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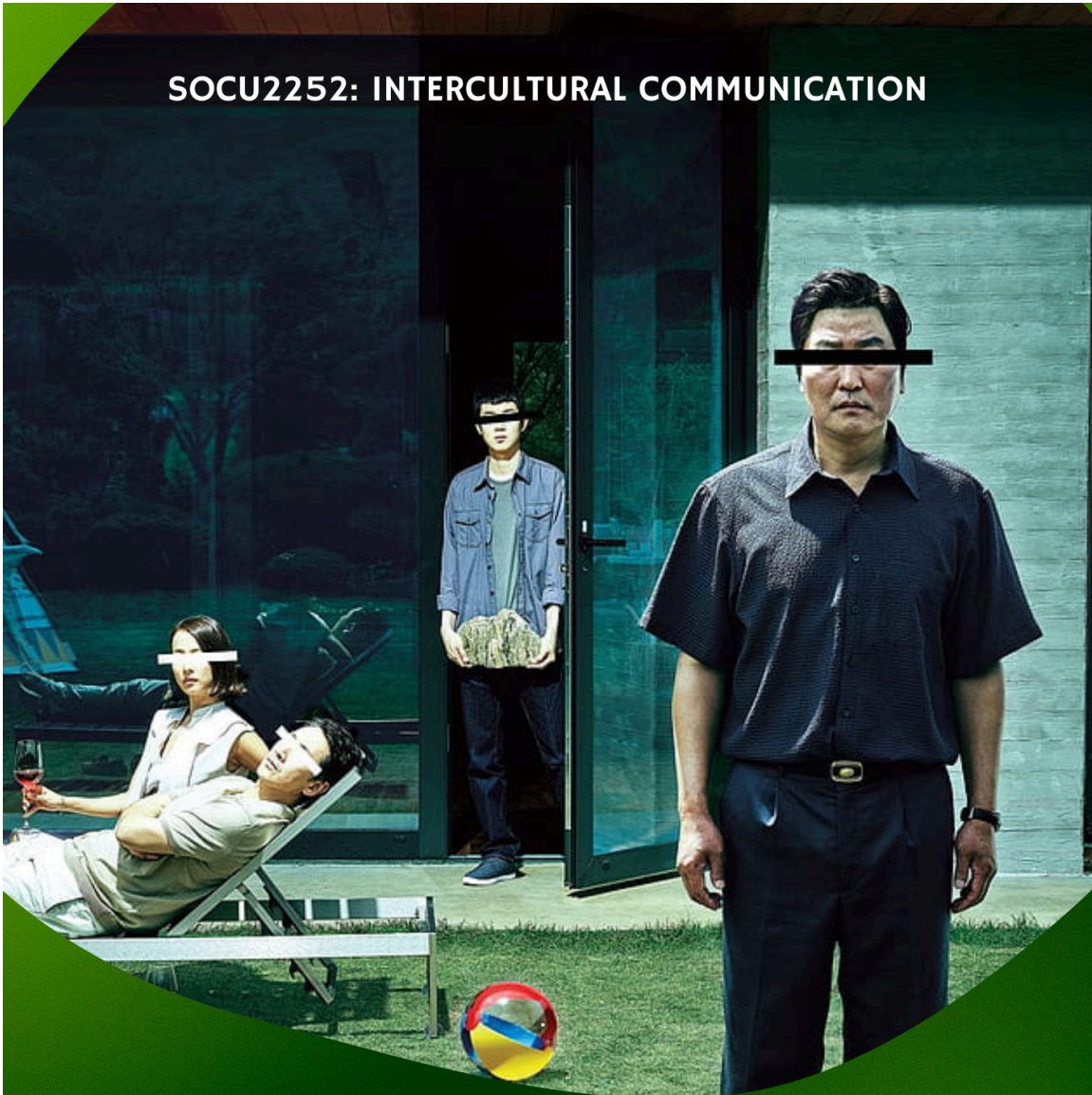
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SOCU2252: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION



ASSIGNMENT 4: CRITICAL LINGUISTIC & CULTURAL PROFILE REFLECTIVE REPORT

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PARASITE

I. Introduction

Parasite, directed by Bong Joon Ho, is the first Korean film to achieve the dual honour of winning both the esteemed Cannes and Academy awards, in addition to garnering other significant awards, including 4 Oscars across various categories. The film depicts the journey of an impoverished South Korean family residing in a semi-subterranean flat in the blue-collar area of Seoul. Over time, they manage to secure jobs with a prosperous family, surreptitiously enter their residence, and establish a disconcerting, mutually dependent bond with them. Parasite successfully delves into the socioeconomic disparity across social classes in South Korea (Liu 2020) and highlights the coercion of the working class to engage in conflict with each other ([Placido 2021](#)). Therefore, this movie appealed to both domestic and international viewers by effectively conveying its message without depending on cultural references to ensure its relevance and comprehensibility ([Vandenburg 2019](#)).

Intercultural competence refers to the exchange of values and identities between different cultures. It involves the reinterpretation and creation of meaning, often obscured by the mistaken belief of successful communication, in which each self involved is a symbolic self being a crucial aspect of one's social identity ([Kramsch 2011](#)). Therefore, this dimension requires a research approach that is based on historical evidence, is attentive to aesthetics, and considers the real, imagined, and virtual worlds. Within the realm of literature, film stands out as the most symbolic medium, employing a multitude of gestures and symbols to convey the core essence or message ([Fraim 2014](#)). Aforementioned, these symbols are often hidden, adding depth and complexity to the storyline through their symbolic significance ([Fitria 2021](#)). Parasite exemplifies the effective use of symbolism. The film depicts a series of events in which sights, sound effects, nonverbal cues, and spoken symbols all add to the overall meaning that effective writings stimulate our inherent capacity to generate or recall symbols, whether new or familiar ([Golden 1990](#), [Brady and Lee 1988](#)).

Bong Joon-ho himself remarked that Parasite highlights the division between the lowest and upper classes ([Sims 2019](#)). The film examines social class division as a manifestation of "permanent inequality" ([Ramos-Niaves 2021](#)) stemming from a binary perspective that distinguishes between the dominant and subordinate groups. Typically, the dominant groups hinder the progress of the subordinates, who, in turn, strive to adhere to the social norms

established by the dominants while pursuing their own self-interests for mere survival ([Miller 2007](#)). The central theme of Parasite revolves around the persistent presence of societal hierarchies, where one group has power and authority over another. The lower class, despite being in a submissive position, actively engages in a competition with the higher class for control and dominance.

This paper aims to analyze and construct culture profiles for two characters in Parasite, Park Dong-ik and Kim Ki-taek, in order to acquire insights about social classification and cultural aspects within each class and in South Korea as a whole. The analysis will focus on eight cultural variables from the Hofstede Cultural model and other relevant models. Through this approach, we can evaluate our abilities in intercultural communication in order to make additional enhancements.

II. Analysis

1. Director background

Bong Joon Ho is a South Korean film director, producer and screenwriter who has made significant contributions to the dark humor and sarcastic genre, aiming to draw on controversial social and political issues and deliver a consciousness-raising message via entertainment (Kim 2023). His films often explore the intersection of contemporary society within South Korea context and culture, emphasizing the sociocultural tensions and conflicts that have arisen. Moreover, Bong's films also incorporate elements of different cultures, including Hollywood genre conventions but tweak them differently in the sense of cultural hybridity, making them accessible and appealing to universal audiences through aesthetically innovative and commercially successful aspects (Wu 2023). However, the idea of being a political filmmaker would never be Bong's preferences at all, he rather use global Hollywood's language of genre to bring uniquely Korean stories onto the mainstream, where the majority of viewers can feel related because of its complex global flow of ideas, messages, production and distribution system (Spaethen 2020). Through Parasite, Bong enriched the differences between the so-called upper and lower classes through a variety of metaphorical images ranging from characters, materials to communicative patterns (Holub 2019). Specifically, in the context of communication, Bong has carefully constructed a multilayers of linguistics scheme to convey a diversity in socialisation.

2. Characters chosen rationales:

Park Dong-Ik, a prominent character in the film *Parasite*, represents a representative of the elite of South Korean society. He is the primary earner for the Park family, assuming the financial obligations for the entire household. Similar to Dong-ik, Kim Ki-taek likewise fulfills the role of the breadwinner in his family, yet coming from the working class - the lower socioeconomic stratum. When these two families interact, a sequence of events unfolds, providing us with multiple viewpoints on culture, including its positive and negative aspects, its roots, and its impact on cross-cultural communication.

Despite being the breadwinner, the way Dong-ik and Ki-taek interact, communicate with others within the family and outsiders have both similarities and differences. We can compare these two characters as two faces of a coin, which means all belong to South Korea, in the same cultural background, but they have different aspects regarding communication, which can be clarified through cultural models as follows.

3. Characters analysis based on cultural variables

- **Individualism / Collectivism**

With a score of 58, South Korea is characterized as having a culture that is comparatively individualistic; this culture places an emphasis on self-sufficiency, self-interest, and the pursuit of personal goals and achievements ([Hofstede Insight 2024](#)) (Appendix 1). Through *Parasite*, we explored this dimension through Park Dong-ik's verbal communication and interactions with others.

During the conversation between Park Dong-ik and Kim Ki-taek in the car, Mr. Park mentioned two things, which prioritizes his own interests over those of others. At first, he asked Mr. Kim to randomly visit a restaurant having pork ribs rather than coming home for dinner with family as usual. He made an excuse for that action by stating that their former housekeeper possessed skill in preparing that dish, whereas his wife is incapable of handling any household chores. In response, Mr. Kim issued him a card visit for the purpose of hiring housekeeping service and instructed him to claim that Park Dong-ik discovered the item independently, without Ki-taek's assistance. At that moment, Park Dong-ik expressed gratitude and claimed he had earned the reputation of a good husband.

Following the neoliberal era, South Korea adopted one of the most concentrated manifestations of free market capitalism, which resulted in the formation of the most stratified

social classes ([Wagner 2016](#)). Concurrently, a discernible shift in the distribution of income towards higher-income groups has occurred during this time period ([Koo 2021](#)), emphasizing the significance of maintaining the neoliberal or capitalist principle that prioritizes the individual's gains in order to maintain social influence and upper-class positions. This further explains why Park Dong-ik, a member of the elite class in South Korea at present, is preoccupied with safeguarding his reputation and rights.

On the other hand, Kim Ki-taek has shown a set of different characteristics, where he primarily embodies collective benefits over his self-interests in the context of socialisation. It was easy to toss his caring and supportive traits. To be more specific, the collectivistic tendencies were depicted through the scene where Ki-taek follows the plan to infiltrate the Park household and conspire to get all of the Parks' employees fired without preventing it from occurring, but instead offering compliments for both of his child - Ki-woo and Ki-jung for defrauding their way into tutoring the Park's children. Moreover, for most of the time, Kim's family are often shown eating close together, even when their plan was done and the Kim's family has an opportunity to gather within Park's mansion, they did not choose to celebrate and eat on a long wooden dining table, where each individual have to sit far away from each other. Besides, Ki-taek also showed his concern for the prior Park's private driver, who has lost his job because of being tricked, and Geun-se - the former housekeeper's husband living in the basement beneath Park's house. This way of behaviour can be explained under the combination of confucian norms and values and Korean historical pathways that construct Korean cultures and communicative patterns. Suffering from many social and political fluctuations, South Korean civilization has formed a strong imagined community (Anderson 2006 ;Park 2015), in which traditions are persistently preserved, despite economic recovery and development process that tended to transform the society in a common capitalist direction. Therefore, there are complex layers of culture established to adjust recent socioeconomic context while remaining respectful to deep-rooted values whenever it comes to socialising (Nam 2013 ; Rozman 2002). Moreover, it is noteworthy to interpret how the environment, including space and urbanisation direct the way people socialise (Zhan and Liang 2020 ; Xuexin 2023). Within a narrow living space, Ki-taek and his family members immerse themselves in certain daily activities that are required to be in close contact with each other, eventually stirring up a sense of irresistible collective identity among family members.

- **Power distance**

Class disparities are accompanied by different levels of power among its members. In fact, an individual's social class is mostly determined by their level of influence within society. *Parasite* clearly portrays the dominance of the Park family and the Kim family's visible inferiority. Bong Joon-ho highlights the influence associated with higher social standing by employing the concept of physical elevation.

South Korea, similar to many East Asian nations such as China and Japan, continues to be shaped in some way by Confucianism, a philosophical system that distinguishes elites with exclusive privileges and power over the lower classes ([Kim 2009](#), [Seth 2020](#)). Hence, the high power distance index of 60 points in South Korea (Hofstede Insight 2024) (Appendix 1), which signifies a hierarchical society in which all members occupy their designated positions and require no additional validation, is comprehensible. Park Dong-ik is not an exception. His preference for a clearly defined social structure is reflected in the housekeeper and chauffeur's steadfast adherence to their designated roles without transgressing boundaries. As a result, he was irritated that Ki-taek perpetually appeared to surpass that boundary or become overly entangled in his personal affairs. This assertion might be interpreted as a moral reminder for Dong-ik and the upper class at large, but when applied to the lower class through the logic of mutual respect predicated on "social distancing" like "I will respect you as well; therefore, refrain from approaching too closely". It ultimately reinforces their established power along with that, structural inconsistencies and social conflicts are reduced and solidified in terms of the ethical stance of each individual ([Jeong 2022](#))

The power distance between Park Dong-ik and his wife is also illustrated clearly in the movie. In the scene that Mr. Park first appeared when he came home, he was surrounded by other people, specifically his wife and their housekeeper, having them carry all his stuff and carefully served. Moreover, his wife is also always afraid of being judged or criticized by Park Dong-ik and apologized when something negative happens in their home. These actions can be explained as the effect of the patriarchal system in South Korean society, in which women had to be subservient and obedient to men including their husbands ([Seth 2020](#)).

In addition, he appears to exhibit preference towards his younger son while neglecting his high school-aged daughter, only engaging with her to discipline her. The portrayal of gender in the film reflects the idea that there is a strong correlation between male dominance in society and

greater social class and income. It also suggests that as one ascends the social hierarchy, patriarchal values tend to become more prevalent.

The Kim family's profound vulnerability is also evident. Even though they are all gathered around her, they struggle to convince even a pizza restaurant employee to hire Ki-woo as a part-time worker. This scene features a medium view that gradually zooms in on the pizza worker. It serves as an illustration of the Kim family's restricted power, which stems from their collective strength and ability to coordinate and collaborate. Even Ki-taek, under the intense patriarchal standards, is supposed to confront and resolve family business issues directly, nevertheless, he rather stepped aside and was not involved in the negotiation with the pizza shop-worker, showing how close the power is between Ki-taek and his family members.

On the other hand, the way Ki-taek interacts with Park's family, specifically Dong-ik and his wife, proposes intense social ramifications, where lower classes are easily being stigmatised or judged due to their powerlessness in a capitalist-oriented and hierarchical society (ref). To be more specific, Ki-taek often seems to cross the intangible boundaries between him and the Parks as he almost exceeds the norm that has been socially-constructed that employees should keep the distance between them and the employers in the context of exchanging information, despite them being all fathers and husbands. By overly expressing while having conversations with Dong-ik in the car and shaking hands with Yeon-kyo (Dong-ik's wife) in a private closet without interpreting the context, Ki-taek has violated both in verbal and nonverbal communicative patterns that are personally preferred by the Parks. In the context of social class stratification, power is a foundation to distinguish different class categories, and by that means, stereotypes are communicated and perpetuated persistently without consciousness as norms practised in this social class might be decoded differently in others, provoking barriers and misunderstandings (Arita 2003; Shin and Lee 2010). Moreover, being upper-class, Dong-ik and Yeon-kyo install their common sense of beliefs toward other social classes, dominating the idea of what should be seen as normal or abnormal in terms of behaviour. Therefore, the way Dong-ik and Yeon-kyo showed their offence through both verbal and nonverbal judgments, in response to Ki-taek's behaviour, is a consequence of how social class stereotypes interrelated with social hierarchy and power distance, where a high-income and a low-income individuals can be treated differently depending on their job, education, and wealth, and those perceptions become normal despite its essentialism for social classes to set a standard and admit unequal power distribution between them (Anwar et al. 2024). That answer for the class inequalities prevents different individuals

with different social standing from having an equal conversation (Oetzel et al. 2007), specifically the way Dong-ik feels impatiently offended by Ki-taek's frequently turning back to a growing degree trying to engage in casual talk.

- **Uncertainty avoidance**

The following segment that we examined during the viewing of Parasite is Park Dong-ik's uncertainty avoidance index, which is illustrated in detail. The Park family consistently employs individuals recommended by acquaintances to fill in for their absent servants, on the grounds that they can only place their trust in those they are acquainted with. This statement is highly consistent with the daily conduct of Koreans. There is a claim that Koreans are considerably more inclined to allocate time, effort, and mental resources towards overseeing and regulating uncertain domains or factors in their personal lives as well as in the workplace. Specifically, their decision-making process places considerable reliance on word-of-mouth recommendations and other reliable standards – achieving success is not solely determined by quantifiable benefits and categorizable amenities, but also by a consensus among the group regarding the worth of a contribution ([Richter 2023](#)). This may elucidate the reason why South Korea ranks among the nations with the highest UAI, attaining 85 points (Hofstede Insight 2024).

In a reverse, Ki-taek differs from Dong-ik in a way that he tends to have a lower level of uncertainty avoidance, but rather be a risk-taker, this can be seen that low social status individuals are depicted to accept changes and variations in their social roles. Despite a high 85-point uncertainty avoidance index (Appendix), situational factors, including status achievements, drive individuals to thrive for ultimate power and position before remaining stable. Throughout the storyline, Ki-taek has involved himself in an attempt to 'invade' into Park's house by falsifying documents, framing others to experience unprecedented privileges that he himself and other of his family members have not reached yet, showing their desire to get anything done without hesitation to go on a ladder.

- **Time orientation**

With a high spirit of uncertainty avoidance, South Korea, therefore, certainly has a high score for long-term orientation index, which is 86 (Hofstede Insight 2024) (Appendix 1). In Korea, delayed gratification, patience, savings, and frugality are highly appreciated. The social hierarchy, which is determined by age and rank, naturally reflects the cultural emphasis on long-term stability, tradition, and resistance to change ([Jing 2019](#)). Hence, it is understandable

that Park Dong-ik expressed his satisfaction and respect for someone attaching with an occupation a whole life.

Park Dong-ik was also depicted as a monochronic individual, demonstrating a strong inclination towards punctuality and a strict adherence to established schedules, as observed by those who prioritize a polychronic perception of time ([Rivers 2022](#)). It can be observed that he prepared details for his son's birthday party and the way they also informed Ki-taek's wife the exact time to start cooking the noodles for them to eat right after they came home when they had to cancel the picnic.

At the very beginning of the movie, the director depicts Ki-taek as a person following a polychronic time system, he has spent most of the time at home, therefore, time is less important for Ki-taek as things can unpredictably come up without scheduling. However, once the Kim family has entered Park's house for employment, the notion of time orientation of Ki-taek has witnessed a change as it needs to conform to Park's schedule of work for employees, even Kim's family suffered from the flood the day before, they still have to show up at Da-song birthday party the next day. This situation partly proposes a common structure of class order, in which upper class decisions are dominant.

- **High-context vs Low-context**

Dong-ik and Ki-taek also show different aspects of communication in the way they interact with each other. Dong-ik is tend to lead a low-context communication as he tends to communicate exactly what he meant to say rather than alluding to points, which is because people with low-context communication desire action-based problem-solving, explicitly stated decisions, facts, and logic, hence sometimes the tone of voice may sound cold and aggressive ([McIvor 2022](#)). On the other hand, Ki-taek has a high-context communication style as he frequently used nonverbal besides verbal communication to convey his message. For example, Ki-taek had a handshake with Dong-ik's wife as a way of agreement or the way his family devised their plan to indirectly fire the Park's former housekeeper along with the affirmation that all things he did had no mean to attack anyone, which all are among high-text communication traits ([Ni 2022](#)). With different communication styles, conflicts can easily happen between these two characters, which can be observed through initial conversations. According to [Augsburger \(1992\)](#), high-context communication often attaches to collectivistic culture and vice versa with low-context, which aligns with the individualism and collectivism dimension of these two characters we analyzed

previously. The causes can be due to prejudices and biases, false assumptions, misinterpretations and misunderstandings resulting from a “conflict of interpretation” and most often attitudes and behaviours related to power, domination, and honour ([Ugorji 2017](#)). Specifically, the climax conflict arose from the action of Dong-ik toward the smell of Ki-taek, originating from Dong-ik’s label stereotypes ([Foster 2020](#)). Park Dong-ik negatively assessed it like the smell of expired pickled radish, of subways, of boiling clouts or in short, the scent of the labour - lower social class, which he claimed to cross the “border”, followed by the action of holding his nose when Dong-ik tried to take the key under Geun-se’s body. This can be defined as a case of expectancy violation when both Dong-ik and Ki-taek had a negative nonverbal behavior violation on each other's expectation in the context of interpersonal communication outcomes ([Burgoon 2015](#)) as the gestures of Dong-ik has contributed to the negative psychological transformation of Ki-taek leading to aggressive action at the end. In the meantime, the smell of Ki-taek serves as a proxemics which is considered as well-understood messages within a culture, but negatively violating Dong-ik’s expectation of interpersonal communication ([Burgoon 2015](#)).

- **Direct vs Indirect communication in managing interpersonal conflict**

Parasite can be seen as a representation of multilayers of interpersonal conflicts occurring among both intra-class and different classes (Oetzel et al. 2007), which is also interconnected with other cultural factors, including gender, types of relationship and race (Bjornsdottir and Beacon 2006). Take the case of Dong-ik for a more detailed interpretation. There was an affective conflict between him and his daughter that cannot easily be seen at the very beginning through the way they interact with each other. This can be explained by how South Korean culture approaches conflict management. According to Kim and Stead (2024), South Koreans tend to not express their emotion directly, which also means that any kind of open confrontation is considered inappropriate. Instead, Dong-ik uses a tender tone of voice to communicate with his daughter, although she seems to disagree most of the time while interacting with her parents through the way she expresses discomfort and opposing emotion. Moreover, as aforementioned patriarchal characteristics, Dong-ik, to some extent, partly has a gender bias between his daughter and son in a way he gives feedback and demands, eventually stirring up an underlying conflict between siblings. Accordingly, Dong-ik primarily pays much attention to his facework when conflicts occur between him and his employees, specifically the private driver in a scene where the underpants were found in the car. Indeed, conflict is often characterised as a threatening situation to one's dignity and honour (Ting-Toomey 2005). In an effort to avoid losing face amidst a conflict, Dong-ik made the strategic decision to delegate the negotiation with the driver to his

wife. He specifically instructed her not to address the conflict directly or provide any rationale to the driver regarding his job termination.

On the other hand, it was noteworthy to comprehend the intra-class conflict between the Kim's family and the Ohs, which is considered as a conflict of interests. Under the influence of capitalist society, Ki-taek and his family members show contradiction to a common conflict management approach of South Korean culture, partly because their family is confronting both opportunities and challenges given by the neoliberal society, where they ought to directly assaulting others for greater resources gaining and status improvement, or in some cases, status recovery, thus, whenever it comes to interests, interpersonal conflicts are more likely to alter into more direct and expressive way (Li 2023). To be more specific, Ki-taek, although he still shows his caring for Geun-se by asking him if he could find things to work, the one that lives in the secret basement, there was no choice for him but to put his family first and foremost, this is when individualism and collectivism characteristics are placed in one frame to see how those concepts, interconnecting not only with each other, but also with more contextual and cultural factors, including levels of intimacy in relationship, gender and social class, are applied for people to manage different conflicts, even in unfavourable manner.

- **Restraint culture direct motivation toward achievement and success**

Both Dong-ik and Ki-taek have a strong sense of thriving for success, however, there are distinctive differences among their own motivations. While Dong-ik is more prone to indulgence as career is more likely a medium to serve his personal elite life, Ki-taek is willing to undertake any job, regardless of status, to sustain the whole family's survival. In terms of Dong-ik, it is understandable from his position that social recognition, dominance and honour explicitly matter more than financial issues because South Korean culture puts great emphasis on the 'inscriptive' image of self that is defined within social and cultural contexts (Kim and Yang 2011). For South Koreans, specifically individualistic person who has higher social status, they tend to adopted ideological notion in politeness behaviour from other and vice versa, including respectful politeness and strategic politeness as both being concerned with honorifics in language usage to preserve morality, honour and reputation of such individuals (Chew 2011; Holmes 2012).

On the other hand, Ki-taek is more likely to restrain himself for a while to achieve a certain level of stability for his family members before his identity crisis comes at the end of the movie. Nevertheless, both of these two characters are depicted as hard-working individuals to

fulfil different needs. This can be easily seen through the fact that South Korea is a restrained society (Appendix 2), where indulgence is an exclusive trade-off and wealth gap play a role as a burden for people to not stop or delay working for such a competitive workplace market in South Korea (Nichasuk 2020)

III. Implications

Through the analysis of chosen characters, we figured out several key takeaways which could assist us in both personal and professional aspects regarding communication and interaction with others. It is clear that Dong-ik and Ki-taek barely have access to comprehension of each other's background, which led to misunderstanding and barriers while communicating, specifically negative expectancy violation in this case. We are aware that in Vietnam, which is a nation having many similarities with South Korea (Appendix 1) along with the existence of numerous communities within a society such as many ethnic groups, reaching somebody without understanding their background including their motivation, behaviours and social class initially would bring about tremendous impact, which could be the same situation with Parasite or even ethnocentrism. Therefore, it emphasizes the importance of practicing Intercultural Competence Communication in Byram's model (1997). We can employ our experience and skills in discovery and interaction to attentively listen to the perspectives of others prior to articulating our own opinions and exchanging cultural encounters. Along with it, we can utilize our abilities in interpretation and relate ourselves thoroughly to examine cultural awareness and analyze discussion topics using appropriate concepts and theories. Furthermore, we demonstrated an attitude to relativise self and appreciate others by accepting that no single culture can be considered as standard. Hence, we are motivated to improve our abilities and expand our understanding of different cultures. This will benefit our studies at RMIT, which is a cross-cultural environment, as well as our future careers, both in Vietnam's dynamic cultural setting and in the current globalized context.

IV. Conclusion

To wrap things all up, this report is not simply just a film critique and analysis, but also playing a role as an open space to critically comprehend the theoretical foundations of interpersonal and intercultural communication in certain social and cultural contexts that go beyond its definition.

Although there were limitations within the report, it instigated a realisation regarding the essence of intercultural communication, emphasising the necessity of a mutual dedication.

Moreover, the profile framework construction underscores the importance for both parties to actively engage in enhancing social and cultural awareness, while demonstrating mutual respect for each other (Ferraro 1994; Kobayashi and Viswat 2011). This understanding serves as a foundation for fostering meaningful connections across diverse cultures and even intra-community that share similar cultural characteristics. By acknowledging and embracing the uniqueness of each other's backgrounds, individuals can bridge gaps, build empathy, and cultivate a harmonious atmosphere of understanding. With a commitment to open-mindedness and genuine curiosity, the journey of intercultural communication becomes an enriching experience that transcends boundaries and promotes unity.

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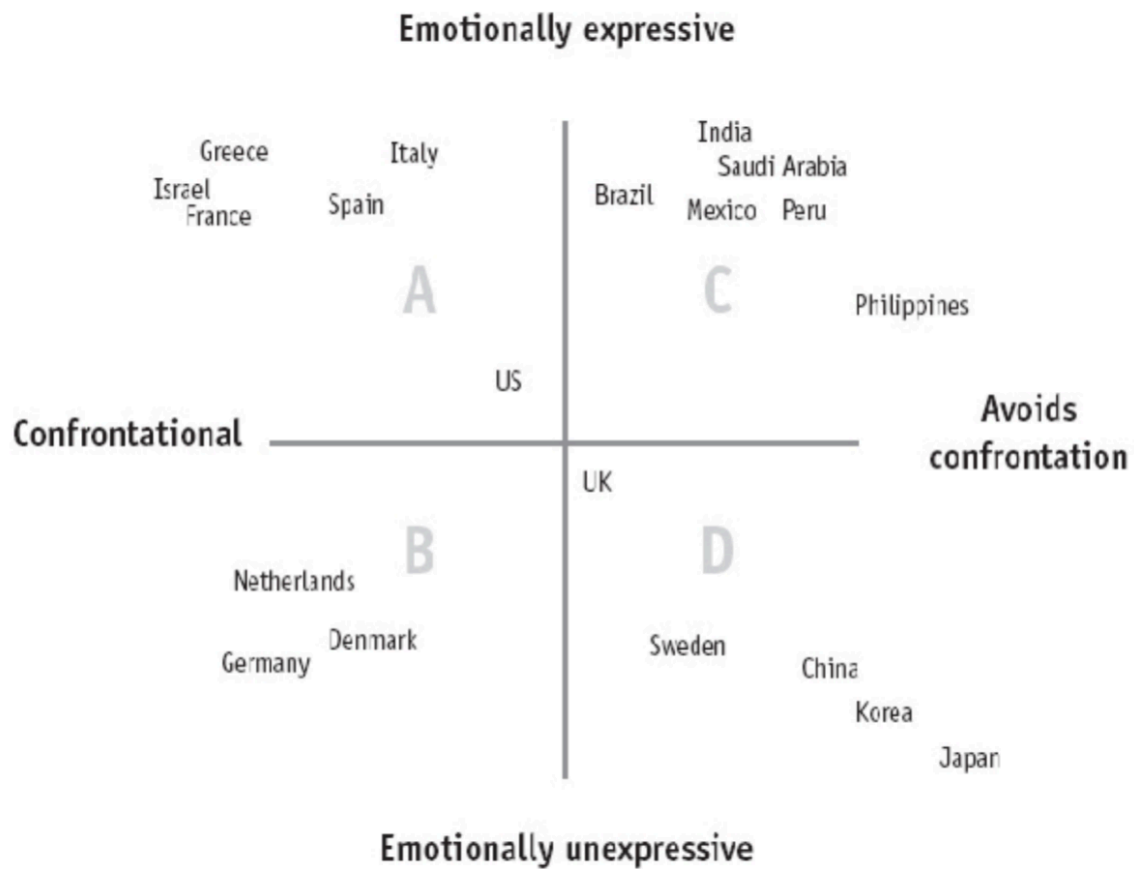
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South Korea x Vietnam x





Appendix 2. Map of confrontational/non-confrontational and emotionally inexpressive/emotionally expressive nations.