412).

Textual Analysis

Two kinds of most Popular Movies: Box office of a nation’s movie market and local movies in the global market are measured. In this study, the former is measured as the highest-grossing films in Korean box office; in contrast, the latter is the highest-grossing Korean films in global box office. In total, 20 movies were collected and finally ten movies were analyzed in this study after the author deleted the repetitive Korean films and Hollywood films, the values of which are not the interest of this study. The five movies are selected as the highest-grossing films in Korean box office in order: *Extreme Job*, *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *Along With the Gods: The Two Worlds*, *The Roundup 2*, and *Ode to My Father*. Another five movies are added as the highest-grossing Korean film in global box office analysis in this study: *Parasite*, *Train to Bushan*, *12.12: The Day*, *Along with the Gods: The*

Last 49 Days, and *Veteran*. These 10 movies are considered the text selected by Koreans or by global moviegoers who appreciated public humanism reflected in Korean movies. Five Hollywood movies are on the Top 10 box office in the Korean movie markets: *Avatar: the Way of Water*, *Avatar*, *Avenger: Endgame*, *Frozen 2*, and *Aladdin* (Please see Table below). All the five movies are listed in the genre of sci-fi or fantasy.

Table 2: Movies analyzed as the most popular movies in this research

Highest-grossing films in Korea		Highest-grossing Korean films	
Extreme Job	2019	Parasite	2019
Avatar: The Way of Water	2022	The Admiral: Roaring Currents	2014
The Admiral: Roaring Currents	2014	Extreme Job	2019
The Roundup 2	2022	Along With the Gods: The Two Worlds	2017
Avatar	2009	The Roundup 2	2022
Avenger: Endgame	2019	Ode to My Father	2014
Along With the Gods: The Two Worlds	2017	Train to Bushan	2016
Frozen 2	2019	12.12: The Day	2023
Ode to My Father	2014	Along with the Gods: The Last 49 Days	2018
Aladdin	2019	Veteran	2015

Textual analysis is conducted to discuss the meanings of most popular movies that are able to convey public connotations. Three out of the ten movies are in the genre of history: *The Admiral: Roaring Currents*, *Ode to My Father*, and *12.12: the Day*, all of which explain how Koreans struggled or experienced sufferings to keep their national sovereignty or their family reunion. Three of the ten movies are related to cop movies dealing with courageous teams of heroic cops solving serious crimes that are almost impossible to control (*Extreme Job*, *The Roundup 2*, and *Veteran*). Three movies are religion and zombie movies and their themes focus on how Koreans deal with issues of poverty, betrayal, disasters, bio-chemical crisis or regrets (*Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds*, *Along with the Gods: The Last 49 Days*, and *The Train to Bushan*). *Extreme Job* as a Comey and cop team movie won the Top 1 title in the Korean movie market and Oscar-awarded movie *Parasite* won the title as most Korean grossing film globally. *Parasite* as an outlier of this study, with a style focusing on how poor people lost their humanistic characteristics and went extreme as to lose their dignity to do whatever it takes to live in a rich mansion. This is the only movie that shows no higher level of humanistic values but how the main characters turn criminals with a desperate desire for a good life. Therefore, this movie is not analyzed in this study. Humanism values, civility, and civic virtue are used as the structure to analyze the 10 movies listed as the context of most popular Korean movies. Schwartz's theoretical model of relations among ten motivational types of value are applied to this study.

Findings

This study examines the top 10 most popular South Korean films through the lens of humanistic values and the theory of subjectivity in public discourse. The results show that one of the main features is the diverse style of heroic films, which are highly favored in South Korea. The analysis reveals that most popular South Korean films showcase a strong emphasis on various styles of heroism, offering insights into how South Koreans define and perceive themselves. The texts demonstrate a strong atmosphere of pragmatism, exploring the nation's historical trajectory and showcasing themes of anti-Japanese-colonialism (*The Admiral: Roaring Currents*), anti-dictatorship (*12.12: the Day*), anti-gangs (*Extreme Job, The Roundup 2*), and resistance against oppressive conglomerates (*Veterans*), portraying the enduring struggle of South Koreans for freedom from a global and historical perspective (*Ode to My Father*), from a virus-crisis perspective (*Train to Bushan*), from a religion and life-death perspective (*Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds ; Along with the Gods: The Last 49 Days*). The texts portray resilient characters, facing challenges in realistic or fantastical settings, featuring historical figures resisting Japanese occupation, brave police officers, and ordinary individuals, discussed as below. Types of genre, crises heroes facing, values of heroes are analyzed.

Table 3: Analysis of heroes from movie genres, crises, values as a means to an end/ motivational types

Movie name	Movie Genre	Crisis Hero facing	Background of heroes	Values of heroes
<i>The Admiral: Roaring Currents</i>	Epic historical action-war film	the demise of a nation	the savior of a nation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universalism and benevolence--enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests 2. Security and power--overcoming threats by controlling relationships and resources 3. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to his nation 4. Stimulation and self-direction--intrinsic interest in novelty and mastery
<i>12.12: The Day</i>	Historical action -political drama	the stealing of a nation	A general failed to stop a military coup from a dictator who was later described as a butcher for killing his own nationals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universalism and benevolence--enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests 2. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to military 3. Security and power--overcoming threats by controlling relationships and resources 4. Conformity and security--protection of order and harmony in relation

<i>Ode to My Father</i>	Historical/ global drama	the fall of a family during crisis of war and poverty	the first-born male's responsibility starting as a kid	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universalism and benevolence--enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests 2. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to his family and friends 3. Tradition and security--preserving existing social arrangements that give certainty to life 4. Conformity and security--protection of order and harmony in relations
<i>Extreme Job</i>	Action Comedy/Cop team/	A captain who has lost his dignity and his squad is about to be relieved	Outstanding performance as a detective team suffer low budgets and bad luck	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universalism and benevolence--enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests 2. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to his narcotics squad 3. Hedonism and stimulation--a desire for affectively pleasant arousal 4. Stimulation and self-direction--intrinsic interest in novelty and mastery
<i>The Roundup 2</i>	Crime action/Cop team/	Korean cruel criminals fled abroad and cannot be apprehended.	Outstanding performance as a detective team facing foreign cops' refusal to help	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universalism and benevolence--enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests 2. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to his team 3. Hedonism and stimulation--a desire for affectively pleasant arousal 4. Stimulation and self-direction--intrinsic interest in novelty and mastery
<i>Veteran</i>	Action Crime Comedy/Cop team/	Detectives are unable to exercise their authority in the case of a murder committed by a South Korean chaebol heir.	Outstanding performance as a detective facing a corrupt system	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universalism and benevolence--enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests 2. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to his team and responsibility 3. Hedonism and stimulation--a desire for affectively pleasant arousal 4. Stimulation and self-direction--intrinsic interest in novelty and mastery

<i>Along With the Gods: The Two Worlds</i>	Religion/fantasy action	A firefighter enters the hell as a perfect dead man with secrets	Secrets were revealed about a firefighter who attempted matricide but was regarded as a revered figure in the community.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universalism and benevolence--enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests 2. Self-direction and universalism--reliance upon one's own judgment and comfort with the diversity of existence 3. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to his family
<i>Along with the Gods: The Last 49 Days</i>	Religion/fantasy action	Three hell envoys with secrets of historical issues	The intertwined life-and-death grudges and affections of three hell envoy across their past encounters	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universalism and benevolence--enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests 2. Self-direction and universalism--reliance upon one's own judgment and comfort with the diversity of existence 2. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to one's in-group
<i>Train to Bushan</i>	Action horror	Crisis of zombies and the extinguish of humans in cities	A father is determined to carve out a path to survival for his beloved wife, their unborn baby, and his fellow sufferers.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universalism and benevolence--enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests 2. Benevolence and tradition--devotion to humans, friends 3. Self-direction and universalism--reliance upon one's own judgment and comfort with the diversity of existence 4. Conformity and security--protection of order and harmony in relations 5. Security and power--avoiding or overcoming threats by controlling relationships and resources

Heroes in this text analysis are more likely to have wisdom to solve crises by being openness to change as self-direction and self-transcendence as universalism and benevolence for self-expansion and growth and promotion of gain goals. Indeed, heroes may face anxiety, possible loss, and threat that might damage their achievement, authority, and security. However, they will take chances for a possible better future for universalism. Values of self-transcendence are very clear in this analysis although there is congruence and conflict among the values and that brings heroes' actions more drama and plots implicated simultaneously make heroes' dilemma in their decisions. (See Figure 2 below).

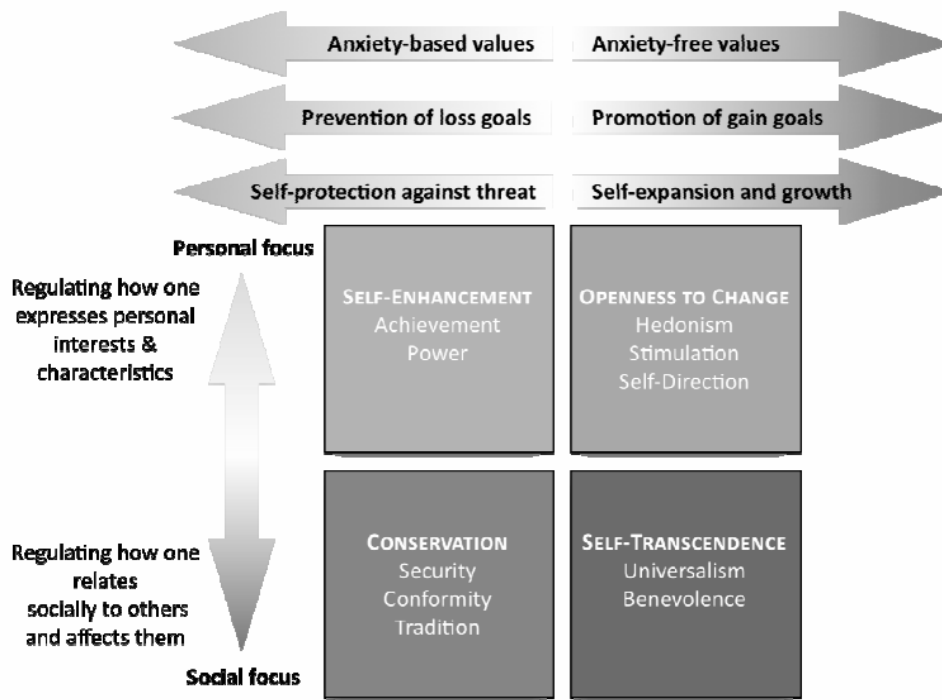


Figure was adjusted and remade by the author, retrieved from An Overview of the Schwartz theory of Basic Values, Schwartz, S. H. (2012). p.13

Figure 2: Dynamic underpinnings of the universal value structure.

Conclusions

The results show that popular culture may be a means for searching for the public and the great community through culture and social ritual. There's a strong emphasis on heroism, unity, and patriotism, highlighting the inherent human worth in maintaining dignity and subjectivity in the face of challenges. The central theme of heroic figures transcends various genres, with a bold level of realism and taboo-breaking themes, placing South Korean cinema at the forefront in Asia.

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