



Youthful Struggles in a Globalizing New World

TAKE CARE OF MY CAT

DIRECTED BY JAE-EUN JEONG

DVD, 112 MINUTES, 2001

ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Reviewed by Kyong Won Yoon



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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,¹ gangster films,² and horror films.³ 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,

GROWING UP AS OUTSIDERS IN INCHON, SOUTH KOREA

Take Care of My Cat, female director Jeong Jae-eun's debut film, is an intriguing coming-of-age drama that depicts the struggles of young contemporary women with their friendships, families, and careers. The film is set in Inchon, an old port city situated on the outskirts of Seoul, and tells the stories of five twenty-year-old women who were once best friends at their vocational high school. Depicted as outsiders because of their gender, social class, and education levels, the young women move apart and experience a crisis in their friendship on the way to adulthood.

Hae-ju (Lee Yo-won), a glamorous and ambitious office assistant at a prosperous stock brokerage in Seoul, is eager to climb the social ladder. Hae-ju desires a middle class lifestyle and is often frustrated by the lack of education that keeps her from it. Because she doesn't have a university degree, Hae-ju's superior considers her a "value deficit." One day, she responds with regret and frustration: "The biggest mistake I made in my twenty years is that I went to a vocational high school." Indeed, vocational high school graduates in contemporary Korea tend to be considered inferior compared to the graduates of academic high schools. In fact, 83.8 percent of high school graduates in Korea today enter universities, and a university degree is socially considered a minimum requirement for an office job.⁶

Ji-young (Ok Ji-young) lives with her extremely poor grandparents in an old rental house. The artsy, quiet woman hopes to study textile design abroad one day. Of the five friends, she seems to have suffered the most after graduation—her family is poor and she is an orphan. In the painful process of growing up, Ji-young feels isolated and ignored by her friends, especially Hae-ju, who may be at the opposite end of the eco-

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the ongoing feminist theme of woman's quest for identity encourages young audiences to contemplate the struggles, anxieties, frustrations, and hopes that exist in the transition to adulthood. The distributor pulled the film after disappointing national ticket sales during the initial release (36,000 tickets in two weeks), but dedicated fans launched local campaigns to "save" *Take Care of My Cat*, resulting in the film's re-release and demonstrating that audiences can influence the screening and distribution of a film.⁴ This grassroots achievement in defense of the movie demonstrates that young audiences are more than passive receivers of media. Through their deep engagement with the film's message, young audiences created shared meanings that caused new demand for the film and alerted new viewers to its multiple messages.⁵

nomie strata. Ji-young has no office skills, no middle class family background, and not enough money to further her education. She wanders between low-paying jobs. Although her dream is to study abroad, in reality, she does low-pay manual work at the Inchon International Airport. It may be symbolic that Ji-young is only able to serve others as they travel abroad even though she dreams to do the same.

High-spirited and unconventional Tae-hui (Bae Doo-na) tries hard to understand and communicate with her friends. She works for her family-run sauna business and volunteers as a typist for a young disabled poet, but dreams about an adventurous life "on an endless sailing boat," a dream that conflicts with the traditional norms of her family. Tae-hui believes she is victim of her father's desire to deny her



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.

self-realization and freedom. Her family seems to live by neo-Confucian norms where women are expected to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their family, even at the expense of individual interests and tastes. Tae-hui feels suffocated in this atmosphere and is willing to leave home sooner rather than later.

In addition to the three main characters in the film, Bi-ryu (Lee Eun-sil) and On-jo (Lee Eun-joo) are half-Chinese identical twin sisters. They are easygoing and make a living as street vendors, selling handmade accessories. Bi-ryu and On-jo show the multicultural side of Korea where the number of ethnic minorities is increasing, but where they remain socially marginalized. Until recently, Korea was ethnically and culturally homogeneous, and its citizens took pride in this cultural homogeneity, calling themselves “the nation of one race” (*danilminjok*). While this declaration assumes only one ethnic group and a homogeneous culture, Korea today can no longer be categorically identified as a nation of one race or ethnic group. In fact, more than two percent of the population is now foreign in origin, and the rate of interracial marriage has rapidly increased, making up ten percent of all marriages.⁷

CONSUMER CULTURE IN SOUTH KOREA

Take Care of My Cat illustrates the pervasive desire for consumer goods by many Koreans. Shopping is an important part of the daily lives of Hae-ju and Ji-young. Like many other young people in contemporary Korea, these two friends buy things not only out of necessity, but also to show off their real or symbolic social status.⁸ It is interesting that Hae-ju and Ji-young show similar attitudes in their consumer behavior despite their class differences. Hae-ju purchases a variety of goods and services ranging from clothes to plastic surgery. Compared to other characters in the film, Hae-ju is a “shopaholic,” and she expresses her desire for narcissistic pleasure by saying, “It’s the present that matters.”

Ji-young’s daily life is also driven by the pursuit of pleasure through consumption. When she borrows money from Tae-hui in an early scene of the film, one might expect that she desperately needs the money to repair the sinking roof of her rental house or to get training for her career goals. Instead, she uses the money to buy a new mobile phone. Possession of the mobile phone helps her live vicariously as a part of the middle class, even though she knows she is not.

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.”⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.¹³

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).¹⁴ 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.



After the death of her grandparents, Ji-young gives Titi to Tae-huiin.
Screen capture from the film. © 2001 Kino International.

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.*¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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

1. For example, *My Sassy Girl*, dir. Kwak Jae-yong (PMP Entertainment, 2001) and *My Tutor Friend*, dir. Kim Kyung-Hyung (Prime Entertainment, 2003).
2. For example, *Die Bad*, dir. Rye Seung-wan (CNP Entertainment, 2000) and *Friend*, dir. Kwak Kyung-taek (Korea Pictures, 2001).
3. For example, *Whispering Corridors*, dir. Park Ki-hyeong (Tartan Video, 1998) and its sequel *Memento Mori*, dir. Kim Tae-yong and Min Kyu-dong (Tartan Video, 1999).
4. C.Y. Shin, "Two of A Kind: Gender and Friendship in *Friend* and *Take Care of My Cat*," eds. C-Y Shin and J. Stringer, *New Korean Cinema* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 117–131.
5. J. Fiske, "Cultural Economy of Fandom," L.A. Lewis, ed., *The Adoring Audiences: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1992), 30–49.
6. Korea National Statistical Office, *Statistics Social Indicators in Korea*, 2008 online at <http://www.nso.go.kr>, accessed July 30, 2009.
7. In-Jin Yoon, "Steps Toward a Multicultural Korea," *Korea.net: A Gateway to Korea* at http://www.korea.net/news/news/NewsView.asp?serial_no=20071207014&part=111&SearchDay=, accessed July 1, 2009.
8. G. Miller, *Spent* (Toronto: Viking Penguin, 2009), 54.
9. Shin, 129–130.
10. M. Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2006).
11. L.C. Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
12. R. Chadha and P. Husband. *The Cult of the Luxury Brand: Inside Asia's Love Affair with Luxury* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2007), 174.
13. S. Choi and K. Jin, "Image Management and Luxury Goods in Korean Society: A Cultural and Sociological Perspective," *Journal of the Korean Society of Clothing Industry*, 8:6 (2006), 672–678.
14. K. Yoon, "Mobile Phones, Young People, and South Korean Culture," *Education About Asia*, 13: 3 (2008), 52–55.
15. J. E. Jung, "Interview with Jeong Jae-eun on *Take Care of My Cat*," *Kino International* 2002, http://www.kino.com/takecareofmycat/cat_dir.html cited in Shin (2005), 128.
16. Shin (2005), 128.
17. According to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the number of Korean international students in the US exceeded 110,000 in 2008, which makes Koreans the largest foreign student group in the US. The number of Korean students accounts for 15.2 percent of 722,272 foreign students in the US. See S. Park, "Korean Students Largest Ethnic Group in US for Three Years," *The Korea Times* (Feb 4, 2009) at http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/02/117_38894.html, accessed on July 29 2009.

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