Korean Popular Movies and Culture Codes

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Abstract Popular movies as one of the cultural content have a close relationship with the social context. Particularly it is very important to analyze and reflect the culture code which can be considered as the cultural unconscious of the public. This article selects the film, "Miracle in Cell No.7," as the core case and is about to analyze the culture code of Korean popular movies. The first is the healing code which is being a social conversation topic recently. The second code is the family code which is traditionally one of the most powerful codes in the Korean films. The third one is the code of social accusation in which the public’s interest is increasingly growing. This article represents that this film makes an effective reflection of culture code as a popular movie.

Keywords: Korean popular movie, culture code, content planning, healing, family code, social accusation, Miracle in Cell No.7

1 Introduction

Film is closely associated with a contemporary context as a cultural content. When planning a movie, the environment of contents market, the public’s interest, the social atmosphere, including the social changes and trends should be reflected[1]. Unlike literary works, which emphasize the consciousness of an author, for popular movies, a consideration for the audience who are the potential consumers is important before everything. In that context, there is a correlation between culture codes of society and popular films. Thus, movies reflect the culture codes, again interacting with culture codes with a certain influence on them. Culture code is defined as a kind of cultural unconscious[2]. It indicates a collective tendency of the public that compose the society.

This article is going to analyze the Korean culture codes which are reflected in popular films. The film, “Miracle in Cell No.7,” will be covered as an example. This movie, released in 2013, drew over 12 million people in a short period of time and was ranked third in Korean box office history. What made this possible is shown as an excellent analysis of the culture code of the current Korean society. This article is going to analyze the culture codes of Korean popular movies, healing, family, and social accusation one by one, focusing on this film.

2 Culture Code: Healing

Healing is recently the buzzword in Korean society. Tour packages also focus on healing for weary modern people. Books written by religious people, psychiatrists, or
social leaders are on the bestseller list. Television shows, “Healing Camp,” attempts healing through an honest talk such as confession and explanation with celebrities who have various rumors and accidents. The phenomenon that Free Hug campaign is popular recently can be seen from the same context. The act, ‘hug,’ is an attempt to heal the other.

The film, “Miracle in Cell No.7,” which shocked the ranking history of Korean box office in 2013, is the so-called ‘healing movie.’ The story of father, Yong Gu, with intellectual disabilities, and little daughter, Ye Seung, who overcome many challenges and make their life in prison happy warmed the hearts of people. The story that reveals the truth for father who was put to death under a false accusation and clears his name also consoled people by giving faith again in the triumph of justice. There are some opinions that the story is too unrealistic or has a logical contradiction. The movie, however, provides people a kind of fantasy who want to escape from the harsh realities. “Miracle in Cell No.7” may be “Wonderland” where Alice runs after the white rabbit.

One of the most effective ways to healing is the catharsis. This is a term that means purification or excretion in Greek. Aristotle said in Poetics that people achieve the emotional purification by seeing the ancient ‘tragedy’ of the story of a man who faces off with his fate. People relieve anxiety and tension, and they feel light of heart as expressing feelings of extreme sadness and fear. The weak point such as unreality and logical contradiction in “Miracle in Cell No.7” is filled with the touching code that stimulates the ‘impression’. When scenes stimulating fundamental human emotions with father’s instinctive love are performed, theater becomes cluttered with the tears of the people inside. Crying for a spell makes feel better. Through accumulated experiences, people already know this emotional effect.

People these days are chasing the contents that can touch their own emotions even if in an artificial way and make them feel a deep impression. They create a hole in heart, and paradoxically, by doing that, they heal wounds. Imaging and experiencing pain in itself becomes a way of healing. Although it is not the reality they face with, what a substitute, called cultural content, provides is catharsis through a touching story and healing through heartwarming and hopeful message. Healed by the stories of others, it is the power of the healing movies. Healing through a story of specific characters such as the story of Yong Gu and Ye Seung, has stronger impact and ripple effect than teachings of social leaders, doctors, or religious people about how to govern the mind.

### 3 Culture Code: Family

The most frequently and importantly used impression code in Korean movies is family love. Shown in many Korean movies such as “Taegukgi,” “Monster,” and “Tower,” family is the value that is highly emphasized in Korean society. Family love fundamentally has the high story value. Themes of universal qualities like money, love, power, honor, or eternal life that stimulate people’s interest transcend age and culture and have a high story value. Among many kinds of love, family love is a good theme because it can touch people’s emotion universally. It is unquestionable that the film, “Miracle in Cell No.7,” places the code of family at the center.
'Yoon Hu,' which recently became the Internet's most popular search term, is a child of a celebrity. There are entertainment TV shows such as “1 night 2 days,” “Family Outing” that emphasize family relationships, and recently TV programs like “Bungeobbang” and “Dad! Where are you going?” that bring the real family members of celebrities into the shows started to appear. Particularly, these two TV programs stimulate father’s love by the appearance of children of celebrities. Weekend evenings in particular can be seen as a favorable time since it is when family members, including parents and children, watch television together.

The family code that Koreans prefer has been used very widely. Korean first 3D animation, “Jumbagi: Korea's Dinosaur 3D” is the case that the dinosaur documentary was reborn as the animated film with the storytelling, and it achieved the good result in Korea and was also exported worldwide. In this film, which was based on solid scientific facts, family love was also used to create an inspiring story, leading an empathy of the audience. Through the adventures of dinosaur father and son, it gave the impression of father’s love. Since the main audiences of the animation film are children who watch together with their parents, the family code can be seen as a highly effective strategy.

4 Culture Code: Social Accusation

Among themes with a high story value, the theme ‘power’ is also used much in the movies. Looking at the recent blockbusters, such as “Crucible” and “Broken Arrow,” we can see the growing interest of the public in social accusation. If you look into the issue of social accusation problems, most are about the stories related to power. Abuses of power or various crimes caused by greed for power are mainly treated as a material. The place that is naturally set is court. Distrust and hostility of people against court where brings justice, and anger can lead an empathy and participation of the audience very easily.

The film’s box office makes as a medium to spread various social phenomena and movements, not simply just as a fiction. In the case of “Crucible,” the audience started signature campaign demanding reinvestigation of the sexual abuse incident in Inhwa School and facilities closing, and police charged teachers criminally as reinvestigating the incident. Eventually, the special law called ‘Crucible Act’ on the punishment of the crime of sexual violence was enacted. This is interconnected with the public’s desire to take the roles in the movie rather than in the media.

“Miracle in Cell No. 7” also includes these social accusations beyond the touching code. The main character who was unjustly condemned loses a chance to explain due to intellectual disabilities, and even is naively blackmailed by the threat of the man in power. The audience beat their chest while looking at the main character who believes that he should sacrifice himself for his daughter leading to execution ground. And people feel thrilled when his daughter grows up, passes the bar exam, participates in mock trials, finally clear her father’s name, and judging the court for justice.

Among many Korean movies dealing with social accusations treat true story events. Many of these films such as “Silmido,” and “Memories of Murder,” became blockbusters. Dealing with those events already known to people has the similar effect to dramatizing one original story. It has an advantage as a material as people feel similarity and curiosity. In recent years, in both the United States and Korea
crime drama is gaining popularity. Particularly, what emphasized here is reality. A reenactment of an incident plays an important role to maintain constant viewer ratings of TV programs such as “Wants to Know,” and “Chasing 60 minutes.” It was also controversial whether “Miracle in Cell No. 7” is a true story or not. The truth is that it is not a real story. Nevertheless, the reason why the public pays close attention to whether the story is true or not is because they hope that this was a true story that much. This indicates that the audience does not consider a movie as a fiction, and they tend to connect a movie with the real problems of the society and participate in such issues.

5 Conclusion

The film, “Miracle in Cell No.7,” is the film that combines the codes of box office of Korean movie, which are comedy, thriller and touching elements, in the golden ratio. Furthermore, the power of images that veteran actors have strengthens the movie. In some ways, the premise for the box office hit was already in place. However, the reason why the number of viewers exceeded 12 million people is because it reflects today’s codes effectively. In planning of visual content, creating a story that accords with culture codes which reflect unique characteristics of age and society is the most crucial key.

References