Christian Identity in South Korean films after 1997 IMF crisis

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Abstract

This qualitative research is focused on studying Christian identity in South Korean films after 1997 IMF crisis. The 6 South Korean films released in August 1998-2007 are chosen as sampling group. The films are analyzed base on the 4 concepts that are (1) Christianity in South Korea, (2) Christian identity, (3) Binary opposition in Christian identity and (4) Socio-cultural context of South Korea. The study found that South Korean films portray Christian identity similarly and differently through the characters' words, character, setting and characters' performing including the relation between the characters' performing and the meaning of the symbol such the meaning of the colors in Christianity. Moreover, The Christian identity is related to the socio-cultural context of South Korea coincidently both in direct and metaphor. The relation can be considered from image and narration.

Although, South Korean films are different in terms of genre and narration, every films reflex Christian identity well. Christian identity is portrayed through aforementioned things interestingly. Furthermore, the Christian Identity found in the film reflex South Korea's socio-cultural context obviously.

Key word: Christian Identity, South Korean films, South Korea
**Background**

According to Sup (1999), many South Korean people are unemployed because of 1997 IMF crisis. Moreover, there is inequality between social classes. The crisis impacted the role of women (Kim & Finch, 2002). More women work outside to get the salary as same as men. So, there is more equality in gender compare to the past that women had to stay at home and had no income by themselves according to Confucianism. Men were only permitted to do it. The results of the effect are portrayed in the South Korean films which are consisted of the Christian identity narration.

**Unemployed worker and the distinct of middle class and upper class affected by the crisis portrayed in South Korean films altogether with Christian identity**

The “unemployed South Korean people” and “company owners’ problem” are portrayed in the film “Old boy”. This film also portrayed Christian identity such as Catholic school, catholic monk and Catholic nun. It seems that the film maker raised the issue about the effect of the crisis and general phenomenon about the existing of Christian identity in South Korea in making the film. Alike the film “Old boy”, the film “Peppermint Candy” also consist of the two realities.

**“Gender equality” the notion of Christianity in South Korean films**

According to Jones (2007), many South Korean films express the changing of gender role which is a part of the effect of “modernity on national identity” after 1997 IMF crisis. Also, the changing of gender role is a phenomenon which is impacted from Christianity (Clark, 2006). According to Clark (2006), women in South Korea have more opportunities in society, and they can be leaders or have other roles after Christianity spread into South Korea. It can be assumed that the impact of Christianity in terms of gender role change can be also an Christianity issue in the South Korean films during and after 1997 IMF crisis.

**South Korean filmmakers and their films with Christian identity**

As it is aforementioned, the film Old Boy consist of the effect of the crisis and Christian identity. It means the filmmaker focus two realities that are the effect of the crisis “the unemployment and the company owners’ problem” and the general reality about the Christian identity in South Korea. It can be assume that the filmmaker “Park Chan Wook” not only know about the crisis’ effect but also know about Christian identity. It can be assume
that he adapted the information about the crisis’ effect and his knowledge about Christian identity for making this film.

Furthermore, another film that seems to be affected by filmmaker is “Peppermint Candy”. This film made by Lee Chang Dong who has his own opinion about his religious that “Where of one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”… “That’s my opinion on God and faith.” (Lee quoted Ludwig Wittgenstein cited in Lim, 2007).

In addition, many South Korean filmmakers are Christians. Therefore, It can be assumed that the South Korean filmmaker adapt their knowledge about Christian identity in order to make their films. It can be seen that Christian Identity is portrayed in the South Korean films both in all stories and some parts of the stories.

Over all, the interesting points that lead to find out Christian identity in South Korean films after 1997 IMF crisis are;

1. After the crisis, Christianity has more impact to South Korean society

2. After the crisis, Christian identity can be seen more in South Korean films

Objectives/Research Questions

1. How is Christian identity portrayed through the narrative of South Korean films after 1997 crisis?

2. How does the portrayal of Christian identity relate to the socio-cultural context of South Korea?

Research Methodology

The study aims to find out the portrayal of Christian identity in South Korean films released after 1997 IMF crisis. The sampling group that is 6 popular/awarded South Korean films released in August 1998-2007 which portray Christian identity was close examined and analyzed following the conceptual frameworks: Christianity in South Korea, Christian identity, and Binary opposition (the things that have their own opposition sides such black is opposite white according to Kanchana (2009)) in Christian identity. The details of the films are shown below.

The details of the 6 South Korean films
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Films</th>
<th>Released Film Years</th>
<th>Popular or Award</th>
<th>Christian Identity in the Films</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Soul Guardians (Director: Park Kwang Chun)</td>
<td>August 1998</td>
<td>Popular: It is ranked in fourth of Box office in 1998 that 419,210 tickets were sold in Seoul (KOFIC, 1998). According to eBay Inc., (2012), this film “made a big box-office splash in South Korea”</td>
<td>According to Nix (2002), there are many scenes that portray Catholicism. Moreover, Nix said that “Catholicism is the primary foundation for the two films’ “resurrect the Devil” plot”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untold Scandal (Director: Lee Je Yong)</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Popular: it is in the rank of “the best selling film in 2003.” It is ranked in fourth of ten among Korean film according to 2003 releases with Seoul Box-Office. 3,345,268 tickets were sold in nationwide and 1,293,642 tickets were sold in Seoul.</td>
<td>Hagopian (n.d.) mention that Catholicism in the film related to “social criticism”. He said that “…the introduction of missionary Catholicism adds a light touch of social criticism to the film,…”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Old Boy (Director: Park Chan Wook) | 2003                | Popular: According to Seoul Box-Office (2003), this film is ranked in the fifth of the ten films of best selling in the same year of the film “Untold Scandal”. 3,260,000 tickets were sold in nationwide and 1,170,000 tickets were sold in Seoul. **Awards:** the film was awarded the Grand Prix at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival and other awards. 1. Grand Bell Awards – South Korea 2004 | There is the scene that portray the webpage of Catholic scene, image of a monk and a nun on the webpage, and a nun who talk to the protagonist “Dae-Su”. It can be assumed that these scenes are impacted by the filmmaker himself. Kehr (2005) said that Park “was raised in Seoul
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Award/Event</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Blue Dragon Film Awards</td>
<td>as a strict Roman Catholic by academic parents”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Hong Kong Film Awards</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>Korean Film Awards</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>Asia Pacific Film Festival 2004</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>37th Festival Internacional de Cinema de Catalunya–Sitges 2004</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>Belgian Syndicate of Cinema Critics 2005</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>Bergen International Film Festival 2004</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>British Independent Film Awards 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>European Film Awards 2004</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Love, So Divine**  
(Director: Heo In Moo)  
2004  
**Popular:** This film is ranked in twenty-second of 75 films in 2004. 1,242,476 tickets were sold in nationwide and 311,663 in Seoul. (KOFIC cited in Paquet Darcy, n.d.)  
**This film portray Christian identity in Catholic in several scenes. Yang (2004) mentioned the scenes that relate to Christian identity that “In the film, Kyu-sik (Kwone Sang-woo) is an exemplary theological student. In a month, he will be ordained and become priest, a dream he has pursued for years. But God throws him into an embarrassing situation:**
Because of his trouble-making friend Sun-dal (Kim In-kwon), Kyu-sik makes a grave mistake during a formal ceremony at church.”

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Movie Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Source</th>
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| Sympathy for Lady Vengeance       | 2005 | Popular: this film is ranked in seventh of ten of the best of selling films of 2005. 3,648,808 tickets were sold nationwide, and 1,375,194 tickets were sold in Seoul.  
Awards: the film won awards from:  
1. Blue Dragon Film Awards 2005  
2. Cinemasie Awards 2006  
3. Grand Bell Awards - Festival de Daejong 2006  
4. Hong-Kong Awards 2006  
5. Korean Film Awards (MBC) 2005  
6. Paeksang Arts Awards 2006 |        | According to Cho (2011), this film portrayed good and evil which is measured by the “Christianity”. In addition, Cho (2011) found that this religion leads the character attends the community. Source (award): Sympathy for Lady Vengeance: http://www.cinemasie.com/en/fiche/oeuvre/ladyvengeance/recompenses.html, n.d. |
| Secret Sunshine                   | 2007 | Awards: this film won many awards in;  
1. 2008 Asian Film Awards  
2. 2007 Blue Dragon Film Awards  
3. 2007 Cannes Film Festival  
4. 2007 Grand Bell Awards  
5. 2007 Korean Film Awards |        | This film has many scenes that portray Christianity. (Cho, 2011). For example, there is the scenes that portray the evangelical work of a pharmacist. She told the “Shin-Ae” that “the cure |
The analysis result will be re-examined what Christian Identity in what scenes of the films are related to South Korea’s socio-cultural contexts. Then, the relation was considered how they were related.

Findings

The analysis results were divided into 2 parts that are;

1. Christian Identity in the South Korean films
2. The Christian Identity in the South Korean films related to the socio-cultural contexts of South Korea.

1. Christian Identity in the South Korean films

In this part, the finding will be categorized into 5 parts that are Christian ethics, Christian values, Christian beliefs, Christian practices and Christian symbolism.

1.1 Christian Ethics

Christian Ethics refer to the principles that say Christians must and must not do. Ten Commandments are the main Christian morals. The morals which are portrayed in the films are related to worship God correctly, honoring to God, taking the rest in Sabbath day,
worship God in Sabbath day, honoring to parents, prohibiting killing people, prohibiting committing adultery, and prohibiting coveting. From the analysis, prohibiting killing people (which can be categorized into 2 parts that are Killing the others, and Killing oneself “Committing Suicide”) and prohibiting committing adultery are found in most films. Only prohibiting killing people and prohibiting committing adultery and coveting are portrayed in the film in binary opposition. The ethics are portrayed through characters’ performing.

1.2 Christian Values

Christian values are Jesus’ instruction which is written in scripture. According to Wikipedia foundation, Inc. (2012), Christian values which are portrayed in the films refer to Love of God or the God’s love notion, Fidelity in marriage, Forgiveness of Sin, and Unconditional Love Renunciation of violence.

All of the films portray the value “Love of God or the God’s love notion”, and most of the films portray “Forgiveness of sin” and “Renunciation of violence”. Unlike other values, renunciation of violence is portrayed in the films in binary opposition. The values are portrayed through character’s performing and narration.

1.3 Christian Beliefs

Christian beliefs portrayed in the films are related to believing in God, praying, and sin of human, atonement or salvation of Christ, predestination, Sacraments, hell, and good works.

The finding shows that believing in God, praying, and sin of human are portrayed in all films. Besides, believing in atonement (or salvation) of Christ and hell (in metaphor according to Catholic’s belief) are portrayed in most films. Christian beliefs are portrayed in the films through words, character’s performing, colors, and narration.

1.4 Christian practices

In this research, Christian practices will be divided into 9 parts that are practices to God, practices to Christians, practices to sinners, practices to other religious believers, priesthood, selection of clergy, forgiveness sin, prayer, and venerating statues.

From the analysis, practices to God, practices to Christians, and prayer are portrayed in all films. Moreover, practice to other religious believers, forgiveness sin, and venerating statues are portrayed in most film. These practices are portrayed in the films through the characters’ performing and narration.

1.5 Christian Symbolism

Colettine Nun (n.d.) said “Christian Symbolism is some kind of artistic representation, an outward expression, or object that has shades of various, often hidden meanings.” The
finding shows that the meanings of the symbols are related to the characters and the narration in the films. In this research, Christian symbolism will be divided into 3 parts that are radiance, colors and objects.

The study discovered that radiance was portrayed in only one film that is “Sympathy for Lady Vengence”. Meanwhile, colors and objects were found in many films. The colors black, brown, gray, red and white are found in most of the films. Considering the meaning of the colors, it can be assumed that most of the films portray mourning, sin, renunciation of the world, humility, love as love of Christ, and purity as purity of Christ.

2. The Christian Identity in The South Korean films related to The Socio-Cultural Contexts of South Korea

Christian Identity which is found in the 6 films is related to the Socio-Cultural Context of South Korea directly and metaphorically. Christian Identity in the films which is related to Socio-Cultural context is consisted of Christian Ethics: prohibiting killing people (killing the others and committing suicide) and prohibiting adultery, Christian Value: The God’s love notion (Love your neighbor as you love yourself), Christian practices: Forgiveness sin and prayer. Overall, Christian Identity which was found in the films reflex Socio-cultural contexts of South Korea in terms of politics and society.

Examples of the relation between Christian identity and Socio-cultural context of South Korea

1. Christian identity and politics

Binary opposition of prohibiting killing people “killing the other” in the film “Sympathy for Lady Vengence” related to South Korea’s socio-cultural context

In the film “Sympathy for Lady Vengence”, many children are kidnapped and killed, and the film narrates the story that the woman “Geum Ja” and a man kidnap and kill children, but “Geum Ja” alone was imprisoned. These scenes related to the incident during Kwangju massacre in 1980. In this situation, the children were killed, and the women were injured or interrogated.

2. Christian Identity and society

Binary opposition of prohibiting killing people “committing suicide” in the film “The Soul Guardians” related to South Korea’s socio-cultural context

In the first scene of the film “The Soul Guardian”, there are many corpses of Satan Cult believers on the floor and a living pregnant woman on the altar in a warehouse. In 1987, there was the cult mass suicide in South Korea, and 33 people were died. They are men women and some Children.
Discussions

The films portrayed Christian Identity directly and metaphorically. This finding corresponded to McCarthy’s study (2000). He mentioned that Hollywood films portray Christian message such the film “The Ten Commandments”. Therefore, the idea of Christian Identity is not only used for South Korean films’ production but also for Hollywood films’ production.

Moreover, some kinds of Christian Identity such as worship only one God, forgiveness sin, and praying which are performed by the characters reflex the relationship between them and God. This phenomenon conformed to Deich’ analysis result (2006). He mentioned that the two films which portray Christianity both in Protestantism (the film “A River Runs Through It”) and Catholicism (the film “Brothers McMullen) express similar notion that is “the relationship between God and community”.

Apart from kinds of Christian Identity which are aforementioned, Christian symbolism “Crucifix” is used as the tool to chase the bad spirit according to the result. The result contradicted to Kozlovic’s research result (2007) a bit. He said that “cross” is used “as the tool to chase the evils”.

Furthermore, Christian Identity reflexes the socio-cultural context of South Korea in terms of politics and society. The result corresponded to Boonrak’s analysis result (2009) and Kittisak’s (1997) that politics and society are portrayed in films as well. It can be seen that the socio-cultural context is used as the information for film production both in South Korea and in other countries.

Recommendations

1. This study focus on the films which were released in August 1998-2007. Next study should focus on the films released in more recent year.
2. Next study should have more information about the purpose of using Christian identity in each film.

References


Deich Jason. (n.d.). *Brothers Catholic, Brothers Protestant: Two Overlapping Worlds Imagined Through Film*, pp.1-10


