

# Capitalism in the host and dumplings movie review example

[Government](#), [Capitalism](#)



Asian horror, as a genre, carries with it a generous mix of scathing subtext and grotesque images. Whether witnessing the wrath of an uncanny ghost girl, seeing people murdered in mountains of gore, or the many subtle avenues in between, many of the best Asian horror films combine shocking sights with potent messages in order to convey an anxiety present in that society at the time. " Setting aside the moral ramifications of such manifest extremities, we can identify the current boom enjoyed by Asian horror and extreme cinema and discern a complex nexus of local, regional and global relationships in play" (Choi and Wada-Marciano 1).

One of these pressing concerns is capitalism: the way modern society is ordered to exchange goods for services can lead to terrible consequences and systemic inequalities in the long run - problems which are often explored in prominent Asian horror films. In the case of 2004's *Dumplings*, director Fruit-chan tells the tale of a rich, aging wife (Miriam Yeung) who finds the secret of youth and vigor in the mysterious ingredients of a strange medicine woman (Bai Ling), demonstrating capitalism's ability to commodify humanity itself. Meanwhile, 2006's *The Host* sees director Bong Joon-ho setting a military/corporate pollution-created monster loose in Seoul, disrupting the modest small-business hopes and dreams of an ordinary Korean family. Both of these films demonstrate a harsh critique of capitalism in its essential form, making them manifest in both the hidden evils of alternative medicine and the military-industrial complex - these man-made horrors wreak havoc with the disenfranchised and the lower class of both Hong Kong and South Korea, respectively.

## **The Host**

In 2006's Korean monster film *The Host*, the American government, represented by a shadowy, elderly old man (Scott Wilson), orders his Korean assistant to dump hundreds of bottles of chemicals into the Han River in Seoul, setting off the birth of a creature who will come to represent the consequences of American military and corporate intervention in foreign markets. The film itself was inspired by a real-life incident in which an American military presence in Seoul led a Korean mortician to dump formaldehyde into the river, thus basing its political content in real events. While the film itself is more political in subtext than economic, there is still substantial criticism of capitalism's tendency to swallow the lower-class, as well as the disastrous effects of hegemonic companies and countries interacting with smaller nations.

The primary juxtaposition found in the film is between the simple, down-to-earth Park family and the ineffective, incompetent Korean and American governments. As previously mentioned, the American government is shown to be uncaring and blasé about polluting the river of a country they have no investment in; this parallels international business' history of pollution in its core concepts. Because the American government does not care about maintaining the health and safety of Korea's ecosystem, they have no qualms with acting unethically and recklessly towards these other environments. Substantial subtext is provided for the government's obsession with the military-industrial complex and biological warfare: government facilities and officials are often seen in biohazard suits, and covered in hermetic plastic, while the climax of the film features a protest of

the government's " Agent Yellow" device, a floating container which is shown to pump out toxic gas. Bong films this scene in particular in ominous slow motion, lending further portent to the dangerous and unethical activities of the government.

The Park family, on the other hand, consists of bumbling small businessmen and similarly flawed siblings, all the epitome of innocence (which is then disrupted by the monsters' presence). By focusing the editing and scene work on the family first and foremost, Bong cements the films' perspective not on the country as a whole, but the way the working class endures these kinds of tragedies. Gang-du, effectively the main character (or at least the most proactive one amongst the Park family), is a simple employee/small business owner, working at a small snack bar with his father, Hee-bong, to deliver concessions to people spending time along the Han River. He and his father trade familial barbs as they serve their simple customers; they make mistakes out of folly or ignorance (as evidenced by Gang-du's eating of part of a customer's order, not thinking that the customer would notice). The other members of their family fall on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their importance or relevance in capitalist economies: Nam-joo (Bae Doona), a national medalist archer, does not work for a living, but presumably lives well off corporate sponsorships and memberships to teams, Meanwhile, brother Nam-il is a college dropout and former political activist who is shown to be a slovenly drunk; even Gang-du and Hee-bong look down on him for not even having an honest wage. Nam-il's impotent political activism and intellectualism is framed in the film as less important than Gang-du's honest, quaint work as a snack-bar vendor; that business is the

idyllic home that the monster destroys, thus setting the family on a quest to murder it and rescue Gang-du's missing daughter Hyun-seo.

The monster itself is shown to be a living, breathing representation of the damage that rampant industrialization, pollution, and governmental hegemony can do to a nation. Being a product of capitalism-fuelled foreign intervention, the monster ravages the Han River, an historical landmark and national treasure for the Korean people. The monster's primary crime against the Park family is stealing Hyun-seo away from them, thus figuratively stealing the innocence of the Korean people (as they turn a blind eye or fail to stop corporate and federal pollution from occurring). In a later scene, the creature also kills Hee-bong, the family patriarch - a symbolic move indicative of the Korean people's loss of tradition and ancestry. This aberration sets the entirety of the Korean government on edge, taking extreme measures to control and quarantine its people while it desperately attempts to contain their mistake. The fact that the creature is ultimately defeated by the cooperation and teamwork of a newly-reunited and reconciled family is representative of Bong's ultimate message - the Korean people (particularly the working class) must stand up to address the mistakes of crony capitalism and reckless consumption/pollution.

The Host's Godzilla-meets-Little Miss Sunshine aesthetic makes the film into a monster movie ostensibly about the need for small businessmen to assert themselves in an unstable and globalized economy. The mise-en-scene of the film grows increasingly dark as the film progresses, the creature's effect on Korea becoming palpable in the added dirt, grime, rain and darkness each subsequent scene provides (also perpetually seen in the moist and dirty

sewers that are the creature's home, thus symbolically linking the two moods). By figuratively making the effects of pollution and lack of organizational empathy the responsibility of the working class of Korea, Bong's film becomes a call to arms for small businessmen and the Korean lower class to assert themselves and hold their government (and others) responsible for their mistakes.

## **Dumplings**

In 2004's stylized Hong Kong horror film *Dumplings*, capitalism is made manifest in the strange alternative medicine market created and facilitated by mysterious healer Mei (played with seductive playfulness and salesmanship by Bai Ling), an immigrant from the mainland who sells aborted fetuses to clients to eat, making them into dumplings. The effect of these dumplings is clear; by consuming the flesh of these fetuses, the client receives youth and vigor beyond their years - a figurative Fountain of Youth. This black market can be extrapolated to represent the whole of the free market espoused by capitalism - entrepreneurs have goods that people want to pay for, and the customers pay for them, thus perpetuating the system. What capitalism fails at, as displayed here in *Dumplings*, is in creating an equitable system for all to enjoy - the dumplings cycle of capitalism has definitive victims in both the aborted fetuses and those who are bribed/traumatized into giving up their children.

Hong Kong is depicted in the film as " a Chinese city predominantly organized by capitalist, Western institutions, including its medicine" (150). The phenomenon of gimmicky, novelty alternative medicine is specifically

referred to in Mei's secretive trade, which she brings from the mainland: "Here China resurfaces as a desirable alternative to overcome aging, illness, and mortality" (10). Fruit-chan depicts the relationship between supplier and buyer as equally toxic on both ends: Mei's home is intentionally decrepit and hovel-like, to showcase her simplicity and her desire to keep a low profile, while Mrs. Li lives in an opulent home, squeaky clean but bereft of humanity. Mrs. Li is exactly the kind of insecure target Mei (and capitalism) seeks out: rich, with a disposable income, willing to spend top dollar for whatever they can do to maintain their lavish lifestyles and superficial appearances. In short, Mei's dumplings are the natural ending point to the plastic surgery/Botox phenomenon; women will mutilate their bodies to look beautiful, but now they don't have to - they just have to mutilate others'. Fruit-chan films scenes in both worlds with the same static, assured lens, bringing a cold distance to the proceedings that is likely echoed in the subtext; by showing this terrible practice with such stateliness, the director creates the expectation of normalcy (thus making the entire exercise that much more macabre).

Mei is presented as a Chinese immigrant who means to peddle her exotic wares in Hong Kong; with her slender frame and sexual allure, she "fits the stereotype of Chinese sex workers," but instead is working to smuggle in "the precious raw material for her flourishing health management business in Hong Kong" (152). In this way, Mei subverts the typical expectations of what young, slender Chinese emigrants have to offer their clients; instead of offering them sexual pleasure, as her appearance belies, she is a businesswoman. "Although Mei does not sell her own body, she purveys

those of anonymous Chinese peasant women who are forced to abort their baby girls under the one-child policy and the persistent patriarchal ideology that writes off female newborns" (152). In this way, Mei is yet another arm of capitalism, one which seeks to disenfranchise and commoditize women:

Mei's efforts to keep up with demand - Li asking for fresher and fresher fetuses to eat in dumpling form - leads to the death of a young girl who was coerced into giving up her baby to Mei. Woman after woman, all lower-class, are paid off with the promise of substantial amounts of money in exchange for their unborn babies; the subtext of commoditization of women's bodies becomes quite clear in these scenes.

Mei's mercurial, deceptive nature is part and parcel of what she represents within the film - the capitalist system's ability to exploit women in many different ways, whether sexually or economically. She subverts the expectations of her community by understanding that, "to survive in Hong Kong, she must do something out of the ordinary, something disturbing to the order and class system of an advanced society like Hong Kong" (153). In this way, she is a uniquely capitalist figure; she takes what others throw away (the aborted fetuses made obsolete and unwanted due to the one child policy) and creates a commodity that other women pay handsomely for. This commodification is not without a human cost; in addition to the aborted fetuses that she often coerces women to perform, she gleefully puts the mothers in danger for the sake of expedient delivery and fresh product. To that point, Choi and Wada-Marciano ask, "Can she be a modern demon in a globalized culture worshipping excessive, insatiable consumption?" (153).

In Dumplings, capitalism is subtextually equated, quite literally, to



cannibalism - the process by which human beings trade goods for services, as it stands in a modern context, is the way in which Hong Kong society chews up and spits out those who are undesirable. It also maintains, conversely, the resources necessary to establish those who are at the top of the food chain in youth and power. The ugliness of this capitalist transaction is displayed through the grotesque nature of the dumplings themselves - the film delights in showing us just what is inside them, with "close-ups of the little curly human in bright orange shade and the juicy orange delicacy nicely laced inside each dumpling" (156). Furthermore, we often see Mei and Ms. Li eagerly eating fetuses, both in and out of dumplings, with great relish; the beneficiaries of this capitalist transaction excitedly feast upon their bounty, with those who must give of themselves suffering for it.

Both *The Host* and *Dumplings* feature anti-capitalist and anti-organizational subtexts; while *The Host* condemns the uncaring and unfeeling governments and corporate interests for creating monsters and disasters with their pollution, *Dumplings* criticizes the capitalist system itself for disenfranchising and stealing from the lower classes to feed the amenities and lavish demands of the rich. Bong's grimy and kinetic monster movie achieves this satire through broad comedy interspersed with moments of abject terror and tension, while *Fruit-Chan* supplies an elegant, beautifully filmed and contemplative story whose grotesqueries are juxtaposed with aesthetic beauty. These films alike demonstrate a tremendous desire to see the lower classes represented, or at least given their fair share, in the capitalist system - or at least a revision of the system itself. By masking these subtexts

through stately gore or monster-movie horror-comedy, these messages become much more potent and subtle.

## **Works Cited**

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