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Beyond the Bastion: Capital, Habitus, and Genre in Yoo Hyun-mi's *SKY Castle*

With the economic boom of South Korea in the late 1980s, it has since then established itself as an urban giant and cultural powerhouse. Apart from distinguishing itself in these aspects, South Korea is also known across the world for its cutting edge education. However, beneath all its accolades are the harsh realities of students that have to bear with the pressure and competitive environment. Typically, if students want to keep up with their peers, they find themselves either enrolling in a cram school (hagwon, in Korean) or studying on their own for an additional eight to ten hours even after an entire day of being in school. As a result, students are given little to no time to explore other aspects of their lives, such as exploring other hobbies outside academics or even leisure time with their friends and family.

Consequently, this pressure exerted by the South Korean academic system also brings with it adverse effects. For example, this culture has debilitating consequences on the mental health of the student population, as they resort to dangerous coping mechanisms such as self-harm, and in extreme cases, suicide (“Academic Pressure Pushing S. Korean Students To Suicide”). It is not uncommon for students to feel that drastic measures such as these are the only option out of the fatal system because many of its citizens subscribe to its “reap what you sow” mindset.

Given these circumstances, the praise that South Korea receives for producing quality research and scholars should also be met with criticisms of its harmful working environment.

One way that a reflexive outlook on South Korea's education can be developed is through the production of authentic cultural products, ones that have the capacity to mirror true realities even if they are works of fiction. Apart from a consideration of the work's authenticity, it is also important to account for whether or not it will reach its intended audience. Even if these cultural products might be able to draw parallelisms between factual and fictional life, how well its audience will receive the product is still just as significant. Bearing in mind all these different factors, it can be said that a text can be deemed effective if it is both authentic in production while still bearing qualities that make it adequate in distribution. An example of a text that fulfills these criteria is Yoo Hyun-mi's *SKY Castle*.

In order to establish *SKY Castle* as a critical text that effectively represents the realities of the South Korean education system, an analysis informed by Pierre Bordieu's theories of capital as well as Christine Gledhill's study on genre production will be developed. Particularly with the way that economic, social, cultural capital function within the habitus of *SKY Castle*, formal elements of the drama affirm the authentic conditions of how South Korean educational institutions operate. Additionally, *SKY Castle* uses techniques of *cultural verisimilitude* while also being a contemporary reimagination of the soap opera genre, allowing it to be well received by its audience. Overall, these distinct features of the television series allowed it to be a mass produced critique of the flaws in this high-stress system.

A Castle's Building Blocks

Behind the fully guarded and towering village gates of *SKY Castle* are a mix of affluent parents that hope to send their children one day to one of South Korea's high caliber universities. The acronym "SKY" refers to the top three universities in South Korea, namely: Seoul National University (Seoul dae), Korea University, and Yonsei University. If a family's

child is accepted into Seouldae, they are treated with great respect and held to a completely different standard. In *SKY Castle*, the drama revolves around four families and their competition to get their children an admission into Seouldae. The protagonists of the drama are the married heads of the household, namely: Han Seo-jin and Kang Joon-sang; Lee Soo-im and Hwang Chi-young; Noh Seung-hye and Cha Min-hyuk; and finally Jin Jin-hee and Woo Yang-woo.¹ Even if the SKY Castle is a fictional setting, many of its depictions of how Bourdieusian capital and *habitus* operate are similar to that of actual South Korean society.



Fig. 1. “SKY Castle.” *Rakuten Viki*, <https://www.viki.com/tv/36348c-sky-castle>.
 [Left picture, from L-R] Top row: Kim Ju-young and Lee Soo-im; Center: Han Seo-jin;
 Bottom row: Jin Jin-hee and Noh Seung-hye
 [Right picture, from L-R] Top Row: Cha Min-hyuk; Center: Hwang Chi-young and Woo Yang-woo; Bottom row: Kang Joon-sang.

According to Bourdieu, capital is “accumulated labor” that can manifest in different forms and can be used in various ways (“Forms of Capital” 15). Economic capital refers to the financial asset an agent gains that can also be used in direct exchange for goods or resources. On the other hand, social capital is more about the interpersonal connections that can be, in certain cases, turned into a title of nobility. Finally, cultural capital can be identified

¹ It is relevant to note that in Korean culture, it is typical for the mothers of the household to retain their family names, but their children would carry their father’s last name, which explains why character’s names differ from their names of the household. (Koffler)

through an agent's knowledge or disposition (embodied cultural capital), material property such as books or dictionaries (objectified cultural capital), and educational attainment (cultural capital). Unlike economic capital that can be transmitted easily, social and cultural capital take time to transfer from one agent to another, and oftentimes occurs unconsciously ("Forms of Capital" 15-17). In order to account for the various social structures that change the way capital is utilized, Bordieu theorized the *field*, a social setting where the interaction of agents take place and each agent ascribes a hierarchical position. However as Bourdieu notes, the field is extremely volatile given that an agent's capital can change at any given time, therefore also changing the position they occupy (Johnson 6-7). Contained within each field is a habitus, or a system that predisposes individuals to behave, perceive, and think a certain way. Though the habitus is a subconsciously ingrained yet socially conditioned matrix, individuals within it still have the necessary agency to resist the structures within the habitus (Johnson 5). For the case of SKY Castle, the elite village can be read as a field that is driven by a stringent, hard to oppose habitus. Even gaining access to a house in the village itself is already extremely difficult. As Jin-hee points out: "you can't live [in SKY Castle] just because you're rich"² ("Episode 1" -54:16)³, an explicit utterance of the village's exclusivity.

For the residents of SKY Castle, more than economic capital, the more important consideration to be part of the elite village is if the head of the household (father figure) is a learned man, usually either a doctor, lawyer, or professor. As such, it can be said that the field of SKY Castle considers cultural capital of equal, or maybe of even greater, importance as economic capital. This can be seen in the families' high regard for institutionalized cultural capital, which also offers them social capital being treated as nobles within SKY Castle.

² Quotes taken from the main object of study throughout the course of the research is based on the translation provided by Netflix; any nuances from the source language itself may not be identified due to a lack of proficiency in Korean.

³ The timestamp provided has a minus sign (-) to indicate the amount of minutes left in the episode.

Joon-sang, Ki-joon, and Yang-woo are graduates of Seouldae, where the two former work as doctors in the local university hospital and the latter works as a law school professor. Both doctors, the law professor, their respective colleagues, and even their family members treat their bachelor's and post-graduate degrees to an extremely high standard, while those who are graduates from an unknown university are typically treated differently. For example, when Chi-young mentions that he completed his residency in a smaller university, the crowd starts murmuring and questioning his position as the head of neurosurgery ("Episode 2" -39:17-39:07). This kind of ridicule that Chi-young experiences is proof that not having a degree from a reputable university is already a hurdle that individuals have to get through, more so if they wish to establish social capital.

Since the field is so competitive, inhabitants of SKY Castle look down on and discriminate against those who do not come from esteemed universities. In one of the side family's conflicts, the son retorted back at his father for having that kind of mindset: "“Lowlife?” If someone's uneducated and poor, do they need to be called a lowlife? You are the lowlifes for looking down on people who didn't graduate from [Seouldae].” (Ep. 7 -53:11-53:06). This is telling of the kind of habitus that has developed as a result of capital and the competitive environment in SKY Castle as Bourdieu explains “social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make... between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar” (“Editor's Introduction” 6). To put it succinctly, Bourdieu stresses that the disposition and choices that agents make are still products of the cultivated habitus that make it as if these decisions are taken from the level of the subconscious, when in fact are based on social interactions. For these families, treating individuals that have lower economic and cultural capital as lesser human beings is normal—prejudice is not an act of bigotry but a necessary action done in order to maintain their hierarchical standing.

Given the nature of the SKY Castle habitus, it is also crucial to note the deviations the drama has from Bourdieu's original crafting of the theories of capital. For Bourdieu, both objectified and cultural capital are typically transmitted usually within a family unit, or a hereditary transmission of capital ("Forms of Capital" 19). However, in a contemporary sociology of education study, Byun Soo-young et. al. found data that suggests another flow of the transmission of cultural capital. Their study found that South Korea had the weakest link between parent's objectified cultural capital and children's embodied cultural capital in comparison to the United States (Byun et. al. 13-14), suggesting that even with a large amount of objectified cultural capital, parents do not necessarily positively impact the child's knowledge on the topics necessary for their education. Moreover, the usual assumptions made by Bourdieu indicate that participation in highbrow culture would also increase a student's academic achievement, but as the research shows, this is not the case. In fact, the data shows that the more exposed these students are to literature, theater, and other forms of highbrow culture, the lower their overall academic achievement (Byun et. al. 14). The main culprit of these anomalies in the South Korean context is the standardized curriculum that educational institutions follow, as exposure to high culture does not provide students with new knowledge on topics discussed in school, but rather takes precious time away from the students to study. However it is consistent in both the Western and Eastern context that a family's socio-economic status (economic capital) benefits their child's embodied cultural capital because of contributive factors such as access to resources that allow a child to achieve high educational attainment (Byun et. al 14).

The findings of this research are reflected in SKY Castle as well. To illustrate, when Seo-jin hires tutor Kim Ju-young to aid in her daughter Ye-seo's admission to Seouldae, Seo-jin is reassured that her only job is to ensure that her daughter is kept healthy and free from distractions. Ju-young also does an ocular at Seo-jin's home to make changes and create

an optimum study environment so that Ye-seo can get high scores on her test (fig. 2). The primary function of Seo-jin's economic capital is not to present her daughter with opportunities to explore cultural products, but to prevent any of her daughter's time from being wasted. Some examples include fetching Ye-seo when needed, preparing all her meals and snacks, and researching possible extra-curricular activities so that Ye-seo would not need to do it on her own. Here, the case of Seo-jin and Ye-seo show how economic capital helps reinforce embodied and cultural capital, while also indicating how academic achievement is based on superb test taking skills instead of a measure of embodied cultural capital. To this regard, Ki-joon reminds his wife of the bleak reality of Korean education: "Do you know the point of education in Korea? It's to help students be good at taking tests." ("Episode 9" -11:02). Whether it is through connotative actions or explicit statements, *SKY Castle* holds a mirror to the circulation of capital as well as the habitus of education in South Korea.



Fig. 2. Yoo, Hyun-mi. "Episode 2" *SKY Castle*. Netflix
<https://www.netflix.com/watch/81030065?trackId=13752289>.
 Kim Ju-young inspects Kang Ye-seo's room to create the optimum studying environment.

Refracted Realities

Given the function of capital and the habitus of education in *SKY Castle*, how is it that the fictional world of the text is able to adequately represent contemporary South Korea? In order to explore this query further, Gledhill presents the concept of *verisimilitude*, which, according

to Steve Neale, is how fictional texts “refers not to what may or may not actually be the case but rather to what the dominant culture believes to be the case, to what is generally accepted as credible, suitable, proper” (qtd. Gledhill 360). Moreover, the concept of verisimilitude is further developed into *cultural verisimilitude* or a fictional text’s reference to the societal and cultural norms of the real world (Gledhill 360). For the case of *SKY Castle*, one of the main features of its cultural verisimilitude can be seen in Han Seo-jin and Cha Min-hyuk’s parenting style. Amongst all the families in the village, Seo-jin and Min-hyuk are two of the most headstrong parents when it comes to getting their children into Seoul dae. They both believe that a parent’s job is to bring the best out of their children, in order for them to get into a prestigious university and live a good life.

Despite the possible repercussions her actions might have, Seo-jin is adamant in creating a path for her daughters to succeed. According to her, “making my daughter a successful person is more important to me than anything else” (“Episode 1” -19:21-19:18). This mindset is observable throughout the drama, as Seo-jin goes to the extremes just for her daughter’s future. In one instance, Lee Su-im catches Kang Ye-bin (one of Seo-jin’s daughters) and her classmates stealing from a convenience store after a cram school session. After finding out that Su-im tried to report her daughter, Seo-jin confronts Su-im for meddling with Ye-bin’s life. It is revealed that Seo-jin knew about the stealing long ago, and simply connived with the cashier to allow her daughter to blow off steam from the stress of school. Seo-jin responds to Su-im’s accusations with a quick retort: “I can do worse things to make sure my daughter lives a nice life like me” (Ep. 5 -8:01-8:03). Despite Ye-bin committing a felony, Seo-jin actually enables this behavior and uses her financial resources to protect her daughter from any legal action, showing the kind of mother Seo-jin deems to be ethical.

On the other hand, Min-hyuk is the type of parent that exerts extreme pressure on his children to succeed. To enhance their test-taking skills, he asks them to solve advanced mathematical problems in a dark room under intense time pressure. During a session with his twin sons, the younger twin is unable to finish before time runs out. Min-hyuk proceeds to send the older brother out and brings Cha Seo-jun to a stone pyramid to represent the social ladder of Korean society (fig. 3). In his lecture, Min-hyuk stresses to his son how he managed to climb very high up the pyramid despite his father's social standing and it is his goal as a father for his sons to reach the very top. Min-hyuk justifies his strict parenting by telling his children that all his actions are for their future. Even so, the amount of pressure that Min-hyuk exerts on his children becomes unhealthy as the rest of the household live in fear.



Fig. 3. Yoo, Hyun-mi. “Episode 4” *SKY Castle*. Netflix

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/81030067?trackId=200257859>.

Cha Min-hyuk (right) explains to Cha Seo-jun (left) how he climbed from the bottom up of the social pyramid after Seo-jun fails to answer the math problem.

Overall, Han Seo-jin and Cha Min-hyuk display two different types of parenting styles that still seem present in South Korea today. By depicting the extreme and obsessive behavior these characters have over their children's education, the drama is able to utilize cultural verisimilitude, making the fictional world seem closer to real life. The contemporary phenomenon of *education fever* is still present in South Korean society today and still continues to affect the disposition both parents and children have towards the benefits

studying in a good university will have (Chandra 151-152). As such, even if *SKY Castle* is still a work of fiction it still presents real conflicts and struggles.

In addition to its use of cultural verisimilitude, *SKY Castle* employed a new yet familiar format of the soap opera allowing it to become a mass produced cultural product. According to Gledhill, it is crucial to genre production not only create several genres for a wide audience to enjoy, but also within particular genres themselves, there must be differentiations to separate one text from another. In short, creating a “pleasure of recognition along with the frisson of the new” (Gledhill 355). Particularly, this can be observed in *SKY Castle*’s episodic format, narratology, and mode of expression.

With regards to the Korean drama’s structure, each episode is about an hour long and was released over the course of four months, from November 2018-February 2019. Each week of the month featured one episode, allowing viewers to follow the lives of the different families of the SKY Castle through a linear timeline. As Christine Geraghty notes, this narrative structure is integral to soap opera’s intended female audience as it develops “a sense of “unchronicled growth”—the sense that while we are not watching or listening, the lives of the characters in the fictional world are continuing in parallel with ours (qtd. in Gledhill 371). Moreover, Gledhill states that the parallel timelines alongside its depiction of everyday life reinforce the idea that the fictional world is not so far from the real world from which viewers are watching (371), making the fictional setting *SKY Castle* even more indistinguishable.

In terms of how the plot unfolds, *SKY Castle* has multiple yet simultaneously occurring storylines that unravel throughout the course of the drama. Viewers watch the four different households compete amongst each other, but also see that each family has their own internal struggles. To illustrate, episode 13 of the drama has a lot of different subplots that

emerge. At the beginning of the episode, Han Seo-jin meets up with her mother-in-law's friend that reveals that tutor Kim Ju-young was accused of murder back when she lived abroad. Afterwards, No Seung-hye gets a phone call from her sister-in-law to find out that her eldest daughter lied about studying in Harvard. Distressed over the news, Seung-hye frantically searches for her daughter to talk to her about what happened in the United States. Moving on to Jin Jin-hee, she visits Hwang Chi-young to thank him for helping her find her son after he had run away from home. Although quite plenty already, these three scenes only cover about less than half of the entire episode. It seems almost natural for an episode to have all these intertwined stories all at the same time. This, according to Gledhill, is how soap operas "[contravene] the "classic" structure of the majority of popular fictions based on the beginning/middle/end formula" (368), formulating their own narrative structure.

Finally, the mode of expression which *SKY Castle* utilizes is that of *melodrama*. Since *SKY Castle*'s conflict is heavily set on the intra- and inter-family relationships of the characters in the story it can be said that it embodies melodrama's "emphasis on the heightened drama of family relationships and personal feelings, as opposed to the focus on public action in "male" genres" (Gledhill 349-350). One major plotline that highlights this is when it is revealed that Kim Hye-na is actually Kang Joon-sang's daughter born out of wedlock, but her biological father is kept out of the dark for so long. In order to save their family from shame, Han Seo-jin takes matters into her own hands and negotiates with Hye-na, offering her a roof over her head in exchange for tutorial lessons. However, Hye-na uses this to her advantage and uses this vital piece of information to leverage more money, food, and house privileges off of Seo-jin. Fed up, Seo-jin threatens Hye-na's life in one final stand to save her family's pride (fig. 4). This confrontation is often seen in melodramas with fathers or mothers revealing that there are more children apart from their nuclear families, adding another dimension to what is conventionally understood as a "family".



Fig. 4. Yoo, Hyun-mi. “Episode 14” *SKY Castle*. Netflix

<https://www.netflix.com/watch/81030077?trackId=14170287>.

Han Seo-jin (right) grabs Kim Hye-na (left) by the neck and threatens to kill her if she chooses to speak up about her biological father.

In considering the melodramatic genre, it is also important to extend the discussion to *SKY Castle*'s feminine subtext, as it places the female characters at the center stage of the stories. Although the influence of their husbands cannot be ignored, the wives of each of the households express their own agency in the choices that they make, while also celebrating each of them for their roles as mothers towards the resolution of the drama. Han Seo-jin eventually realizes how education obsessed she is and allows Kang Ye-seo to try to get into Seouldae on her own accord. No Seung-hye puts her family back together and gets Cha Min-hyuk to take a step back from their children's education so that they might find success in other aspects of their lives. Similarly, Jin Jin-hee allows her son to drop out of cram school and stops pressuring him to become a doctor like his father. Finally, Lee Im-su supports her son as he embarks on a journey outside of Korea, in hopes of continuing his learning outside the classroom. In each of the mother's respective families, they are celebrated for making the decisions needed to properly support their children's aspirations.

Conclusion

As of writing, Yoo Hyun-mi's *SKY Castle* remains one of the highest rated Korean dramas of all time, just shy of the number one position from *The World of the Married* (Nitura). *SKY Castle*'s cast and creators have also won several awards from the Baeksang

Awards, Korea Drama Awards, and Asian Television Awards all held in 2019 (“SKY Castle-Awards”). Utilizing Bourdieu’s framework of capital and habitus, it was shown how the drama mimics the harsh reality of South Korean education, and how class is used to sustain their position on the top. Additionally, *SKY Castle* adequately adopts concepts strategies from genre production, such as cultural verisimilitude and the adaptation of the melodramatic genre, further establishing itself as a work of fiction that appeals to a wide audience even beyond the country of origin. Ultimately, Yoo’s work is an award-winning work of fiction, while also exposing the many flaws that continue to plague South Korean society. Critical texts such as these provide both local viewers and international audiences to develop a better understanding of South Korea not only as a cultural powerhouse, but also as a country with its own internal struggles.

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