

Hwang Dong-hyuk

CITATION

Every once in a while there appears an expression of creativity that, while fictional and not without flaws, nevertheless holds up a useful mirror to society, including its rawness, provoking discussion and collective introspection. Such a work is the Netflix drama series Squid Game.

Millions of households have tuned in fascinated, many have found it repugnant or perhaps wearying. The grim portrayal of South Korean life has dampened enthusiasm for the shows at home.

Nevertheless, Squid Game, created by Hwang Dong-hyuk, 50 years old, has emerged as more than a mere television show. It has become a global phenomenon, spoken of by just about everyone, from pundits to politicians and also psychoanalysts the world over.

As social commentary, it has sparked soul searching about capitalism, inequality and how societies treat the less fortunate.

As a commercial enterprise, it makes a compelling case to Hollywood for the viability of non-English content. Squid Game is Netflix's biggest TV series launch to date.

Above all, as a vehicle of soft power, it has taken South Korea's global cultural influence, already high, to the next level.

As a media organisation that keeps a close watch on all things Asian, The Straits Times recognises themes in the drama that are deeply realistic, and in the protagonist, Seong Gi-hun, the real life stories of laid-off autoworkers that we reported not only in the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-2009 but in an earlier era, when South Korea's economy was devastated during the Asian Financial Crisis.

Since then, South Korean industry has risen to great strengths, and it recently passed Russia's gross domestic product to become the world's 10th largest economy. Electronics firms such as Samsung are world beaters today, Korea's carmakers are approaching Japanese quality and its dockyards make world class ships, especially for the energy industry. Culturally, the boyband BTS, the girlgroup Blackpink and the performer Psy – of the catchy pop tune Gangnam Style – are household names in many countries. BTS this year became the first ever Asian act to win Artist of the Year at the American Music Awards.

Kimchi has emerged as a global health food. For many in Southeast Asia, Korean has emerged as one of the most popular foreign languages to study, and many yearn to visits scenes from its movies and films.

It is perhaps time now for South Korea to examine some of its societal wounds, including economic inequality and the financial struggles of its emerging generations; it is not an accident that suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the young.

Squid Game offers an avenue. While The Straits Times finds the callous violence depicted in the series abhorrent, the underlying message is worth pondering, and not just in South Korea. A fairer, more inclusive and humane society is a universal desire among people the world over, who yearn for a better post pandemic world.

Hwang Dyong-hyuk, through his searing and compelling series, has given voice to that common cry.

Hwang Dong-hyuk was born in Seoul in May, 1971. He was educated at Seoul National University and at the University of Southern California. His graduation thesis film, Miracle Mile, won several awards and signalled his early promise as an artistic genius. He went on to direct several critically-acclaimed and commercially successful films in South Korea. With Squid Game - his first TV series - he has established himself as both a global success and a social commentator for his society and times.

The editors of The Straits Times are pleased to name Hwang Dyong-hyuk the 2021 Asian of the Year.