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The *SKY Castle* Effect: Korean Television Dramas as
Emerging Spaces of Identity Construction

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INTRODUCTION

Finding answers in Korean popular culture

It has been 20 years since Korean popular culture started to first cross its national borders. From television dramas, films and music, Korean popular culture has since gained a significant presence on the global stage. Illustrative of this rise in global popularity are the immense international achievements of K-pop groups such as *BTS* and *BLACKPINK*, the emergence of Netflix original series such as *Kingdom* (2019), *Sweet Home* (2020) and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) and Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite* (2019) being the first Korean film in history to win an Oscar. These global cultural flows are especially interesting when thinking about how visual culture has become central to contemporary everyday life. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argued in his book *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, we could say that it is in fine art, cinema, the internet, advertising, performance, photography and television where contemporary everyday life is visualised, which ultimately makes these cultural products crucial for understanding our post-modern world (3-4). In this respect, this research too will turn to these cultural products to gain new insights on contemporary society. Sticking with Korean popular culture, this research will specifically look into Korean television dramas serving as productive spaces of identity construction in Korean society. In doing so, this research aims to be exemplary of the usefulness of studying these cultural products in relation to contemporary society. However, before elaborating on this, I first want to take a look at some crucial ideas within existing scholarship surrounding Korean popular culture.

Academic interest in Korean popular culture arose from the phenomenon that is referred to as 'The Korean Wave', or 'Hallyu', which essentially implies the global expansion of Korean cultural products starting with Korean television dramas, or K-dramas, throughout the 1990's (Chua and Iwabuchi 2). Research was concerned with questions about why Korean cultural products gained popularity outside of Korea and, more importantly, what the effects were that came with this consumption (Schulze 396-373). This type of research first concerned itself with the development of the cultural industries in Korea and especially the role of economic factors and the government (see, e.g., Lee 2008; Shim 2008 and Walsh 2014). Behind the rising popularity was said to be the Korean government who actively supported the Korean cultural industry since it saw it as a potential vehicle of economic and political improvement (Walsh 13-15; Lee Keehyeung 179-180). However, since this type of scholarship only focussed on the economic, political and commercial context of

popular culture, scholarship regarding the social and cultural context soon followed. This scholarship first focussed on the impact of the Korean Wave on nearby countries in East Asia such as Japan, China and Taiwan (see, e.g., Lee and Ju 2010 and Yang 2012). This type of research on East Asian countries follows the concept of 'cultural proximity to explain the popularity of Korean popular culture. This concept, first introduced by Straubhaar in 1991, essentially means that there is a comparative advantage factor based on cultural similarities, such as those between the different Asian countries (Schulze 370). Think of dress, nonverbal communication, humour, religion, music and food. In this respect scholars argued that it was traditional values and Confucian ethics such as harmony, community, strong morality and respect for family ties that attracted cultural consumers in East Asia (Schulze 370). But, seeing the limitations in the concept of 'cultural proximity' such as the lack of attention towards the popularity in South Asia and in the West, scholars then also looked at other factors that could clarify the appeal of Korean popular culture. Scholars Doobo Shim and Koichi Iwabuchi have been particularly important in this field since they introduced two central ideas. Doobo Shim applied the concept of 'hybrid culture' to the Korean Wave, which implies the idea of Korean cultural products having strong national and international influences that are in dialogue with one-another and are subjected to the forces of globalisation (Shim, *Hybridity and the Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia* 26-28). This fusion of the national and international would then enable Korean popular culture to easily transcend its national boundaries. In this respect these culturally hybrid products are then products of this dialogue between the national and international in which social-power structures are made visible. On the other hand, Koichi Iwabuchi introduced the concept of 'odourless culture', which implies the lack of a national identity (Iwabuchi 27). In the Korean context it would mean that Korean popular culture is placed within a recognisable image through the use of both Korean and, for example, Japanese or western influences; a certain identifiable "Koreanness" as seen by the foreign consumer. This positioning of Korean popular culture between what is seen as national or international is then what would make Korean popular culture "nationless". These two scholars both emphasise the international context but sketch a different idea; Shim who emphasises the dialogue between the national and international, and Iwabuchi who sees it as the loss of the national.

These ideas called for a new type of research, one that questioned if Koreans actually think of their popular cultural products and national identity as being "culturally hybrid" or "culturally odourless". Alongside this, scholars started to question what the Korean Wave then meant for Korean identity and society. What is

essential here, is that this scholarship is still mostly situated in an international context since they look for their answers outside Korea's national borders (see, e.g., Chua 2008; Ju 2014; Kim; 2019; Kuwahara 2014; Lee 2018 and Yang 2008. I argue that this calls for a shift towards situating these questions in the national context. I then want to propose a research that deals with what Korean cultural products themselves can actually tell us about Korean identity and society. In this respect, this research will concern itself with Korean television dramas that, as stated above, started the global spread of Korean culture in the first place. It is this specific form of visual culture I want to focus on since I've personally noticed a recent shift in the prominent themes and genres of K-dramas that end up becoming successful. In contrast with previous K-dramas, it is visible that the highest rated cable network K-dramas from 2018 until now in Korea, are those that actively try to engage with topics surrounding Korean society and specifically the controversial aspects of Korean society.[1] Some examples of these issues are: the competitive education system, social inequality due to family background, beauty and fashion standards that cause discrimination and exclusion, domestic violence and the taboo on mental health issues. I argue that because K-dramas are widely available through television and online streaming services, and are thus prevalent in contemporary everyday life, they can contribute to the way Korean identity is being constructed and perceived on both a national and international level. The medium can therefore give interesting insights on Korean society and culture, and can contribute to current academic research on these topics.

K-dramas as productive spaces for identity construction

As mentioned above, this research will discuss the idea of K-dramas being productive spaces for Korean identity construction and, as opposed to previous research, approach this idea from the national context. Specifically, this research will focus the topic of the competitive Korean education system visualised in K-dramas that deal with the societal pressures on Korean youth and their parents regarding educational background. To do so, I will discuss the K-drama *Sky Castle* (2018). *Sky Castle* is currently the second highest rated and number one viewed cable network K-drama that sheds light on elite families dealing with the pressures of the competitive education system and certain societal status standards that come with it

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[1] See: Wikipedia. "Korean television dramas: Viewership ratings (data acquired through AGB Nielson Media Research)." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_television_drama>. [Please note that this kind of data is found on many other places that are often tied to media outlets. As these aren't always fully neutral, I opted for the most objective collection of data that is found on Wikipedia and acquired through data from AGB Nielson Media Research.]

(Chandra 153). The drama situating the plot within the circle of the Korean elite and giving the audience a peek into the lives of this normally closed-off milieu, could explain this high-rated reception. However, my aim is to show in what way this drama can offer valuable insights on the portrayal of contemporary Korean reality in relation to educational system and societal pressure. Ultimately, this research will strive to provide an answer on the following question: *How does the K-drama Sky Castle deal with the topic of the competitive Korean educational system and how does it contribute to Korean identity construction?*

    To provide concrete answers on this question, this research will be placed in line with the idea that identity is something that is actively constructed. Starting with Anthony Giddens, who states that due to globalising forces in late modernity, identity is no longer a given but is something that needs to be actively constructed (1991). However, as a critique on his sole focus on family, work and religion as sources for identity construction, I want to turn to popular culture as the new main sources for identity construction. To do this, this research will use Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model (1973) in which he, like Giddens, sees cultural identity as a construct but as opposed to Giddens, does pay close attention to media-texts as new sources for this construction. Furthermore, through this model he emphasises that this is a constantly changing landscape and thus also implies the fluidity of identity construction which I want to highlight through the K-drama landscape. Moreover, I'll place my research in line with the work of Nicholas Mirzoeff on visual culture (1999), whom I've started this introduction with. Here he explores how and why visual media have become so central to contemporary everyday life and argues that the visual is becoming crucial for understanding the postmodern world. Building upon this idea, this research will illustrate how visual media, and in this case K-drama, can indeed be seen as an extension of meaning making when used as a critical reflection.

    Following this introduction, the first chapter will elaborately discuss the chosen theoretical and methodological framework. This chapter will provide the necessary knowledge on the used terminology, context and approach of the topic. Building upon this knowledge, the second chapter will elaborate on the current situation of the Korean educational system and emphasise its prominent position in Korean society. To link the educational system to Korean popular culture, I will also discuss elaborate on the chosen medium K-drama and specifically the genre 'high-school K-drama' in this chapter. With this first half of the research, I aim to provide the necessary contextual knowledge before moving on to the third chapter where I will discuss the K-drama *SKY Castle*. The fourth chapter will ultimately serve to

bring together my findings of the previous chapters before moving on to the concluding chapter in which I'll give my final remarks followed by a bibliography in the MLA citation style.

1: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Before turning to the specific case of Korean popular cultural products as productive spaces of identity building, I want to devote this chapter to exploring some of the necessary context and terminology of this research. Therefore, the following part will elaborate on how the concepts of 'popular culture' and 'identity' are understood and used in this research.

Popular culture

There are many different ways to attribute a definition to 'popular culture'. In the book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction by John Storey*, Storey explores this conceptual landscape of popular culture. He argues that one first obvious definition is to say that popular culture is culture that is widely liked by many people (Storey 5). However, this is a very broad definition which tells us not enough by actually entailing too much. A second definition would be to say that it is what high culture is not, which simultaneously caries the meaning of it having a lower cultural value than high culture (Storey 5-6). This contrast is explained by the claims that popular culture is produced for the masses and high culture is "the result of an individual act of creation" (Storey 6). However, what do we then do with products that challenge these what seem to be clear cut boundaries? Think of Shakespeare belonging to the realm of popular theatre in the 19th century but nowadays seen as the epitome of high culture and similar things could be said about literary works such as those of Charles Dickens and George Orwell. This illustrates that the meanings attributed to what is considered popular culture or high culture are subjected to time and thus operate as fluid instead of fixed. A third definition relates to the previous two definitions being that popular culture entails it is mass-produced for mass consumption (Storey 8). But more importantly, this definition entails that it is consumed with "brain-numbed and brain-numbing passivity" (Storey 8). However, this idea of passive consumption is problematic when thinking about box-office failures or disappointing album-sales or book-sales which suggests a more dynamic trajectory. Alternatively, a fourth definition would be that popular culture originates and belongs to the people and thus indicates "an authentic culture" (Storey 9). But who then belongs to 'the people'? There is again a sense of exclusiveness here. Therefore, a fifth definition which draws on Gramsci's concept of hegemony sees popular culture as "a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate

groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in interest of dominant groups" (Storey 10). But, as stated before, popular culture and its actors don't operate in a vacuum but are subjected to time and space. Therefore, what is regarded as dominant and subordinate constantly shifts which makes that the cultural product is "made up of a contradictory mix of different cultural forces" (Storey 11). What then follows is the sixth definition that entails that the post-modern world doesn't recognise a distinction between high and popular culture at all (Storey 12). What I want to take away from these definitions, is that meanings attributed to cultural products are subjected to change and social power relations between different social groups in society. For this research, I will refer to popular culture as mass-produced culture produced for the masses focussing on the category of what is regarded as entertainment which includes pop-music, film, television, games, comics etc. However, I don't see the consumption of these products as a passive process but instead one that is active on which I'll elaborate later in this chapter. What is central now is that I want to emphasise that it is questions about what popular cultural products and consumption of them can tell us about society and its identity that are crucial here.

From the different definitions of popular culture, one notices that a reoccurring argument is that there is a definite connection to society. To explore this relationship further, this research will turn to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In his 1993 volume *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu argues that in order to understand an artwork one cannot simply rely on an analysis of the artwork itself but instead has to take in account the social conditions in which an artwork is produced and consumed (37). This means one needs to take in account not only the artwork itself and its artists but also "the producers of the meaning and value of the work – critics, publishers, gallery directors and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognising the work of art as such" (37). To Bourdieu this means that one should understand artworks as "a manifestation of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated" (37). So, these fields can be understood as networks of social power relations that are constituted by the logic of the field and refer to the domains of cultural production. In other words, when a cultural product is produced it is done so within a field that is structured in a particular way through its actors and their social positions. This social structure that is internalised by the actors manifests itself in the different physical appearances and behaviours of different social groups; certain social codes that Bourdieu refers to as 'habitus' (63-64). Moreover, Bourdieu argues that together

with having a specific habitus, these different actors within the field all possess different kinds of capital like economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital and this can be understood as a kind of medium through which the field operates, meaning that the hierarchal position of the actors is expressed through capital (40-43). Thus, from this theory of fields of cultural production, I want to emphasise that cultural goods and society are indeed interconnected and therefore actively construct one another.

Popular culture and identity construction

This active construction of cultural products and society then brings me to the concept of 'identity'. Starting with sociologist Anthony Giddens and his book *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991), Giddens stresses that 'identity', or 'the self', is not a passive isolated phenomenon but instead something that is actively and reflexively constructed due to the globalising forces of late, or rather, high modernity (1-3). To Giddens, this means that, due to high modernity, identity is no longer a given in the sense that we don't possess the kind of pre-existing identity based on gender, class-hierarchy, family, race or locality. Instead, people are constantly re-establishing, reenforcing and redefining their identity through day-to-day decisions and their reflexion on these decisions (14). In other words, because these pre-existing structures of identity became dismantled through the forces of modernity, individuals must now make coherent identities for themselves. However, Giddens does stress that this doesn't mean individuals are free of choice in these decisions. Instead, they are still restricted to a particular set of choices available to them determined by their work, social milieu, upbringing etc. which results in them adhering to a certain lifestyle that is accessible to them (80-85). Within these reflexive lifestyles, Giddens also points to the role of media. He stresses that similar to print media, electronic media construct a mediated experience where time and space no longer result in exclusion but rather inclusion; "the visual images which television, films and videos present no doubt create textures of mediated experience which are unavailable through the printed word. Yet, like newspapers, magazines, periodicals and printed materials of other sorts, these media are as much an expression of the dis-embedding, globalising tendencies of modernity as they are the instruments of such tendencies" (26). In other words, due to media, people as a collective are now being made aware of the forces of modernity that are inescapable and at the same time express various ways of living with them. However, Giddens doesn't elaborate further on the role of media in actually constructing identity in modern life. Instead, Giddens pays special attention

to the resurgence of religion that supposedly provides structure to daily life and thus can guide individuals in their everyday choices and respective lifestyle they identify with. This lack of structure, as said above, is according to Giddens caused by modernity and its globalising forces that dismantled pre-existing structures of identity and thus created an environment where everything is continuously questioned. Together with the previously stated influence of work, social milieu and upbringing on the choices of lifestyles, to Giddens it is then religion that can give a sense of structure to these lifestyles, namely by providing a sense of moral purpose of life (207). Like Giddens, this research stresses how identity is no longer a given, and instead is actively constructed in contemporary daily life. However, as opposed to Giddens' sole focus on identity construction within lifestyles influenced and structured by work, social milieu and religion, this research emphasises the need to also look at cultural products as productive spaces in contemporary life where identity can be constructed, redefined and re-established.

To do this I want to move away from Giddens and instead turn to sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall. Hall, argues in his work titled *Who needs Identity?* that "[…] identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation" (17). In other words, like Giddens, Hall also sees identity as something that is actively constructed, but he also stresses the importance of the specific localities and contexts in which this identity is constructed. Moreover, Hall does pay close attention to the role of media through his encoding/decoding model of communication that was first introduced in *Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse* (1973), where Hall proposes a theoretical approach of how messages within media are produced, consumed and understood. According to Hall, "the level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional more active ideological dimensions" (512-513). In other words, these meanings that consumers adhere to certain messages are not static but in fact fluid since the content can mean different things to different people and are thus bound to particular localities. Through his example of the medium of television he proposes four stages that make up his encoding-decoding model. In the first stage which he identifies as production, the encoding and thus the construction of a message takes place (509). Hall states, "of course, the production process is not without its 'discursive' aspect:

it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure" (509). In other words, the production process is already subjected to pre-existing meanings through the people and institutions involved in the production stage. This resonates closely with Bourdieu's theory on the fields of cultural production discussed in the previous section. As mentioned, Bourdieu also argues that cultural goods and society are interconnected and actively construct each-other since a cultural product is produced within a field that is structured in a particular way through its actors and their social positions. The second stage, Hall defines as the circulation stage which entails the influence of the way how messages are circulated in the way the audience perceives the messages before they make use of it; visual and written circulation have different results in perception (509). Arriving to the third stage, which Hall describes as the stage of use, or rather the stage of consumption, it is here where the receiver must actively adhere a certain meaning to the message before this meaning can have an effect or be put to use (509). This leads to the final stage, the stage of reproduction, where the receiver actually makes use of the message by being influenced, instructed, entertained or persuaded by it (509). However, Hall does stress that because the receiver is actively encoding the messages, there are three positions they can adhere to; they can either completely understand the intended meaning, negotiate with the meaning by accepting and rejecting certain elements of the message, or they can completely understand the intended meaning but oppose to it and instead come up with an alternative framework of reference (515-517).

From Hall's theory, I want to emphasise once more the process of active construction of meaning. Furthermore, as Hall also stresses, I want to argue that one should pay attention to the respective context of the society that is being researched. With this I mean that cultural consumption in different societies is formed through local circumstances and is historically situated. The meaning attributed to cultural goods that are consumed can then change over time. Thus, as opposed to culture being a static phenomenon, I argue that cultural consumption is operating in a continuously changing environment since the cultural products that are consumed aren't operating in a vacuum. In this respect, I think one should acknowledge that cultural consumption is embedded in a variety of different contexts and fluidly operates throughout different societies. Moreover, as Nicholas Mirzoeff argues in his book *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, we could say that contemporary

everyday life is visualised in fine art, cinema, the internet, advertising, television, performance and photography and thus simultaneously makes these the cultural products crucial for understanding our contemporary life (3-4). Combining Hall's and Giddens' idea of active construction of identity with Hall's model for encoding and decoding messages produced through media, this research will thus build upon this theoretical framework by applying these ideas to popular visual culture which has become so central to contemporary daily life and ultimately strives to provide new insights in the specific case of Korean popular cultural products that deal with the Korean education system and their relation to Korean youth. Building upon the theoretical framework provided in this chapter, the following chapter will be devoted to elaborating on the current situation regarding the Korean educational system and the medium K-drama and specifically the genre 'high-school K-drama' where we can see this identity visualised, (re)constructed, (re-)established and challenged.

Data and method

As for the used method of this research, this research will start with reviewing various literary sources that deal with the current situation of the Korean education system and the medium K-drama. The chapter that follows will build upon this discussion and analyse the K-drama *SKY Castle.* Since this is a visual medium, the interpretation of the content that is presented in the K-drama will be supported through scene-analysis by applying David Bordwell's 'classical model' of film theory. According to this model, every dimension of film should ultimately be in service of the narrative form which results in a tight cause-and-effect structured film through the use of *continuity editing* (creating a seamless transition from shot to shot)*,* goal driven stories, and a sense of realism which are all strengthened by specific choices in *film style* including *mise-en-scene* (setting, light, costume and the behaviour of figures)*, cinematography* (the photographic aspects, framing and duration of the shot) and *sound* (see Bordwell & Thompson *Film Art: An Introduction* 2013). So, this research will discuss how specific choices regarding *mise-en-scene, cinematography* and *sound* throughout the series contribute to the narrative and the constructed meaning attributed to the media-text. To do so, crucial scenes from episodes that will be analysed in chapter three are those from episodes 1, 2, 19 and 20. Episode one and two introduce the story and lay the foundation of the narrative which is crucial in understanding the constructed meaning. Episode 19 and 20, forming the ending of the drama, show key turning points in the plot which are crucial for the understanding of the constructed meaning that this research will attribute to the medium. Through an elaborate discussion of these four episodes and

some events occurring in various other episodes, combined with the analysis of specific visual elements of the K-drama, the research will show how form and style strengthen the drama's key message of its narrative within the framework of the portrayal of the Korean education system and the academic achievement-oriented Korean society. It is important to realise that this research doesn't claim to define a sole meaning of the analysed material. Instead, as I offer one possible analysis of the media-text *SKY Castle* by specifically focussing the analysis on the portrayal of the Korean education system in the K-drama, this construction of meaning is only a specific portion of the full meaning of this popular cultural product. The results of this analysis will be related to conclusions on the external reality of this media text by exemplifying to what extend the contemporary social reality of academic achievement-oriented Korean society can be visualised, (re)constructed, (re-)established and challenged through these kinds of popular cultural products. To do this, I will systematically divide the analysis in certain categories which together will make up the constructed meaning. In this respect, the analysis of the material will be categorised in focussing on three different levels of its portrayal. These levels are, 1: the portrayal of the actual school system; 2: the portrayal of the competitive academic environment in relation to Korean youth and 3: the portrayal of the competitive academic environment in relation to the role of parents in this system. In doing so, this research provides a systematically organised reading of the material that is analysed.

As been discussed above, according to Bourdieu, in order to understand an artwork, one cannot simply rely on an analysis of the artwork itself but instead has to take in account the social conditions in which an artwork is produced and consumed (37). Therefore, together with the reviewing of the current status of the Korean education system and the genre of high-school K-drama I will illustrate the social context in which the idea of *SKY Castle* came to life. Furthermore, as both Bourdieu and Hall stress, the meaning of the cultural product is then also bound to the consumption of the product. As Hall argues with his encoding-decoding model, the last stage of revolves around how the receiver actually makes use of the message by being influenced, instructed, entertained or persuaded by it (509). However, as the scope of this research doesn't allow space for a detailed analysis of audience reception, I will instead offer a discussion where I argue how *SKY Castle* can be seen as the start of a new genre in the field of K-drama production by discussing the rise of K-dramas offering social critique.

2: THE KOREAN EDUCATION SYSTEM AND THE HIGH SCHOOL K-DRAMA GENRE

An academic achievement-oriented society

As introduced by Bourdieu and Hall discussed in the previous chapter, in order to understand the cultural product, one should also look at the social context in which the cultural product and its meaning take shape (Bourdieu 37 and Hall 509). When looking at the current status of the Korean educational system, it is due to compressed modernisation in late modernity that Korea's educational system has rapidly developed into a high-quality system and has largely contributed to the increase of human recourses (Ahn and Baek 265). However, with this rapid development also came negative side-effects since excessive psychological and financial investment in education has resulted in an overly competitive environment for both students and parents (Ahn and Baek 265). So, how do we understand this competitive education system?

The current Korean educational system consists of 6 years of compulsory elementary school, three years of middle school and three years of high school (Park 183). What is crucial for understanding the educational system is that academic success is widely perceived within Korean society as the key to having a successful future which simultaneously means that academic underachievement equals a less successful life widely understood as failure (Lee et al. 538). So, education can be seen as the main driving force regarding social mobility. Characteristic for this academic achievement-oriented Korean society is then the role of the parents in the educational system. Korean parents are heavily involved in their children's education since they regard their children's high academic achievements as crucial for being a successful family as a whole (Ahn and Baek 267). Within this involvement of the parents, mothers play a crucial role since they mediate between the home and school environment (Park and Kim 431). Mothers try to create the perfect environment in benefit of academic stimulation in the way that they care of their children's emotional, physical, relational and financial (usually through the father) needs (Park and Kim 431). This involves parents spending huge amounts of money for private lessons after regular school hours, during weekends and holidays which many parents start with even before elementary school (Ahn Baek 265-266). This results in students being in school for 12 hours a day since regular school hours that last from 7:30 in the morning until 6:00 in the evening are then being extended with extra classes lasting until 9:00 or 10:00 at night (Ahn and Baek 270). Furthermore,

activities that Korean youth are doing outside of school have to contribute to their academic record in some way and everything that isn't related to it has to be minimised (Ahn and Baek 266). What's crucial is that these private tutoring schools charge very high fees which result in financial burdens that are visible through surveys that indicate parents choosing not to have another child since they wouldn't be able to afford these fees for multiple children (Ahn and Baek 271). This then ultimately also means that there is a social inequality at place regarding the availability of these private institutions for different social groups (Ahn and Baek 266). This is because we can say that rich families have less of a problem enrolling their kids in private institutions than less wealthier families who can only afford this for one child or even for none at all. Because investing in children's education equals a bright future for the children and a high social position for the parents, social power relations are constructed through this competitive education system. However, as much as parents take on a huge role in the academic achievement-oriented society, the schools are also stimulating the overly competitive environment through their norm-referenced evaluation which ultimately results in a competitive relationship between a student and their peers (Ahn and Baek 270).

One noticeable development is that whilst this education-oriented society brings about outstanding academic performances of Korean students creating a highly educated workforce, suicide has become a major social issue over the past 25 years and is especially high from ages 10-39 (Mun and Ahn 79-80). While it is difficult to say if academic stress is the direct cause of these developments, surveys do show that academic stress is mentioned in relation to suicidal ideation among the ages from 15-19 (Ahn and Baek 273). Moreover, existing scholarship has shown the negative effects of the expectations regarding high academic achievement on the well-being of Korean youth by identifying common effects such as the occurrence of anxiety and depression (see, e.g., Ahn and Baek 2013; Cho 2015 and Lee et al. 2010). One could say that it's because the academic achievement-oriented society encourages Korean youth to solely focus on academic development, they neglect the crucial social-emotional development (Ahn and Baek 266). Academic stress and its possible connection between the high suicide rate among Korean youth also haven't gone unnoticed by the Korean government since suicide management committees in elementary, middle and high schools as well as in local education offices have been established since 2011 (Ahn and Baek 274). With all of this in mind, it isn't completely impossible that the competitive education system plays a significant part in high suicide rates among Korean youth.

As is clear from the strong emphasis on academic achievements in Korean society, educational background has a prominent position regarding one's social position in Korean society. This has become an issue regarding the pressures of living up to the high standards of society for both youth and parents as is visible in the national issue of high suicide rates among this age-group. Since Korean adolescents spent the majority of their youth in school and doing academic oriented activities outside of it, one can say that the competitive academic environment is crucial for understanding how these social structures in society are (re)constructed, (re-)established and also challenged. To make sense of this environment, I want to now turn our attention to popular cultural products since I argue that it is in these cultural products where this social reality is visualised.

The field of high-school K-dramas

As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is in visual culture where the construction of everyday life can be examined (Mirzoeff 3-4). This resonates with the change of attitude towards culture in Korea during the 1990's which is simultaneously the start of the Korean Wave which I mentioned at the start of this research. This new attitude entails that with the rapid modernisation and globalisation and the rise of 'Hallyu', "culture, and especially popular culture became the representative culture of modernised and 'dynamic' Korea" (Lee Keehyeung 183). In this respect, since the Korean education system is an intrinsic part of Korean society and the outcome of Korea's rapid or 'compressed modernisation', I want to highlight a specific popular cultural product in which we can examine this field, namely in television dramas.

Korean television dramas have been at the centre of television watching among the Korean audience by depicting the everyday life of ordinary people and their social relationships, joys and hardships (Shim, *The Growth of Korean Cultural Industries and the Korean Wave* 23-24). Furthermore, these dramas are designed with a fixed number of episodes as opposed to the "season" formats that are prevalent in the West, which makes the plots more emotionally charged and emerging through these evolving social relationships and individual joys and hardships (Chung 45). Within this field of K-dramas there is a genre that is particularly interesting to examine in relation to the academic achievement-oriented society, namely the so-called 'high-school K-dramas'. These types of dramas usually surround coming-of-age stories guided by themes such as friendship and romance against the backdrop of Korean high-school life (see, e.g., *Boys Over Flowers* 2009; *Cheer Up!* 2015; *Moment of* Eighteen 2019 and The *Heirs* 2013). Each of these dramas deal with the characters' journey through their high school days, where private education,

academic stress, pressuring parents, school bullying, school violence and teen suicide all get depicted. However, as said, the main themes of these dramas are young-adult friendships and teen romance which makes that these types of dramas don't necessarily appeal to a nationwide audience but resonate more with the everyday life of Korean youth than those of adults. This is in a way reflected in the fact that these dramas aren't found among the nationwide highest rated rankings of Korean television dramas. Instead, these types of dramas seem to find a longstanding popularity among the Korean youth as is for example illustrated through the long running anthology series *School* created by KBS drama production in 1999. The KBS series *School* started off with the drama titled *School 1* (1999) which was followed by the dramas *School 2* (2000)*, School 3* (2001) and *School 4* (2002) respectively. All four dramas take on the plot of Korean youth in their high school days dealing with their studies, first love and family issues and each drama depicts different conflicts and obstacles that occur along the way. Following a ten-year hiatus, the show got rebooted with the release of *School 2013* (2012)*,* which was followed by *Who are You: School 2015* (2015) and *School 2017* (2017) respectively. Each of the series presents a new plot and a new cast against the backdrop of the contemporary everyday lives of Korean high school students. These continuous releases of dramas with new stories in the series show how the series has adapted to fit the respective contemporary situation at the time of release, since the series aimed to display the challenges of Korean youth realistically and specific to each generation. I therefore argue that it is this specific focus on realism translated in the relatability of these dramas regarding the reality of Korean students, that cause these types of dramas to be a popular genre among Korean youth and in turn have become a staple in the K-drama landscape that are nowadays even found in the form of Netflix Original series such as *Extracurricular* (2020), *Love Alarm* (2019) and *Love Alarm 2* (2021) which further underlines the (global) appeal of the genre.

However, as I've said, these dramas foreground the slice-of-life themed plots driven by themes such as friendship and teen romance. Because of this, I argue that the more serious theme of the Korean education system in relation to societal issues such as school violence, pressure on high academic achievements, suicide and family conflicts got pushed to the background. But, as I've stated in the introductory chapter of this research, this has changed with the release of the 2018 K-drama *SKY Castle.* To illustrate this, the following chapter will provide a discussion of the drama where its content and scenes will be analysed through discussing the portrayal of the academic achievement-oriented Korean society and how this portrayal can contribute to identity construction.

3: SKY CASTLE: A CRITICAL MESSAGE TO THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT-ORIENTED KOREAN SOCIETY

From slice-of-life stories to direct social critique

As established in the previous chapter, there is a strong emphasis on academic achievements in Korean society in the sense that educational background largely determines one's social position in Korean society. This has brought about issues such as school violence, academic pressure, suicide and family conflicts. So, stemming from this social context, the genre of high-school K-drama tried to visualise this contemporary reality but failed to do so since the serious themes got overshadowed by themes such as adolescent love and friendship. This changed with the production of *SKY Castle. SKY Castle* was written by Hyun-mi Yoo and directed by Hyun-tak Jo. Looking at the past works of writer Hyun-mi Yoo, it is clear that she has taken up serious themes with a deeper message such as colonial brutality during the Japanese occupation in *Bridal Mask* (2012), dysfunctional families in *Home Sweet Home* (2010) and corruption and powerplay in *Scales of Justice* (2008). Similarly, the past works of director Hyun-tak Jo also take up social reality such as the political reality of South Korea in *Dae Mul* (2010). In line with their previous K-dramas, *SKY Castle* then also engages with contemporary Korean reality through its depiction of the educational system. It does so by telling the story of five elite families (the Park, Han, Cha, Jin and Hwang family) residing in the neighbourhood "Sky Castle". Each of these families are striving to get their children into one of the most prestigious universities of Korea, being Seoul National University, Korea University and Yonsei University (hence the neighbourhood and drama name), to maintain their elite social status in Korean society (Kim et al. 2). This is visible in the families who are willing to do anything to get their kids into these universities, ranging from investing in the most expensive private tutoring methods to continuous actions of deceit and manipulation. With this obsession of getting their children into one of the SKY universities, the fierce competition between the families shows how education is portrayed as the ultimate tool for elevating oneself on the social hierarchal ladder. As is clear, the story directly reflects the social reality that is the Korean academic achievement-oriented society discussed in the previous chapter. But how is this visualised and how can we understand this drama in relation to identity construction?

The depiction of the educational system: Korean education as a commodity

Throughout the 20 episodes, *SKY Castle* addresses the competitive Korean educational system. It does so by the portrayal of the challenges of elite families who see education as the ultimate tool of achieving success in life. The status of education is established in the first episode with the introduction of the initial main four families before the addition of the Hwang family. *SKY Castle* opens with the protagonist, Han Seo-jin, organising an extravagant party in celebration of her neighbour, Lee Myung-joo, who just got her son Park Yeong-jae accepted into Seoul National University (hereafter, SNU). Through this party she hopes to gain Myung-joo's trust to receive information about Yeong-jae's portfolio which is supposedly the key to successfully getting her daughter Kang Ye-seo accepted as well. This shared goal of having the children accepted in one of the SKY universities binds the families together creating an environment of competition among the parents. Furthermore, by portraying how children are expected to follow their parents' wishes, which in some cases means putting their parents' happiness above their own, puts emphasis on the status of academic excellence. This is visible in a short dialogue between the children where they question if Yeong-jae is actually happy that he got into SNU and if he really wanted to go to medical school at all. The answer he gives is "I made my mom happy". Yeong-jae then asks Ye-seo why she so desperately wants to go to SNU herself. The answer one of the children gives is, "because her mom wants her to".

As the episode unfolds, the drama quickly establishes how Korean education among elite families is treated like a commodity. Through the cultural value education carries within Korean society, the parents try to construct their identity through the means that gives them access to the education they aim for. This involves the most expensive tutoring and spending all of one's time on creating the perfect academic stimulative environment for the children. This then segregates society into those who have the financial resources for this and those who have not. In *SKY Castle* it is clear the families are part of this elite milieu visualised through the *mise-en-scene* that depicts big mansions, sophisticated costumes, and the extravagant party of Seo-jin (see still 1-3 below). This is further visible in the scene where Seo-jin receives an invitation from Myung-joo about a private VVIP meeting which is disguised as an investment meeting at Hannam Bank. At this meeting the best and most expensive exam coordinators are introduced to mothers of elite families through their acceptance rate and statistics. Seo-jin together with three other women, manages to find the coordinator who coached Yeong-jae. The coach, Kim Ju-yeong,

reviews each of the mothers' and their children's profiles to see who fits her standards. A crucial thing is mentioned in this scene. This starts when Kim Ju-yeong drops one of the mothers based on the fact that she is a working mother. The coach says, "children of working moms can stay at the top of their class, but they cannot stay at the top of the top for extended periods. You may have heard this. Getting into college is a four-legged race in which the mom, the child and I are a team". Then, Han Seo-jin continues by saying "I taught for a short while before getting married, but quit after I got pregnant. I thought that Korea's curriculum was set up assuming a full-time mom is always there to help the child. […] Making my daughter a successful person is more important to me than anything else." With this one scene, the drama establishes the role of the mother within Korea's educational system. A mother is a key component in a child's educational achievements. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in the Korean educational system a mother should take on the mediating role between the home and school and create an environment that is the most beneficial to the child's academic performance (Park and Kim 431).

Still 1.

Still 2.
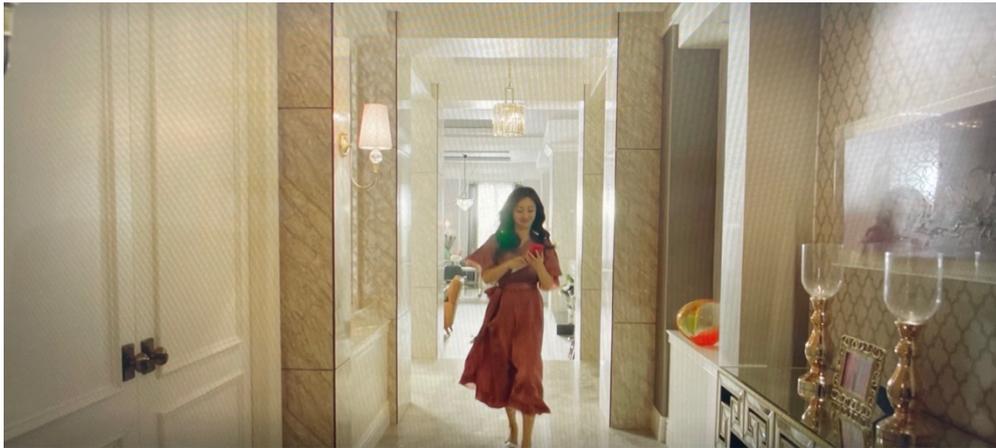
With Seo-jin's ideal attitude, coach Kim then ultimately chooses to coach Ye-seo. However, in order to pay for the fees, Seo-jin has to resort to her mother-in-law to acquire the money since her husband doesn't know about the coach. In this scene it is clear why Seo-jin goes to great lengths to get Ye-seo into SNU; to get acknowledged by her mother-in-law. In this scene we see Seo-jin kneeling to her mother-in-law, madame Yoon, begging for her help with getting Ye-seo to become a third-generation doctor, like Madame Yoon longs for (see still 4 below). Through Madame Yoon's attitude towards education in which she sees it as the ultimate tool for social elevation the drama depicts how education has been embedded in Korean society for generations. This is again strengthened through the use of *mise-en-scene* in the choice of situating this scene in a traditional Korean style interior as opposed to the modern western style mansions of the Sky Castle residents which thus mirrors her traditional values.

This is the last chance to make me acknowledge you.

Still 4.

In this respect the episode shows that through the shared values of the families and their access to the commodity that is top-tier education they are able to communicate their social status in society; one that is elite. Important is that this elite

status isn't a hollow totem but instead ties itself to power. It highlights class divide through the pressure to maintain their status and their cultural power in an academic achievement-oriented society. This form of pressure is visualised in the last 10 minutes of the first episode where we Seo-jin receive a present from Myung-joo which is a porcelain figurine of a mother holding a baby. The scene ends with a *close-up* that depicts a worried looking Myung-joo looking directly in the camera, breaking *the fourth wall* which is the conceptional barrier between the fictional work and its audience (see still 5). By directly addressing the viewers with this concerned expression, the audience is reminded of their act of watching the drama and makes them actively think about what this look entails. What follows directly after is a 10 second scene which connects to the foreshadowing expression of Myung-joo to the ending of the episode (see still 6 and 7). In this scene Seo-jin places the figurine in between a picture that shows her family and a picture of her and her husband. What follows is a close-up of the figurine followed by a shot of Seo-jin seen through a split mirror which shows us two angels of her face. I argue that this use of *mise-en-scene* and *cinematography* relates back to the *motif* of the role of the mother and the two sides to Seo-jin; a loving mother vs. a mediator between the home and school. Straight after this scene follows the ending where Myung-joo ends up killing herself by a shot through the head which ends the episode triggered by the OST "We All Lie". This use of sound further strengthens the narrative by directly referring to the families' continuous acts of deceit and manipulation in competition with one another as seen in the lyrics and title of the song. By using the song to close each episode, the song itself turns into a *motif* intrinsically linked to the drama by continuously reminding the audience of the deceitful acts of the characters whilst creating a space for the viewer to reflect on the content they've been watching.

Still 5.

Still 6.

Still 7.

Cutthroat competition creating conflicting identities and dysfunctional families

Myung-joo's suicide is explained in the second episode where the audience learns how Yeong-jae detested his parents' obsession over education as measurements of one's validity in society to the point he wanted to commit suicide as revenge for the mental and physical abuse his parents brought upon him for the past three years. However, he ends up running away. Myung-joo's feelings of guilt and shame drive her over the edge and ends up killing herself. What this second episode entails is the harsh reality of the educational system in Korea through the misfortunes of the dysfunctional Park family. By depicting a family's obsession with academic achievements that ultimately results in the destruction of the family, the drama sets the tone in understanding the effects of educational system in Korea, namely one that stresses the effects on mental health. As Seo-jin learns that coach Kim Ju-yeong is involved in the tragedy of the Park family, she confronts her and ends up firing her claiming to not want her daughter to suffer like Yeong-jae has done. With this, the drama suggests a change of attitude within Seo-jin only to be debunked by the

following episodes where we see Seo-jin's greed for maintaining her social position overtake her reasonings which has the drama set out a new story of destruction. This greed is tied to the competitive environment being a key characteristic of the Korean educational system as discussed in chapter three. This is visualised in the second episode where the audience learns why Seo-jin wants to be acknowledged by her mother-in-law. When the Park family moves out of their residency, the Hwang family moves in. The mother Lee Su-im, seems to recognise Seo-jin as her childhood friend Kwak Mi-hyang which Seo-jin denies. However, we are taken into a flashback where we see Seo-jin as Mi-hyang living with her abusive and alcoholic father who sells ox-blood for a living. After the flashback Seo-jin convinces herself that she is not Kwak Mi-yang anymore but instead the successful educated person named Han Seo-jin. What tells us differently is the cinematography which shows this scene through creating multiple faces of Seo-jin through overlaying images (see still 8), illustrating her everlasting second identity which resonates with the scene discussed in the previous part where we saw her split identity through the use of mirrors (see still 7). Furthermore, such *cinematography* creating distorted images again calls for the attention of the audience, stimulating them to construct a meaning of the image in front of them. What is demonstrated in this scene is how Seo-jin constructs her identity by utilising her daughter's future academic success to compensate for her past. She displays herself as a successful person which can only be held intact through turning Ye-seo into a third-generation doctor. In this respect, education is the mediator between her low-class identity and her desired elite identity.

Still 8.

Throughout the drama we see Seo-jin's continuous efforts in getting Ye-seo to excel in her academic ventures while simultaneously crafting her own identity as a highly educated woman belonging to Korea's elite social class. Claiming she won't let herself and Ye-seo end up like Myung-joo and Yeong-jae, she re-hires coach Kim Ju-yeong. However, coach Kim, doesn't simply intensively tutors Ye-seo, she goes as far as stealing exam papers and eventually killing Ye-seo's competitor Kim Hye-

na which she frames on Su-im's son who is the second competitor of Ye-seo (episode 15-16). Driven by her motive of destroying elite families to cope with her past tragedy where her genius daughter became mentally disabled after a car-accident, coach Kim's creation of tension was only possible because of the already present environment of obsession over social status and academic achievement. This is continuously confirmed by conflicts between the families such as between Seo-jin and Su-im regarding Su-im's plan to turn the tragedy of the Park family into a novel to raise awareness for the controversies happening in contemporary Korea. Worried that the story would tarnish the reputation of Sky Castle and its residents including herself which would ruin the chances of Ye-seo becoming a third-generation doctor, Seo-jin directly values her reputation and social status over that of having moral feelings in regards to the death of her friend when she collects all of Sky Castle's residents to file a petition to stop Su-im from writing the book (episode 10). However, at the event Su-im reveals Seo-jin's true identity resulting in a significant loss of respect from the other Sky Castle residents towards Seo-jin as her constructed identity is torn down. This thus leaves Seo-jin desperate for Ye-seo's academic success to uphold their social status. Another example would be how Seo-jin ignores her youngest daughter habitually stealing from a convenience store as a way to relieve stress of academic pressure by paying the owner of the store to turn a blind eye. However, this only results in Ye-bin trying to run away from home due to her mother's lack of care and acknowledgement suggesting Seo-jin's highly academic-achievement-oriented attitude (episode 5 and 6). But, the most extreme example is visible in the distant relationship between Seo-jin and her husband Kang Joon-sang. Due to a lack of communication between the two, Seo-jin fails to inform Joon-sang of the role coach Kim had played in the tragedy that fell upon the Park family, silently letting coach Kim gradually taking control over Ye-seo through her illegal practices. Moreover, when Seo-jin finds out that Ye-seo's competitor Kim Hye-na is actually the daughter of Joon-sang from a previous relationship which he's unaware of, she fails to tell him this before Hye-na got murdered by coach Kim. It is ultimately Ye-bin who tells her father the truth which makes Joon-sang overwhelmed with guilt (episode 16 and 17). However, even then Seo-jin initially urges him to stay silent about it all because if it is revealed that coach Kim killed Hye-na, Ye-seo would be expelled from school since Hye-na's death is directly related to the theft of examination papers (episode 18). The destruction caused by the tension that is created through coach Kim, is thus the product of an already dysfunctional family consumed with greed and obsession over academic achievements.

However, the Kang family is not the only family that portrays the already present obsession and controversial parenthood in Korean society. The Cha family sketches yet another image of a dysfunctional family. In episode 4, Cha Minhyuk locks his oldest son Cha Seo-jun in a room after he failed an assignment and scolds him by pointing to a miniature pyramid saying, "Your grandfather who used to wash other people's clothes all his life belonged to the very bottom part of this pyramid. But I managed to pass the bar exam with the highest score and became a prosecutor. That's how I climbed the social ladder up to this point. I want to keep climbing the ladder to the very top, but my dream got ruined while helping my father-in-law. And that's why I changed my goal. It doesn't have to be me. My son will have to get to the top. I'll make sure my son gets to the top." This shows the direct verbalisation of his sole focus on his children's education which he sees as the key to elevating himself on the social ladder in Korea's society. This is visualised in the same scene through the positioning of him and his sons in a triangular mirroring the shape of a pyramid through their actual bodies (see still 9). Like Seo-jin, Min-hyuk utilises his children's academic potential to compensate for his past which both see as a failure. His authoritarian personality and parenting style are further strengthened through the stoic and all black interior of the Cha family home mirroring his personality (see still 10). Through this utilisation of *mise-en-scene* and *cinematography* in strengthening the narrative, Min-hyuk's personality is established which is ultimately the embodiment of an overly academic-oriented authoritarian parent. This is once more established in episode 7 where he states "even if my kids hate me and become revengeful, once they get into SNU, I'm sure they will end up thanking me later in their lives", suggesting again his idea of educational excellence being a measurement of one's validation and happiness. Furthermore, he only shows his caring side towards his daughter Se-ri who embodies this academic success by studying at Harvard University in America. However, when Se-ri returns to Korea and it is revealed that she lied about her admission to Harvard in order to fulfil her father's unrealistic demands, he doesn't acknowledge her at all. This conflicting once more underlines Min-hyuk's sole acknowledgement of academic excellence and is verbalised in Se-ri's comment saying "You made me thing that I have to get good grades to be considered your child" (episode 13). However, contrasting his authoritarian personality stands the caring mother figure that is embodied by his wife Noh Seung-hye. After meeting Lee Su-im, Seung-hye started to object to the authoritarian ways of her husband when seeing a different approach to academically supporting one's children. From breaking down his prison-like study room for the boys to defending her daughter Se-ri when getting hit by her father and eventually

taking her children with her leaving him, Seung-hye embraces her role as mother, not as a mediator between the home and the school but as one that cares for her children.

The visualisation of critique

What makes the drama stand out are not only the societal issues the drama depicts but also the satirical way the drama constructs a message of critique towards these issues. For example, already in the first episode, the drama outright calls out the pretentiousness of the party Seo-jin organises in celebration of Myung-joo's victory. It does so by mimicking a Hollywood western shoot-out scene between Han Seo-jin and her husband Kang Joon-sang. Here we see Kang Joon-sang and youngest daughter Kang Ye-bin who both show up in casual clothes contrasting the elegant attire of the rest of the guests as a means to emphasise the pretentiousness of the company present who are only attending out of self-interest. This is visualised not only through *costume*, but also strengthened by the entrance of them through the use of *slow-motion* effects guided by music typically heard during a shootout scene in a Hollywood Western movie, thus carrying a sense of satire. What we can make out of the Kang family dynamic through this one scene is the tension between the

husband and wife. This is particularly visible in Joon-sang walking past his wife without acknowledging her, strengthened through the choice in *framing* by putting a door right between the husband and wife drawing an actual line between them establishing their conflicting relationship (see still 11 and 12). This use of *costume, cinematography* and *sound* thus offers a critical note from the very start of the K-drama by emphasising the pretentiousness of the elite.

Still 11.

Still 12.

This use of satire to critique the competitive attitude of the families is continuously used throughout the drama. The most extreme examples being a confrontation between all of the families resulting in a physical fight (episode 15, see still 13 and 14) and the physical removal of Cha Minhyuk when his wife and sons are no longer tolerating his authoritarian behaviour (episode 16, see stil 15) looking much like *slapstick comedy.* While the argument is fuelled by the competitiveness and greed of the families, the highly comedic scene actively reduces the sophisticated image and right-mindedness of the characters.

Still 13.

Still 14.

It's immoral!

Still 15.

Besides this satirical way of critique, episode 19 and 20, making up the ending of the drama, are crucial for understanding the constructed message of critique the drama strives to deliver. In these two episodes the drama puts moral up against desire once more. Seo-jin, Ye-seo and Jang-soon are tested when Su-im's son gets framed for the murder of Hye-na, while they know the truth of Kim Ju-yeong's deceit and criminal acts. But, revealing the truth would get Ye-seo expelled from high-school and ruin her chance of getting into SNU medical school. After seeing Ye-seo being unable to longer bare the guilt, Seo-jin makes up her mind to turn in Kim Ju-yeong. Without verbalisation of her decision, there is only a simple shot that signifies the reason change of heart being the shot of the familiar porcelain figure in between family pictures which we saw in the first episode (see still 16.) Where Seo-jin was first always depicted through mirrors or distorted shots visualising her conflicting identities, this shot serves to establish her identity as a mother of her family. Her character development is then verbalised when Seo-jin faces her mother-in-law who accuses her of being a failure to which Seo-jin answers "I stopped because I didn't want my child's life to be an empty shell." Ye-seo then continues by saying, "a third-generation doctor, what is it good for?" This exchange suggests a generation calling for change in academic achievement-oriented Korean society.

Still 16.

Episode 20 then shows the aftermath of all the events, the Kang family leaving their residency and Cha Min-hyuk promising to no longer put academic pressure on his children. Furthermore, the time Su-im's son, Hwang Woo-joo, spend in jail made him decide to give up on university education completely. During a family conversation he says, "power doesn't come from where I graduated from. Who I am, what kind of person I am, and what I live for, when all that is clear, isn't that where power comes from?" With this statement the drama offers direct critique on

the power-driven contemporary reality of Korean society. As education has been the tool for generations to define one's social position in society it has been the way for the upper-class to assert cultural power. Through the drama, *SKY Castle* calls upon its audience to actively reflect on this question. The drama ends with a new family moving in the house previously belonging to Seo-jin and her family. When the mother goes to meet the rest of the mothers she is taken aback by their laidback attitude towards the academic achievements of their children and calls them naïve to which the other mothers just laugh. Leaving the story open, the drama creates a space where change is possible.

In the next chapter I will bring together the findings of this research by relating them to the social reality of contemporary Korea through arguing how I see *SKY Castle* as a productive space of identity construction through its visualisation of social critique.

4: EMERGING SPACES FOR CREATIVE RENEGOTIATION OF KOREAN SOCIETY

The guiding question of this research was: *How does the K-drama SKY Castle deal with the topic of the competitive Korean educational system and how does it contribute to Korean identity construction?* In this respect, I have strived to argue how popular culture can be understood as the spaces in which contemporary every-day life is visualised resonating with scholars such as Mirzoeff and Hall. To do so, chapter two outlined this contemporary reality through contextualising the case of the educational system of South Korea. From previous research on this topic, it is clear that there is a strong emphasis on academic achievements in Korean society in which educational background has a prominent position regarding one's social position in Korean society through seeing education as the key to achieve a successful life ((Lee et al. 538; Ahn and Baek 267). The chapter further showed how this contemporary reality has been incorporated in Korean television dramas through the genre of high-school K-dramas. However, I argued that since these types of dramas tend to foreground themes such as teen romance and friendship, the negative effects of an academic achievement-oriented society have been pushed to the background and thus haven't been able to properly visualise this social reality. This has since changed with the release of the 2018 K-drama *SKY Castle*.

As the previous chapter has shown, *SKY Castle* has embraced highlighting the competitive educational system foregrounding the sensitive topics such as authoritarian parenthood, academic pressure and most importantly the obsession over academic excellence in an age of competition. In this respect education becomes a commodity through which one can establish one's social position and assert a certain cultural power. This simultaneously creates a segregated society in which you either have access to top-tier education or not largely depending on your financial recourses. Through greed and competitive behaviour, the families encounter continuous conflicts and obstacles where their values and morals are being questioned. As Cha Se-ri asks her father, "does financially raising your children make you a parent?" Or even more straightforward like Lee Su-im who states "the competition to get into college ends up killing so many kids every year. But our society is not changing at all and that made me feel sad and miserable" By actively offering social critique regarding contemporary Korean reality the drama asks its audience to reflect and creates a space for change. It does so by questioning the very

essence of what it takes to ensure a successful life. Is academic excellence indeed what it takes to acquire cultural power and a respectable social position even when it disregards our mental well-being and individual happiness? Like this question, *SKY Castle* actively tries to stimulate re-examining the social structures of contemporary Korean reality.

With its depiction of social commentary through the visualisation of the hardships of the Korean academic achievement-oriented society, I thus argue that it ultimately opens up a space in which it shows how these social structures in society can be (re)constructed, (re-)established and also challenged through a creative renegotiation of contemporary every-day life in popular culture. In turn it then also offers a way to make sense of and renegotiate one's identity in our rapidly globalising post-modern world.

CONCLUSION

As this research has showed, *SKY Castle* functions as a social satire and an emotional family-oriented drama. It visualises an academic achievement-oriented society and more importantly, offers a space to renegotiate contemporary reality. As Bourdieu and Hall have emphasised, to understand the cultural product fully, one should also look at what happens after the consumption of the product (Bourdieu 37 and Hall 509). In this respect, there is an interesting development taking place in the K-drama landscape. After the unexpected immense success of *SKY Castle* both national and international, there has been a continuous release of K-dramas that have been starting to embrace these more serious themes to drive its narratives. One of the most prominent examples is the K-drama *The World of the Married* released in 2020 that takes on societal issues such as gender and social inequality. This drama actually took over the highest rated position from *SKY Castle,* proving the continuous interest in dramas revolving around contemporary reality.[2] Other examples include the dramas *Itaewon Class* (2020) depicting struggles of marginalised groups such as ex-convicts, foreigners, high-school dropouts trying to find their place in Korean society and the drama *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) shedding light on the taboo on mental health issues. Furthermore, the appeal of these dramas goes beyond Korea's national borders as they are now widely available through the international streaming platform Netflix with *Itaewon Class and It's Okay to Not Be Okay* even being Netflix original productions. This increasing number of K-dramas dealing with social reality achieving national and international success then shows how Korean television dramas are indeed creating a new space within the K-drama landscape, one that illustrates how they are productive spaces where contemporary reality can be visualised. In other words, as these dramas offer direct social critique, they are opening up spaces of creative renegotiation of post-modern social reality.

To gain new insights regarding *SKY Castle's* immediate effects on Korean society itself, future research that incorporates audience reception would be highly relevant. This directly relates to both Bourdieu's and Hall's arguments regarding the

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[2] See: Wikipedia. "Korean television dramas: Viewership ratings (data acquired through AGB Nielson Media Research)." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_television_drama>. [Please note that this kind of data is found on many other places that are often tied to media outlets. As these aren't always fully neutral, I opted for the most objective collection of data that is found on Wikipedia and acquired through data from AGB Nielson Media Research.]

importance of what happens after consuming a cultural product. What does the audience actually do with attributed meaning of the product? Do they adhere, re-negotiate or challenge it? As the scope of this research didn't allow for this discussion to be included, I therefore think it would be a large contribution to create a more in-depth understanding of identity construction in Korean contemporary reality. However, with this research, through using concepts from fields such as Media-Studies, Area-Studies, Identity/Gender studies and Sociology, this research has offered a multi-disciplinary approach to explore questions regarding studies on Korean identity, Korean popular culture and the relation between the two. In this respect, it has illustrated how one can understand Korean popular cultural products as emerging spaces of Korean identity construction.

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