

GEOG 4130

Individual Essay

Inequality and Poverty in Seoul Suburbs

Introduction:

The movie *Parasite* (2019), directed by Bong Joon-ho has fully illustrated such social disparity and spatial equity in modern Seoul. The movie portrays two societal classes in Korean society: low-income households (the Kim family) who live under terrible conditions versus super wealthy families (the Park family) who possess substantial prosperities and privileges. In the movie, the contrast between Park's luxurious lifestyle in a gated community and Kim's semi-basement dwelling in a flood-prone district serves as a powerful representation of Seoul's socioeconomic stratification. The film's portrayal of social inequalities, housing disparity, and economic gaps, has reflected real-life poverty and inequality in Seoul due to the city's rapid expansion of suburban areas.

Seoul's Demographic:

Seoul, located in the lowland of a topographic basin surrounded by hills approximately 1,000 feet (300 meters) high (*Britannica, 2025*), has developed to become South Korea's economic and political core. By 2022, the city's population reached 9.5 million, which accounted for 17% of the nation's total, reflecting its continued role as a magnet for internal migration and opportunity. However, despite South Korea's status as a developed country, income inequality remains a heavy concern. The country ranked fourth in poverty percentage among major global economies in 2023 (*Nam, 2021*).

Background of the movie:

The photo below (*Figure 1*) shows the filming location of *Parasite*, location 1 is Ahyeon-dong, described to be Kim's home while location 4 is Seongbuk-dong, where Park's home is. In Korean, "gu" refers to a district, while "dong" signifies a neighborhood or ward, with districts being multiple neighborhoods.



Figure 1: Filming location of *Parasite* in Seoul.
Source: Korea JoongAng Daily (2020)

Ahyeon-dong [1] is located in Mapo-gu. In the late Joseon Dynasty (1392 - 1910), it was a place to bury people. In 1931, the Japanese had relocated poor people from all over Seoul to this area in groups in order to beautify the city. Currently, most of the homeowners have lived here for more than 40 years. Most of the residents who have settled here are unemployed and have lost their productivity (Jeoung & Lee & Cha, 2020).

In contrast, Seongbuk-dong [4] is a village located in the north of Seoul, nestled in the hills overlooking the city. A large proportion of the residences are owned by wealthy households. It is also where many ambassadorial residences are located (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2016).

The contrast in the Movie: Housing Type, Living Environment, and Accessibility

The setting of *Parasite* draws inspiration from real-life neighborhoods that highlight the contrast between wealth and poverty in the city, especially in housing, living environment, and accessibility.

1. Housing Type

In the movie, the Kim's family live in a sub-basement apartment in Ahyeon-dong. The sub-basements, which are called "*banjiha*" in Korean, are an idea that emerged to protect South Korean citizens in the Korean War to serve as bunkers (Chloe, 2023). Due to the housing crisis in 1980, South

Korea eased construction laws and permitted “*banjiha*” to be a type of low-income housing (*San Nicolás Leyva, 2020*). In fact, Seoul was home to about 200,000 “*banjiha*” in 2020, contributing 5% to the number of all households in the city (*McCurry, 2022*).



Figure 2: “Free extermination” scene from *Parasite*, showing the fumigation outside the Kim family’s “*banjiha*”.

Source: *Absolute Scenes* (2021)

A scene (Figure 2) from *Parasite* highlights these “*banjiha*” vulnerabilities when fumigation chemicals flood the Kim family’s home through an open window, dramatically symbolizing their lack of protection and dignity. As the house is partially situated below street level, these units are often prone to unsanitary conditions due to their close proximity to sources of contamination such as sewage and vermin.



*Figure 3: Filming location of the Park family's house in Parasite.
Source: FilmOblivion (2021)*

Figure 3 shows the Park family's luxurious home in Seongbuk-dong. As the area is home to business elites, diplomats, and celebrities (Cheryl, 2022). It sits in an exclusive, elevated neighborhood surrounded by wide, clean streets and walled estates, separating Seoul's "golden" from its "dirt".

In specific, the physical locations of low-income housing in Seoul expose vulnerable communities to environmental risks. *Figures 4 & 5* highlight the geographical disparity: Ahyeon-dong, where the Kim family lives, sits in a lower-lying area near the Han River and is more susceptible to flooding, whereas Seongbuk-dong rests on elevated ground, protected from such risks.

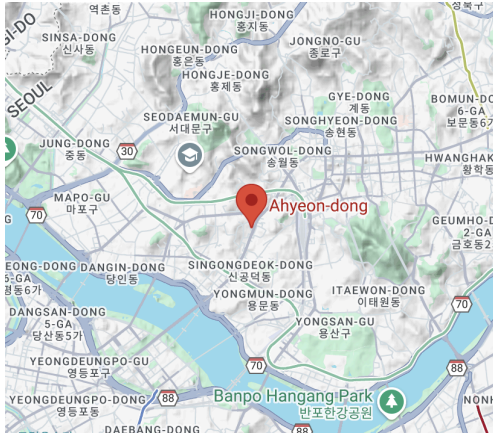


Figure 4: Screenshot of Ahyeon-dong neighborhood, Seoul, taken from Google Maps.

Source: Google Maps (2025)

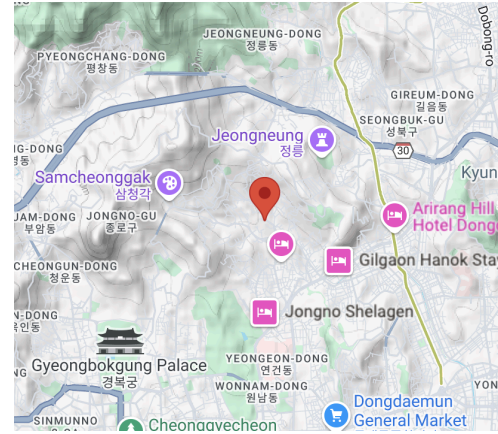


Figure 5: Screenshot of Seongbuk-dong neighborhood, Seoul, taken from Google Maps.

Source: Google Maps (2025)

2. Living Environment



Figure 6: The flooded “banjiha” scene from Parasite, showing the Kim family wading through sewage after a storm.

Source: McKegg Collins (2021)



Figure 7: The Park family enjoying the rain in comfort from their living room.

Source: Urban Water Flows (2022)

This scene (*Figure 6 & 7*) sharply contrasts with the experience of the Kim family, who, at the same time, are scrambling through flooded streets, eventually returning to find their “*banjiha*” submerged in sewage while the Parks perceive the rain as a romantic, refreshing event. The scene highlights the divide between the two families not only in wealth, but also in how the same event carries drastically different meanings depending on one's place in the social hierarchy. In fact, the risk for living in “*banjiha*” is so high that the government of Seoul has vowed to ban these types of houses after a severe flood in 2022 resulted in the death of 11 people (*McCurry, 2022*).

3. Accessibility

The Kim family, coming from a low-income background, relies on public transportation and walking through narrow, crowded streets and steep staircases to reach the Park household (*Parasite, 2019*). Their daily journey often involves climbing uphill due to their staying in the lower land next to the Han River (*Figure 8*). Their movement through the city is exposed, effortful, and grounded in the reality of working-class life, where commuting is part of the struggle to earn a living.



Figure 8: Narrow alley and steep staircase near the Kim family's home in Parasite.
Source: CNN Travel (2020)

In contrast, the Park family experiences transportation as a form of convenience and luxury. They rely exclusively on a private car and chauffeur, shielded from the chaos of public transit and the city's harsh environments. Their commute is smooth, silent, and entirely detached from the physical labor or discomfort experienced by the working class.



Figure 9: Mrs. Park riding comfortably in her chauffeured car in Parasite.
Source: Screen Rant (2020)

The film mirrors real-world conditions, where only 21.6% of workers in South Korea drive to work, and the majority depend on overcrowded public transit (Shin, 2024). This disparity in transportation reveals more than just lifestyle differences. It highlights a lack of spatial equity, where access to mobility and urban comfort is unequally distributed based on socioeconomic status.

What's wrong with Seoul?

1. Concentration of Wealth and Opportunity

Since the 1960s, Seoul has been the nucleus of South Korea's rapid industrialization. Rapid industrialization and centralized urban planning has helped South Korea be one of the high-income nations. However, the fast development of Seoul also reinforced a spatially uneven development model. When millions of people migrated from rural areas to the capital in search of opportunity, the city's infrastructure became overstretched, land values and housing costs soared, demand for urban services outpaced supply. This

situation has resulted in a deeply divided urban landscape where wealthier residents, concentrated in central or elite districts like Gangnam, benefited from excellent schools, hospitals, parks, and transit connectivity. In contrast, lower-income groups are left in aging, overcrowded neighborhoods like Ahyeon-dong, where access to resources is limited, and environmental risks such as flooding or poor air quality are greater (*Lee & Han, 2024*). These inequalities are not only physical but psychological, fostering feelings of exclusion, alienation, and systemic frustration among marginalized residents.

2. Inequitable Urban Expansion

Seoul's suburban expansion is shaped by master-planned new towns, designed for high-income families with modern infrastructure, green spaces, and high-rise apartments (*Choi & Lee, 2021*). These areas are often self-sufficient, offering everything from international schools to shopping malls, yet they are socially insulated, creating physical and symbolic distance between income groups. The statistics show that high-end apartments in Seoul cost more than five times the price of low-end ones (*Jang, 2024*). It illustrates that access to quality housing is now a matter of privilege. The real estate market has become a gatekeeper of status, locking low-income families out of desirable areas through exorbitant prices and rising living costs. Consequently, those who can't afford to buy or rent in these planned communities are confined to underdeveloped districts, where public services are inadequate, infrastructure is outdated, and long commutes are the norm. What troubles me most is that this kind of spatial inequality creates a self-reinforcing cycle where children in wealthier districts have access to better schools, leading to better jobs and continued residence in privileged areas, while poorer families remain trapped in low-quality neighborhoods with little chance of upward mobility. In addition, this is also how inequality becomes structurally reproduced through space.

Conclusion

Parasite presents a compelling exploration of Seoul's deep-rooted social inequalities and spatial inequities. By highlighting differences in housing quality, transportation access, and environmental vulnerability, the film sheds light on systemic issues

happening in urban planning and development. Historically, Seoul's planning policies have favored affluent groups, leading to widespread neglect of lower-income communities. This has resulted in a city where social mobility is limited, and housing has become not only a basic need but a marker of exclusion and aspiration. To create a more just and inclusive Seoul, urban planning must shift from expansion-driven development to policies grounded in spatial equity. This means Seoul must prioritize inclusive urban development, decentralize vital services, invest in neglected neighborhoods, and ensure equal access to resources and opportunities. Without such changes, Seoul risks becoming a city divided not just by wealth, but by walls of space, status, and silence.

Reference:

In the process of writing this essay, I used ChatGPT to summarize the film Parasite, analyze key scenes, and take insights from related readings and articles. I also used Google Translate to access and understand sources written in Korean. Finally, Grammarly was used to refine grammar and enhance the overall clarity and quality of my writing.

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