

# Korea's Force is Not Strong—Exploring the Definitions of Science Fiction

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## Introduction

“May the Force be with you”, “I am your father.” These are simply two of the many famous lines of the science fiction phenomenon known as *Star Wars*. The epic story which takes place in a galaxy far, far away is known to nearly everyone who has come to live in the world of modern cinema. However, even with such influence, *Star Wars* was unable to make a great impact in certain places with its seventh installment *The Force Awakens* (Kennedy & Abrams, 2015), one of them being South Korea. *The Force Awakens* was never able to place first in the box office since its first showing in December 17th last year. For thirteen consecutive days, it ranked second in the number of spectators, which eventually deteriorated. Outside Korea, *The Force Awakens* broke records in terms of views and revenue, so one must question: why not in Korea?

The challenge *Star Wars* faces in Korea can be linked to the challenge science fiction as a genre faces in the nation. According to the *Merriam-Webster English* dictionary, science fiction is defined as “fiction dealing principally with the impact of actual or imagined science on society or individuals or having a scientific factor as an essential orienting component” (Science fiction, n.d.). In Korean, science fiction is commonly known as *gongsangwihak* (공상과학空想科學), which in English translates into “fake science” or “science that cannot be achieved.” While the former allows the

events in science fiction to be imaginary in the present, it hints at a potential possibility. The latter, however, rejects any possibility whatsoever, and gives off a dismissive tone. This difference in treatment is rather peculiar when one considers the relative success of *Star Wars* and science fiction outside of Korea, so one must question what prevents *Star Wars* and science fiction as a genre from being as highly popular in Korea as it is in the rest of the global community, and will be looked into by comparing *Star Wars* with other science fiction films that were screened in the nation.

## The Differing Definitions

Besides the definition given in the dictionary, there have been many attempts to give a definition to science fiction in the west. Chris McKitterick (2015), director of the Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction, defines science fiction to be “the literature of the human species encountering change” (para. 1), and that it “explores possibilities and pushes boundaries” (para. 2). American futurist Alvin Toffler (1970) in his book *Future Shock* underscored the significance of science fiction in future studies. According to Toffler, science fiction is important in that it allows the younger generation to expand their imagination and, through this expansion, allow them to explore the political, social, psychological, and ethical challenges of the world.

In contrast to this definition, the coined term for science fiction in Korean *gongsang gwahak* denies any possibility whatsoever. Korean science fiction experts believe that the giving of this definition plants a sense of negativity in the genre. Park Sang-jun (2005), head of the Seoul SF Archive, argued that the misleading translation of science fiction leads to two prejudices: science fiction is a childish plaything, or something so difficult that only devoted fans could enjoy. In response to this, Park claims that it is neither, and supports Toffler’s claim that science fiction is a method for one to look into his or her future self. Djuna (2000), a Korean science fiction writer, also expressed his discomfort in the term *gongsang gwahak*, hinting at how it suggests the notion of grasping an impossible concept and preferring to simply label the genre as SF—short for science fiction.

Because of the term’s nature of pointing towards obscure and fantastical elements, *gongsang gwahak* in Korea is often mixed up with fantasy. Park (2006) explains how the origins of the term itself came from Japan: *SF Magazine*, Japan’s version of America’s *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, first displayed the term in the title page as “*Gongsang Gwahak SoSul Ji* (공상과학소설지|空想科學小説誌)”. In short, fantasy and science fiction were presented as the same thing; genres which dealt with fake ideas that have nothing to do with the real world, and thus a queer xenophobic notion that these genres are only understandable by a certain few was born.

One such example of this is the case of Bong Jun-ho's *The Host* (Choi & Bong, 2006). The film is about the struggles a family goes through after the emergence of a monster created as a result of the dumping of chemicals in the Han River by the United States Army. When Korean critics and viewers speak of this film, they do not categorize it as science fiction, but rather a "family film" or a "political film". Chang Suk-young (2006) briefly mentioned *The Host* having science fiction elements, but does not elaborate on these elements and focuses on the family and political aspects the film carries. In short, in Korea if there is a way to speak of a product of entertainment without defining it as science fiction, it is often taken.

## **The Direction of Korean Science Fiction**

As time progressed, however, efforts to bring reality and the science fiction film closer became more visible. Brandon Taylor (2016) comments on how Bong Jun-ho's films take a stance against the United States in its relationship with Korea. This is visible in Bong's film *The Host* (Choi & Bong, 2006), in which the monster is created due to in just United States military actions and, though the United States military attempts to aid in stopping the monster, is portrayed to be ineffective. *Snowpiercer* (Park & Bong, 2013) takes a slightly different approach of criticism and can be read to be more of an American film that talks about issues of the American "caste" system in American society rather than putting the focus on relations between Korea and the United States. *The Host* takes place in contemporary Korean society around the Han River, an area most Koreans are familiar with, whereas *Snowpiercer* goes into the future in a post-apocalyptic Earth in which the only sanctuary for the human race is a continuously running locomotive, in which the poorer classes are forced to live in the rear end with protein bars made of cockroaches as their only source of nourishment, whereas the social elite enjoy all sorts of luxury in the front. Both *The Host* and *Snowpiercer* contain phenomena which are impossible in the real world, but are explained to be possible through material and physically rational means. With this accomplishment, Korean science fiction has begun to show an understanding of what is required to carry out a science fiction narrative.

When one considers the content of *Train to Busan* (Lee & Yeon, 2016) Korea's latest zombie apocalypse film it is difficult to say that anything was "new" to the science fiction narrative. Yet, when the zombie apocalypse was applied to a setting in Korea, it proved to be an interesting narrative to audiences. Daniel W. Drezner (2014) explains the growing popularity of the zombie apocalypse narrative in relation to the metaphor zombies stand for; in a time in which terrorism and epidemics throw the society into uncertainty, zombies serve as the perfect avatar for such concerns. *Train to*

*Busan* can be read in the same way; the fear that is aroused by uncertainty is what allows the zombies to spread at a rapid rate and thus tear the survivors apart. The main character starts off as a casual individual with his personal problems in relation to his family, and he shows a questionable moral code when it comes to survival. When his daughter offers her seat to an elder lady, the main character pulls her to the side and tells her that she does not need to do such things in times of chaos; when it comes to survival, it is every man (or woman) for himself (or herself). When the survivors get off the train at Daejeon station, the protagonist calls an army officer to ensure the safety of his daughter and himself without letting the others know. This act of selfishness is the consequence of fear caused by the uncertainties; it is uncertain whether or not Daejeon is safe, it is uncertain whether Busan was able to succeed in its defense, and it is uncertain whether the group of survivors can make it to sanctuary without getting infected, which forces them to suspect each other and refuse to allow others into their compartments on the train. As the film progresses on and the main character has no choice but to work with others, however, it is shown that he outgrows the mentality of selfish survival, allowing viewers to question the desperate mentality of survival in real Korean society.

Science fiction has been suffering from lack of content and attention up until now, but coming into the 21st century, there has been an increase in both aspects. Park Chang-sun (2006) voiced a positive future for science fiction before Bong Jun-ho's *The Host* even came out, claiming that unlike the past when funding for blockbuster science fiction films was woefully lacking in comparison to Hollywood films, no longer was that the case. *Train to Busan* in terms of scale and budget was relatively low in comparison to zombie apocalypse films produced in the west (Cho, 2016, para. 6); the budget for *Train to Busan* cost 8.5 billion won (approximately \$7.4 million), a relatively low budget when one considers the fact that just the first *Resident Evil* film cost \$33 million, and there have already been five *Resident Evil* films (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). This shows that even without a Hollywood scale budget, Korean cinema is able to produce good science fiction, so it can be hoped that some day appreciation of the genre will reach a level in which no one is unfamiliar to "May the Force be with you."

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