Games may be terminated if the majority agrees

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To catalyze this development, the administration was centralized and an erudite class of bureaucrats emerged from the predominantly peasant population: the yangbans. With time these inequalities deepen, and towards the end of the 18th century the yangbans strongly resisted this new nobility as known in Europe. The society of the Joseon period is particular by its rigidity, unequalled in the world during this period: the elite and the hierarchization of the society remain the same for nearly five centuries. The pivotal period of the Joseon dynasty was thus an era of development and surprising stability. However, this was accompanied by a relatively impermeable hierarchy of the society.

Why say «Hell Joseon» when talking about contemporary South Korea? Because we find its characteristics today.

• The tiger[6]

At the end of the Second World War, South Korea planned a great development plan. With foreign aid (especially Japanese) and the hard work of its people, South Korea saw all its economic and development indicators (life expectancy, literacy, ...) rising. It was then part of the Asian Tigers with Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. At the end of the century, the transition is over and it is part of the G20! The economy gradually shifted from primary to secondary education and, like the Miracle on the Rhine, which refers to the industrialization of Germany after the Second World War, this period is called the Miracle on the Han River[7]. The case of South Korea is considered a model of economic development.

This impressive transition is taking place under a conservative, nationalist political regime that promotes state capitalism. This facilitates the emergence of the international giants you know well, like Hyundai and Samsung. But these names are in fact more than that: they are mega-conglomerates, grouping together dozens of successful companies in various parts of the economy. For example for Samsung, there is Samsung electronics, Samsung Life Insurance, Samsung Construction and Trading and many others. There are now dozens of conglomerates like this one called Chaebols, literally «clan of those who have names», a dynasty of kings strong and long used for the families owning them. Main participants and engines of the Korean growth, the Chaebols hold today an unprecedented economic power on the country.

Knowing this, you can probably guess the next phase. Cases of corruption and tax evasion are common. But the importance of these companies in the national economy and the cult of personality established towards the fathers of each conglomerate forces the president to pardon the few indicted. And the influence of the Chaebols does not stop there. Some of them are also involved in politics. This is for example the case of Chung Mong-joon, chairman of Hyundai Heavy Industries, who was elected to the national assembly in 1988[8].

Today's South Korea is therefore subject to great wealth disparities, and the influence and opulence of the Chaebol class is only slightly concealed. However, this is the case in many countries around the globe, without their citizens calling their country a hell. The country is in the top 10 in the world, both in HDI (Human Development Index) and in GDP. To understand the exasperation and distress of Koreans, we must look at their habits and customs.

What's going on in South Korea? What context transfers a Netflix phenomenon from the couch to the street?

• Hell Joseon[3]

Hell Joseon, Hell in Korea. This is the satirical expression that young Koreans have adopted on social networks to describe the ultra-competitive socio-economic system in which they live. As a nod to this, the second episode of the series we are interested in is entitled «Hell». As a whole, the characters in the series serve to highlight the social inequalities in South Korea. For example, the main character is inspired by a trade unionist traumatized by a violent police repression. Beyond the first episodes, the ultra-rich appear who sadistically enjoy the bloody trials in which the marginalized are forced to participate.

Squid Game puts the violence of inequality in South Korea on the screen without a filter. So much so that the international success of the series transports its symbolism, like the masks, to the social struggle[4].

To better understand the context, I propose you a small dive in the Korean history and geography before coming back to Squid Game and its resonance with the socio-economic situation.

• Joseon[2] dynasty

Without detailing all that precedes the modern times in Korea, we will make a small exception for the period which gives its name to the expression. During the 15th and 16th centuries, the Korean peninsula was known as the Joseon dynasty. It is a rich period of Korean history during which kings promoted education, science and culture. Confucianism was established as the majority religion and way of thinking. Advances such as the invention of printing, the development of medicinal and agricultural sciences and the democratization of the Korean alphabet are examples of this golden age.
Let’s make room for K-pop and K-drama (for Korean-pop and Korean-Drama)! Since South Korea is part of the G20, it has invested heavily in its soft power: art and culture, and it works very well. The export starts in the 90’s and without problems in East and South Asia. More recently, the success of Korean entertainment is worldwide. International hits like Gangnam Style or big K-pop groups like BTS have already made a big splash. On Netflix, K-drama series are becoming more and more popular. The cinema is also influenced by it, as with Bong Joon-Ho’s Parasite, which is a gratifyingly popular and international success. South Korea is recognized today as a hub of both economic and soft power.

In terms of production, technology and talent, the South Korean entertainment industry is on par with Western English-language production.

What about Squid Game? (spoilers from here)

Let’s start with a few words from the director, Hwang Dong Hyuk, directly:

“I wanted to write a story that was an allegory or fable about modern capitalist society, something that depicts an extreme competition, somewhat like the extreme competition of life. But I wanted it to use the kind of characters we’ve all met in real life.”

[12]

The series puts in scenes without embellishment the distress of the characters forced to gamble their lives for a huge sum of money. As we have seen, they represent a wide range of disadvantaged people and examples of discrimination, beyond their debt. Without really knowing what to expect, the participants play childish games, like red light, green light. Only, the losers are summarily executed by machines or mysterious organizers hidden behind the famous masks with round, square and triangle, representing their level in the hierarchy. Characters are led to ally, manipulate and betray each other: the amount of the reward depends on the number of players left. The constant violence is sometimes brutal and impersonal, sometimes calculating and intimate. Tears are guaranteed. The players, as much as the organizers, play without question and respect the strict rules that have been given to them, even if it means killing.

However, throughout the game, it is enough that the majority agrees, and everything stops. Simply, few are able to do this. Episode two, «Hell», concludes with the following: it’s worse out there.

Then come the big bad rich Westerners, who come to enjoy the misfortune of the participants, betting as if on horses. A bit like us behind our screen. As in Joker or Black Mirror, the series insists on the perversity of the system that creates such violence. By playing with the tension and disgust created, which works so well, it puts us, the viewer, back into the system. But unlike other dystopian social criticisms like Hunger Games, this one is cold and contemporary.

The international success of the series allows the Korean unions to call the people to the street, to protest against the violence of their daily socio-economic system, disguised as torturers.

As if to remind us that, as in the series, in a democracy, the game can end if the majority agrees.

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