Recent South Korean (Korean, hereafter) films have portrayed the everyday lives of young people from diverse angles, often challenging Hollywood stereotypes that depict young people as endangered or dangerous. For the past ten years, intriguing stories of young Koreans are represented in different genres including romantic comedies, gangster films, and horror films. In particular, recent films featuring Korean youth have been highly recognized for their social criticism and artistic achievement. For instance, *Bad Movie* (1997), *Whispering Corridors* (1998), *Tears* (2000), *Take Care of My Cat* (2001), and *The Aggressives* (2004) demonstrate the creativity and charm of Korea's new generation cinema but do not ignore diverse social issues. Images and stories of youth in contemporary Korean cinema offer rich resources for understanding Korean society.

*Take Care of My Cat* (2001) is an especially noteworthy new generation film. Above all, the film delicately explores how young Koreans come up against social obstacles common to both their generation and the general population. With a microscopic observation of the daily lives of young, marginalized Korean women, *Take Care of My Cat* implicitly brings up issues like social justice, stratification, women's identity, globalization, and consumerism in a developed capitalist society. In addition, the movie offers audiences opportunities for self-reflection. For example, in *Take Care of My Cat*, femaledirectorJeongJae-eun’sdebutfilm,isanintriguingcoming-of-agedramathatdepictsthestrugglesofyoungcontemporarywomenwiththeirfriendships,families,andcareers.ThefilmissetinInchon,anoldportcitysituatedontheoutskirtsofSeoul,andalldifferentfriendshipsofyoungwomenareshowntotheamericanizationofcareerwomen.DebutanteHae-ju(LeeYo-won),aglamorousandambitiousofficeassistantataprospershopinSeoul,iseagertoclimbthesocialladder.Hae-ju’sdreamisamiddleclasslifestyleandisoftenfrustratedbythelackofeducationthatkeepsherfromit.Becauseshedoesn’thaveauniversitydegree,Hae-ju’ssuperiorconsidershera"valuedeficit."Oneday,sherespondswithregretandfrustration:"ThebiggestmistakeImadeinmytwentyyearsisthatIwenttoavocationalhighschool."Indeed,vocationalhighschoolgraduatesincontemporaryKoreaaremorelikelytobeconsideredrebukeformsocialclasscomparedtothegraduatesofacademichighschools.Infact,83.8percentofhighschoolgraduatesinKoreatodayenteruniversities,andeveryuniversitydegreeissociallyconsideredaminimumrequirementforanofficejob.

With a microscopic observation of the daily lives of young, marginalized Korean women, *Take Care of My Cat* implicitly brings up issues like social justice, stratification, women’s identity, globalization, and consumerism in a developed capitalist society.
In *Take Care of My Cat*, the five friends communicate with one another through mobile phones that also serve as audio players and cameras.

From left to right: Tae-hui, Hae-ju, Bi-ryu, On-jo and Ji-young in a five-way conference call planning their get together in Seoul. Screen capture from the film. © 2001 Kino International.

The quiet desire of Ji-young and the conspicuous desire of Hae-ju for material goods demonstrate the “picture of the consumer society that governs the girls’ lives.” As such, the emerging consumer culture of Korea provides ordinary people, especially youth, with a narcissistic sense of power and affluence. Some sociologists argue that citizens of capitalistic societies tend to buy and possess goods for socio-psychological purposes as well as to meet practical needs. Ownership of certain goods in capitalistic societies can be a means of identifying with a particular social class.

Koreans formerly identified themselves with their employers and what they produced, rather than what they personally owned. During the rapid economic development under the military regimes of the 1960s through most of the 1980s, the state disdained any form of “excessive consumption.” But transition from a dictatorship to a semi-authoritarian regime in 1987, as well as the enhanced economic capacity of the urban middle class in the 1990s, increased Koreans’ interest in consumer culture. Since that time, consumption as an expression of urban middle and upper class lifestyles has prevailed. As a result, Korea is widely considered to be one of the fastest growing global consumer marketplaces, and “every other woman in Seoul and Pusan is said to have a Louis Vuitton piece.” Since the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Korea has witnessed remarkable growth in the consumption of luxury brands and new technologies. Many Koreans purchase luxury items beyond their means in order to feel part of the socially privileged class.

Korea is now one of the most “tech-savvy” countries in the world, achieving this distinctive status for their development and consumption of new technologies—virtually all young people between twenty and twenty-four have a mobile phone (98.4 percent as of 2007). In *Take Care of My Cat*, the five friends communicate with one another through mobile phones that also serve as audio players and cameras. In an early scene in the film, the girls celebrate Hae-ju’s birthday by playing Clifford Richard’s song *Congratulations* as a ringtone on their mobile phones. They frequently express their feelings to one another by text messaging. The phone gives the young women a means to express themselves and serves as a positive reinforcement for their relationship.
Screencapture from the film. © 2001 Kino International.

After the death of her grandparents, Ji-young gives Titi to Tae-hui.

Not all Koreans welcome the increased use of technologically mediated communication. The effects of cell phone use are widely debated as the technology continues to penetrate daily life. Some believe that the new technologies have a positive effect on intimacy and socialization. Others argue that new communications technologies may be dissolving relationships with family and friends because they decrease face-to-face communication. Despite these ongoing debates, the young women in Take Care of My Cat mainly use the mobile phone to coordinate their daily lives and to maintain friendships.

**KOREANS’ AMBIVALENT FEELINGS ABOUT GLOBALIZATION**

Take Care of My Cat derives its name from the stray cat, Titi, who seems to represent the uncertainty of the five girls’ lives. In the film, the cat passes from one friend to another, symbolically demonstrating the uncertainties and possibilities of the girls’ future. In an interview, director Jeona Jae-eun emphasized the nomadic traits of the characters through the use of symbolism with Titi the cat:

“I wanted my characters to be girls who possessed nothing permanent and therefore were able to leave. Their relationships change and the girls continue to walk. I believe that if something is not moving, the energy weakens and it needs to be filled with things that are moving.”

In this regard, it is no coincidence that the film often shows Incheon Airport, Incheon Harbor, and the subway stations, all places of departure and arrival. The nomadic traits of the girls are not solely derived from their own self-will though. External events, like the death of Ji-young’s grandparents and the divorce of Hae-ju’s parents, help push their departure.

It can be argued that the young women’s situation in Take Care of My Cat reflects the way that Korea chooses to confront the rapid process of globalization. As the girls continue to miss the more innocent and giving friendships of high school, Koreans today may want to reflect back to the “culture of cheong” where local relationships were once warm and more intimate within close circles of trust. Such nostalgia tends to appear in the countries that experience rapid modernization as traditional and local values decline.

Korea has undergone rapid Westernization and urbanization over the past decades. The government has also massively restructured its economic and social systems in order to meet “global standards” that the International Monetary Fund enacted after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Koreans have made an active effort to globalize, and today, Korean students regularly travel abroad and Koreans emigrate all over the world. Just as Tae-Hui and Ji-young want to leave home to travel abroad despite their nostalgic feelings for the past, Koreans today look forward globally but also wish to maintain their imagination of the “innocent past.” Take Care of My Cat illustrates this ambivalent attitude.

Take Care of My Cat portrays the struggles of young women growing up in Korea and touches on sensitive social issues in contemporary Korean society. The film helps readers think about Koreans’ encounters with globalization. As the cat in the film ambivalently symbolizes global-looking nomadic traits and innocent local friendships, Koreans may also have mixed feelings about globalization: nostalgia about the local past with an adventurous spirit for the global present.

**NOTES**


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