

Unraveling the Thread of Elegant Lies: The Depiction of Students and Teenage Bullying in South Korean Film

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This article explores the 2014 film adaptation of *Thread of Lies* (directed by Lee Han), a popular young adult novel of the same title written by Kim Ryeo-Ryeong (2009). The story centers on the aftermath of Cheonji's death. Cheonji—a thoughtful, quiet, and academically successful 14-year-old student—died by suicide using a red scarf that she knitted. Her widowed mother (Hyun-Sook) and her older sister in high school (Manji) are faced with 'elegant lies' that had been there all along: teenage bullying and depression. A direct word-to-word translation of the film's title—*Uahan Geojinmal*—from Korean to English is 'Elegant Lies'. They discover handwritten letters that Cheonji left inside knitting yarn, which help them get closer to a possible explanation for her decision. This paper interrogates the five letters left by Cheonji by focusing on the person the message was intended for and what their relationship reveals within the film. In these explorations, I examine the intersections of family, friends, economic class, and academic performance which work to heighten the conflict and competition between the students. In a country that has the highest suicide rate among OECD countries at 26 per 100,000 population, *Thread of Lies* provides meaningful representation of middle and high school students—within a single-sex educational environment—grappling with the complexities of success and acceptance.



This article explores the 2014 film adaptation of *Thread of Lies* (directed by Lee Han), a popular young adult novel of the same title written by Kim Ryeo-Ryeong (2009). The story centers on the aftermath of Cheonji's death. Cheonji—a thoughtful, quiet, and academically successful 14-year-old student—died by suicide using a red scarf that she knitted. Her widowed mother (Hyun-Sook) and her older sister in high school (Manji) are faced with 'elegant lies' that had been there all along: teenage bullying and depression. A direct word-to-word translation of the film's title—*Uahan Geojinmal*—from Korean to English is 'Elegant Lies'. They discover five handwritten letters hidden inside knitting yarn that Cheonji gifted to significant individuals in her life, which help them get closer to a possible explanation for her decision. Currently, South Korea (henceforth Korea) has the highest suicide rate among OECD countries at 26 per 100,000 population (Statistics Korea 2023). The suicide rate for those aged between 10 and 19 is at 7.1 per 100,000 population (Statistics Korea 2023). Against this backdrop, *Thread of Lies* offers a meaningful opportunity to probe into the complexities that Korean society faces in negotiating teenage bullying, depression, and death by suicide.

The 2007 launch of the Changbi Publishers Young Adult Literature Award marks an important shift, where teenagers became a large target audience for literature (Chung 2021: 221). Within this change, young adult literature in Korea, including *Elegant Lies*, provides an important window into the 'dissolution of families' in the post-1997 Asian Financial Crisis era and the advent of a neoliberal society (Chung 2021: 220). The first winner of this prestigious award was Kim Ryeo-Ryeong for her novel *Wandeugi*, which is a coming-of-age story of a Korean-Filipino teenager. *Wandeugi* was adapted into a film (also directed by Lee Han) in 2011 and became a box office success with more than 5.31 million viewers. In this vein, Kim's works serve as successful examples of impactful youth narratives that transcend to other mediums including films and musicals (Chung 2021: 221). *Thread of Lies* is the second collaboration between the novelist and director Lee.

Existing research on *Thread of Lies* has largely focused on the novel, with studies looking at comparing the first-person point of view with multiple perspective narratives (Jang 2016), representations of death (Kim 2015), suicide among girls (Eum 2016), youth and peer culture (Park 2016), reading as therapy and suicide preventative education (Kim and Cho 2017; Kim and Kim 2019), and book cover designs for bestselling novels (Kim and Kim 2015). Previous research has also discussed the differences between the novel and the film. For example, novel reviews frequently mention how 'uncomfortable' readers felt while reading, whereas film reviews often emphasize 'how moving and emotional the story was' (Chung 2021: 223). This stark difference in the tone between the two works reflects the novel's focus on highlighting

the contrast between the memories of those left behind and the complete isolation that Cheonji experienced while alive (Chung 2021: 224). Conversely, the film only focuses on the memories of those left behind as they ‘complete their mourning’ (Chung 2021: 224). For the purposes of this study, I concentrate on the film and not on assessing the faithfulness of its adaption from the novel.

Within this paper, I borrow Huang, Hong and Espelage’s (2013: 882) definition of bullying as ‘both direct and indirect forms of aggression, which is instigated by an individual or a group of individuals whose purpose is to gain power, prestige, or goods’. In the context of Korean society, Roh et al. (2015: 3) identify the seven most frequent forms of bullying at schools: ‘physical bullying (hitting), verbal bullying (threatening or intimidation), extortion (having their belongings taken), ostracism by a group, harassment (being forced to do work), sexual bullying, and cyber bullying’. As will be demonstrated in the sections below, ostracism is the most prevalent of these in *Thread of Lies*, and this also encompasses Olweus’ (2009: 11) three behavioral criteria for bullying: ‘intention, repetitiveness, and imbalance of power’. Through a close analysis of the student characters within the film, I argue that *Thread of Lies* illustrates the failure of contemporary Korean society to provide adequate support and protection for marginalized youth, especially within the school environment. The sections that follow will examine the characters Cheonji, Manji, Hwa-Yeon, Mira, Miran, and Sangbak—all students—to illustrate the intricate interplay of family structure, peer relationships, socioeconomic status, and academic success, which fuels the tension among students and contribute to Cheonji’s isolation.

Locating Cheonji and Her Family within Korean Teenage Films

Thread of Lies must be studied in the context of ‘teenage films’. Teenage films in Korea are broadly categorized using the age of the main characters and the inclusion of themes pertaining to teenage interests (Jeong 2015). In one study, Eunjung Kim (2014: 60) traces how youth have been portrayed in Korean teenage films across each decade: ‘romantic youth in high teen movies in 1970s, distressful youth in the competitive college admissions in high school movies in 1980s, and confused youth in the classroom education crisis in 1990s’. Kim (2014: 45) argues that entering the 2000s, teenagers shifted from ‘obedient students who are consumed like machines that study’ to ‘youth who actively seek consumption and develop individuality’. Within this transition, the school is often represented as a space filled with violence, and consequently, a place that youth must fight against or leave (Kim 2014: 51). As will be shown in this paper, this applies to *Thread of Lies* where Cheonji—faced with bullying—has moments of resistance but ultimately ‘chooses to leave’ through her death.

Although *Thread of Lies* is a relatively small budget film at US \$2 million, it boasts a star-studded cast including Kim Hee-Ae (Hyun-Sook), Go Ah-Sung (Manji), Kim Hyang-Gi (Cheonji), and Kim Yoo-Jung (Hwa-Yeon). While the themes explored in the film may be perceived as socially taboo, the popularity of the actors makes the film approachable for audiences. Similarly, while *Thread of Lies* is a teenage film, it was marketed as a family drama (Jeong 2015: 631) with moments of comedic relief offered by supporting characters (Chung 2021: 247), particularly Chu Sangbak, played by Yoo Ah-In, who was the actor for the titular character in *Wandeugi*.

Min-Ah Jeong (2015) describes the shift in the representation of families in Korean teenage films. In the 1970s, films highlighted harmonious middle-class families spanning across three generations. Within this structure, generational differences between the adults and the youth seemed to be easily reconciled through laughter and mutual compromise. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, films shifted to center on the middle-class nuclear family. By then, a competitive school environment was established in Korean society and parents were depicted as either incredibly involved in their child's education or cold-hearted in raising their child. Entering the 2010s, there was an increase in films with main characters from single-parent households, deviating from normalized nuclear families (Jeong 2015: 609). In *Thread of Lies*, Cheonji comes from a single-parent household, and this is represented as the main reason for her being bullied at school.

Hyun-Sook raises her two daughters after her husband passed away nine years ago. She works at a GS supermarket, a large conglomerate-owned chain grocery mart. Although Hyun-Sook is a busy working mother, she does not neglect household duties that are expected of her, such as cooking and cleaning. For example, in the opening scenes of the film, audiences are introduced to Hyun-Sook dozing off in front of the gas stove as she prepares breakfast for her daughters. Cheonji—positioned as the 'good daughter'—is ironing her school uniform. Manji sighs and complains about the food: curry (presumably left over from the previous night), rice, dried seaweed, fried eggs, and kimchi. Manji scolds her mother saying that she should have at least made some *gook* (soup). Hyun-Sook replies, 'Just eat. Or I will switch breakfast to cereal'. Cheonji, on the other hand, compliments her mother on how prettily the eggs were cooked.

In this opening sequence, Cheonji asks Hyun-Sook if she can buy her an MP3 player as an early birthday present. Hyun-Sook notes that there are still months left till Cheonji's birthday and promises that she will buy it next month. This month, she needs to save up for their rent deposit. Manji interjects that no one uses MP3 players and that Cheonji should just listen to music on her cell phone. It is later revealed that the MP3 player was not for Cheonji, but for Hwa-Yeon who demanded it as a 'friendship gift'.

This scene cuts to Hyun-Sook, who is busy at work promoting the ‘buy one, get one free’ tofu deal. She gets a phone call from Cheonji asking her to knit a hat. Hyun-Sook replies, ‘This morning, you asked for an MP3. Now, a knitted hat? I’m busy right now. Make sure to eat something and let’s talk when I get home’.

Hyun-Sook is instinctively bothered by Cheonji’s voice, and she calls Manji to ask what type of MP3 player Cheonji might be looking for. Hyun-Sook tells Manji to look after Cheonji when she arrives home from school. Manji calls Cheonji. The camera cuts to Cheonji’s cell phone on her desk at home. Cheonji’s right hand is shown hesitant to pick up the phone. When the call turns into a missed call, her left hand is shown picking up a long red knitted scarf which is resting behind the cell phone. The camera pans down from the ceiling to show the scarf now hanging as a noose from above. Cheonji is seated on the floor. Her face is never revealed in this scene. This opening sequence ends with Manji’s narration: ‘Cheonji died. My younger sister, who was ironing all morning just so she could wear proper clothes to school, died by suicide without leaving one single note behind’.

Following this opening sequence, the film is dedicated to her family—mainly Manji—searching for an answer to ‘why’ Cheonji died by suicide. The film reveals that Cheonji’s death was premeditated, indicated by the five letters hidden inside red yarn balls that she gifted to different individuals in her life: her mother, her sister, and her classmates Hwa-Yeon and Mira. Jeong (2015) notes how recent Korean teenage films resemble a mystery case where each character functions as a detective, perpetrator, or victim and flashbacks are strategically used to provide important evidence for the audiences. In this narrative, the main characters are often ‘tragic’ in that they are not able to ‘change their realities’, but are forced to ‘escape’ their situation by ‘dying or leaving’ (Jeong 2015: 617). Cheonji follows a similar path, although her death could have been impacted by several ‘identified risk factors for adolescent suicide’ (Kim, Koh, and Leventhal 2005: 361); teenage bullying and depression are the most prominent factors highlighted within the film. These are influenced by her relationships at school and at home, which will be unpacked in the sections below.

Manji as Sibling and Detective

Manji serves multiple roles within the film, including being a daughter, an older sister, a high school student, and a detective. The differences between Manji and Cheonji are emphasized in numerous scenes: their appearance, their height, and most importantly their personality. Cheonji is quiet and reserved; Manji, on the other hand, is terse and direct. Cheonji admires how Manji has many friends despite her seemingly blunt personality. Manji’s knowledge and experience as a high school student allows her to

freely navigate middle school spaces including Cheonji's classroom. Manji, through the work of 'investigation', reveals the 'secret' behind Cheonji's death and completes the 'work of mourning' which normalizes the loss of a family member (Kim 2015: 54). Ultimately, in this process, Manji takes a step towards 'adulthood' (Kim 2015: 54). One of the most significant indicators of Manji transitioning into adulthood is her decision to go to college. In a scene with Hyun-Sook, Manji's homeroom teacher reveals how Manji—who previously did not aspire to attend university—has new goals of applying after the passing of her sister. This reflects Manji's determination to live with more purpose and intention after Cheonji's death.

As the 'detective' in the film, Manji comes face-to-face with Hwa-Yeon, the primary instigator of the bullying against Cheonji. Via a flashback scene, the audiences are taken to when Manji sees Cheonji and Hwa-Yeon together for the first time. Manji comments on how different Cheonji and Hwa-Yeon look. Hwa-Yeon is noticeably taller and has long straight hair. Cheonji is petite and wears a chin-length bowl cut. Hwa-Yeon replies that 'opposites attract'. Hwa-Yeon asks Manji to buy them *donkatsu* (fried pork cutlets). Manji, who says she doesn't have enough money, buys them *tteokbokki* (spicy rice cakes) instead. *Tteokbokki* is a popular street food that is affordable and readily found in the vicinity of schools. The economic standing of the two families is highlighted in Manji buying the girls *tteokbokki* instead of *donkatsu*. In this encounter, Cheonji asks Manji what she thinks of Hwa-Yeon. Manji, without giving much thought to this question nor paying attention to the troubled expression on Cheonji's face, replies that Hwa-Yeon is 'cute'. Manji remains indifferent and does not probe further. For Manji, her lack of concern and interest will haunt her post-Cheonji's death and ultimately lead her to change by embracing Hwa-Yeon when she becomes the next target of bullying at school.

'I Am Going to Die Because of *Jjajangmyeon*'

Hwa-Yeon lived in Chowon Apartment all her life, and she 'befriended' Cheonji in the third grade of elementary school, when Cheonji moved to the neighborhood. Cheonji's family, on the other hand, had relocated frequently as they were unable to afford long-term permanent housing. Manji and Hyun-Sook move into this five-story run-down and rat-infested apartment after they are evicted from their old home in the aftermath of Cheonji's suicide. In a later scene, the audiences are made aware that it was not a coincidence that Cheonji's family moved to Chowon Apartment. In fact, Hyun-Sook chose this apartment so that Hwa-Yeon's family would have to face them every day. In essence, the repercussions of bullying and suicide persist for the families even after Cheonji's death. In a study of 4,500 articles published across ten Korean newspapers,

Lee (2010) identifies six major discourses created around suicide: suicides have been described as (1) national disgrace, (2) the only way out for marginalized social classes, (3) protests against unfair treatment or the political system, (4) weakened individual will or irresponsibility, (5) pathological attitude created by depression, and (6) social evil promoted by the media and internet. Within *Thread of Lies*, the film is extremely cautious not to depict suicide in any of the above six frameworks. Rather, one can argue that the audiences are invited to approach Cheonji's death as objectively as possible as they accompany Manji in her work as the detective.

Eum (2016: 688) argues that Hwa-Yeon's actions against Cheonji can be categorized as 'relational aggression'. 'Relational aggression' refers to harm caused in relationships by covert bullying or manipulative behavior. Examples include isolating peers from their group (social exclusion), threatening to stop talking to a friend ('the silent treatment'), or spreading gossip and rumors (Eum 2016: 688). Despite calling herself a 'best friend', Hwa-Yeon bullies Cheonji in numerous ways including spreading rumors that Cheonji's father died by suicide, when in fact, he passed away from an accident caused by heavy construction equipment.

Each year, Hwa-Yeon holds a birthday party at Bosingak, the Chinese restaurant owned by her parents. The party begins promptly at 2 pm, except for Cheonji whose invitation Hwa-Yeon purposefully marks as starting from 3 pm. Prior to her arrival, Cheonji's classmates talk behind her back: 'It's great that she's pretty and good at studying, but her family is...'. Here, they refer to her father's 'suicide'. By 3 pm, all the guests have finished eating, and when Cheonji arrives, they giggle and make fun of her through their group chat. Lee et al. (2016) note the rise in teenage bullying on social media platforms like Kakaotalk, the largest mobile messaging app in Korea (Lee et al. 2016: 268). While Cheonji does not belong to this group chat, she can see and hear that messages are actively being exchanged among the girls as they laugh. Peguero and Hong (2020: 27) argue that 'for the bully, laughter is a form of encouragement, and sometimes just having a captivated student audience could be interpreted as valued and acceptable behavior by the bully. Without such social affirmation, bullies may be far less likely to engage in aggressive or bullying behavior'. As such, Hwa-Yeon can confidently flaunt her power among her peers in this scene.

Cheonji quietly eats the bowl of *jjajangmyeon* (noodles in black bean sauce) given to her. As she is eating, Hwa-Yeon tells her that they will be heading to the *noraebang* (karaoke) afterwards. She asks if Cheonji would like to join. When Cheonji declines by saying she has *hagwon* (private education institution, 'cram schools'), Hwa-Yeon says, 'I asked you to join us. Don't say later that I left you out'. This shows that Hwa-Yeon is fully aware of her intentional and repeated bullying against Cheonji. It is

important to note that *jjajangmyeon* is often the cheapest item on the menu in Korean Chinese restaurants, and this contrasts with the abundance of main dishes that were offered to the other guests at the party. Hwa-Yeon and her parents could have easily given Cheonji more food, including meat dishes like *tangsuyuk* (sweet and sour pork). *Jjajangmyeon* symbolizes the cruel actions against Cheonji and it has been argued that eating *jjajangmyeon* represents Cheonji's desire to protect herself from the relentless bullying from her classmates instigated by Hwa-Yeon (Kim and Kim 2019: 48).

In a revealing sequence of short scenes, Cheonji tells her situation to Hyun-Sook. The montage begins with Cheonji approaching Hyun-Sook, who is busy doing the dishes. 'Mom, I'm sick'. 'Where?' 'My stomach hurts... Can I skip school today?' Without even looking at Cheonji, Hyun-Sook says, 'You can be sick at school. If you can't bear it, just go to the infirmary and lay down'. The scene cuts to Hyun-Sook at her tofu stand where she receives a phone call from Cheonji's homeroom teacher. Teacher Lee tells her, 'There's a girl named Hwa-Yeon and I think she's bullying Cheonji. It would be best to keep them apart'. Their homeroom teacher does not go beyond making this phone call and the burden of solving the problem is tossed to the parents. The next scene takes us to Hyun-Sook visiting Bosingak to talk with Hwa-Yeon's mother. Hwa-Yeon's mother is quick to dismiss the conversation by saying, 'It's between the girls. Let them take care of their own business'. Hyun-Sook answers, 'You should raise your child intelligently, not cunningly'. Hwa-Yeon's mother replies, 'It's your fault for raising a meek child. Please leave, I'm busy'.

In the final scene of this montage, Hyun-Sook, tired from work, asks to order *jjajangmyeon* for dinner. Cheonji vehemently opposes and says, 'I am going to die because of *jjajangmyeon*'. Hyun-Sook replies she will cook ramen instead and does not ask why Cheonji may have those feelings. In other words, Cheonji had been actively telling her mother of the bullying that she had been facing at school; but Hyun-Sook failed to listen. In a scene post-Cheonji's death, Hyun-Sook laments her situation of wanting to eat double portions of banquet noodles when her child is dead. Her colleague says, 'Eat up, your child is looking at you from above'. Noodles—a symbol of longevity in Korean culture—posits an ironic truth for the characters within the film in that it serves as a reminder of the terrifying consequences of the bullying Cheonji endured.

Hwa-Yeon: A 'Transfer Student Killer' Spawned from Money

Throughout the film, Hwa-Yeon uses her economic power to weaponize her schoolmates in bullying Cheonji. Han et al. (2019: 1717) explain that Korean bullying must be understood in the context of Korea's collectivist culture where (1) victims are often publicly identified within their social groups leading to isolation, segregation,

and stigmatization even if they change grades or schools, (2) the structure of secondary school contributes to the perpetuation of victimization as students usually stay in the same classroom for all their classes, and (3) the low tolerance for difference and diversity among Korean adolescents means that students who ‘disrupt’ by being ‘different’ are targeted for peer victimization. Cheonji’s situation is comparable: she is petite, especially compared to Hwa-Yeon; she has been bullied since elementary school, with the level of violence increasing each year; she is marked as ‘different’ due to her seemingly timid and reclusive personality, her academic excellence, and the fact her father passed away.

In one of the most revealing scenes within the film, Hwa-Yeon is confronted by her classmates after Cheonji’s death. Mira exposes that when she moved to the neighborhood in fifth grade, she was warned that Hwa-Yeon is ‘a transfer student killer’ and that she should keep her distance if she did not want to ‘end up like Cheonji’. In the heat of their argument, Mira stands up and strikes a textbook down on Hwa-Yeon’s head.

Mira: Cheonji never knew how to fight back like this. You thought you could eat her up. How could you not get tired and endlessly bully her? I would have died by suicide as well.

Hwa-Yeon: Gwak Mira, you are funny. Why act a hero now? I was the only person who played with her till the end.

Mira: Yes, I didn’t play with Cheonji. But I never cunningly bullied her. You have no conscience. Cheonji is honestly someone who was hard to get close to. You... Do you know what your nickname is? Wallet. Your nickname is ‘Wallet’. A free wallet. You buy food for everyone. You pay for *noraebang*. You get everyone’s popcorn at the movie theater.

Hwa-Yeon: No one said a single word when Cheonji was alive. Now I’m the bad bitch? I’m going to tell Manji that Cheonji was an *euntta*. I have evidence of everyone in the group chat at my birthday. You are all accomplices.

In the film, Cheonji is labeled an ‘euntta’, which is an abbreviated word for ‘eungeunhi ttadollim’. *Eungeunhi* is Korean for slightly or covertly, while *ttadollim* means bullying. *Euntta* is comparable to *wangtta*, which is a form of extreme bullying including ‘overt peer exclusion’. Unlike Park Miso, a classmate who is cast as an ‘outsider’ in a direct manner, Cheonji is known as an *euntta* and bullied in more cunning ways. As Migliaccio and Raskauskas (2016: 32) explains, ‘bullying in collectivist cultures tend to focus more on maintaining the group status quo, utilizing more relational forms

of aggression such as rumor spreading about the individual or their family or social isolation. One hallmark of bullying in collectivist cultures is that they tend to have more bullies than victims ... It is not uncommon for an entire classroom of students to single out and collectively bully 2–4 individuals within the same class'. In Cheonji's classroom, both Cheonji and Miso are singled out but bullied in different manners. Miso is depicted as being completely unbothered by the fact that she is cast as an 'outsider' and consequently does not 'suffer' like Cheonji. Hwa-Yeon calling her peers as 'accomplices' emphasizes how '[r]einforcing bystanders are students who affirm or encourage the bully socially through laughing, making emboldening comments, or serving as an approving audience' (Peguero and Hong 2020: 27), as exemplified by their behavior at the birthday party.

Hwa-Yeon perceives her actions towards Cheonji as a 'discreet yet interesting play' rather than as emotional abuse or bullying (Jang 2016: 165). In this way, Hwa-Yeon's long history of bullying serves as a 'play' precipitated by envy, jealousy, and competition between her and her classmates (Jang 2016: 165). The film demonstrates the dire consequences of these actions taken by the students: Why did Cheonji die? And how did Hwa-Yeon become a monster? Hwa-Yeon's situation is further complicated as she becomes the next target of rumors and contempt from her classmates in the wake of Cheonji's death. Mira physically striking Hwa-Yeon on the head begins another cycle of bullying inside the classroom. When Mira points out that their classmates were only taking advantage of Hwa-Yeon as a 'free wallet', the peers instantly take sides with Mira, who had largely been a bystander until then. With this turn, Hwa-Yeon's situation resembles that of Cheonji's.

After losing her power, Hwa-Yeon seeks help from her parents. Hwa-Yeon asks her mother if it would be okay to miss school. Her mother begins scolding her, 'Cheonji, I heard she died? Before you started middle school, I received a phone call from the *hagwon* saying that they couldn't take you any longer. You were bullying others too much. *Hagwon* is a business. When a business refuses to take someone who pays each month, you know that something is serious'. Hwa-Yeon retorts, 'Why do you always take sides with other people? Aren't I your daughter?' Her mother replies, 'How can I take sides with someone who stabs another person's heart, even if she's my own daughter?' Their conversation ends here, and there is no attempt to remedy the situation despite knowing that a deep problem exists. Hwa-Yeon's mother—through Hyun-Sook's visit as well as the phone call from the *hagwon*—knew that her daughter was a bully both inside and outside the school. Yet, she chose not to intervene and make necessary amends. Instead, she used the excuse of being 'too busy' to look after her only child. Throughout the film, Hwa-Yeon's parents are depicted as being preoccupied with the increasing competition from the new restaurants opening in

town and consequently leaving Hwa-Yeon unattended. As a compensation for their neglect, they allow Hwa-Yeon to spend money as she wishes, including being the 'free wallet' for her classmates.

Mira and Miran: Another Reflection of Friendship and Sisterhood

Throughout the film, Mira is shown as the only classmate who had the potential for a true friendship with Cheonji. Cheonji describes Mira as 'the most well-rounded' in their classroom, meaning Mira does not have trouble with anyone. In the film's English subtitles, Mira is called 'Miss Congeniality'. Mira, however, says this is because 'there is nothing to envy about her'. Mira describes herself as 'ugly, bad at studying, and extremely poor'. These self-descriptions capture what is most valued at school by the students: being pretty, being academically successful, and being wealthy. One day, Mira sees her father chasing after Cheonji's mother. Sensing that it may be a romantic relationship, Mira turns sour on Cheonji. After this encounter, Mira positions herself as a complete bystander in the bullying against Cheonji. This sudden distance, in fact, enhances the loneliness and isolation that is experienced by Cheonji. For example, studies have found that affective empathy reduces bullying among Korean female middle school students (You et al. 2015).

Miran is Mira's older sister as well as a close friend and classmate of Manji. Their mother passed away after having been sick for a long time. It is inferred that their father did not take care of their mother during her illness and that he had extra-marital affairs by telling women that his wife had died even when she was alive. Their father is abusive and is rarely home. In their father's absence and their mother's illness, Miran takes care of Mira. The two sisters' relationship acts as a mirror to that of Cheonji and Manji. For example, Manji is triggered when she sees Miran's attentive kindness to Mira. Unlike Manji, Miran is a protective older sister who cooks and cares for her younger sister just like a doting mother.

After seeing Mira and Miran, Manji is reminded of her conversation with Cheonji. Using a flashback scene, the audiences are shown the two sisters in bed. Cheonji begins the conversation, 'There's a girl in our class named Park Miso and she's bullied. I don't know why she's being bullied'. Manji, who is laying with her back towards Cheonji, replies, 'There's always a reason for being bullied'. Cheonji continues, '*Eonni* [older sister], do you have friends who are only nice in front of you but talk behind your back?' 'Don't be friends with those people'. 'What if they are the only friends you can make?' 'If that's the case, just be alone'. 'Then who do I play with?' Manji realizes too late that this conversation was a call for help. This forces her to face the truth that it is not only Hwa-Yeon's bullying, but also her own neglect that contributed to Cheonji's decision.

Cheonji's Resistance to Bullying

Moments of resistance against bullying become most amplified in the scene where Cheonji gives a class presentation on the dangers of prejudice. Cheonji concludes her presentation with a bold statement and question, 'Crude words can kill people. Are you a murderer in the making?' Hwa-Yeon smirks and says, 'Your presentation was interesting. But isn't "potential murderer" too extreme?' Cheonji replies, 'I should have said "confirmed murderer" instead'. Seeing Cheonji becoming vocal, Hwa-Yeon quickly responds by having Cheonji sign a 'Best Friend Memorandum'. In this memorandum, it states that Cheonji will give Hwa-Yeon an MP3 player and that Hwa-Yeon will give Cheonji a digital camera as a token of their friendship. In essence, this memorandum functions as an alibi for Hwa-Yeon, who perhaps was anticipating Cheonji's death. Once Cheonji dies, Hwa-Yeon rips up the memorandum and flushes the 'evidence' of her bullying down the toilet.

Mira tells Cheonji that her presentation is futile. Cheonji replies, 'You and Hwa-Yeon, you both think that the only way to make friends is by bullying someone. Try it with all your might. I won't budge an inch'. Mira says, 'I'm different from Hwa-Yeon. I have a reason. Hwa-Yeon? She'll only come to her senses after someone dies'. This conversation is the ultimate blow for Cheonji. In this way, Mira's verbal attack against Cheonji functions as an 'alignment with murder' (Jang 2016: 169). Mira, who was once Cheonji's ally and mediator against Hwa-Yeon's bullying, ultimately ends up providing the decisive words for Cheonji to prepare her own death (Kim and Kim 2019: 51). Consequently, Mira is the only character that does not get a sense of 'closure'. By the end of the film, Hwa-Yeon receives forgiveness from Manji and Hwa-Yeon repents by placing a digital camera inside Cheonji's locker at school.

Another act of resistance demonstrated by Cheonji is the act of studying. One 'weakness' that Hwa-Yeon holds—despite her dominance in physicality and socioeconomic status—is that she is not academically gifted. Cheonji, on the other hand, is skilled at her studies. Cheonji knows this and avoids studying in front of Hwa-Yeon as this may further exacerbate envy. She chooses to study alone in the municipal library outside of school. It is important to note that the film does not dwell too much on academic success and its ramifications in Korea. There is no mention of class rankings or depictions of *hagwon*. It is well known that the dependence on *hagwon* in Korean education poses a considerable economic burden on families. For Mira and Miran, their family's economically abject state not only impacts their access to *hagwon*, but also their path after graduation including employment for Miran.

One scene that highlights the importance of studying takes place at the Aram Municipal Library. In a conversation with Sangbak, Cheonji professes that she does

not like to study. Yet, she studies hard because ‘people only trust studious students and one’s words will evaporate into thin air if one does not study well’. Sangbak is a young male adult that Cheonji befriends at the library. Coincidentally, he lives in the unit next door to Manji and Hyun-Sook when they move to Chowon Apartment. Within Korean society, he is an ‘outsider’ symbolized by his long hair, which he grows out to cover the scars across his neck and body. Within the film, Sangbak is positioned as the unconventional student. He dropped out of high school after being bullied for his burns, which were from a fire at his home. He is currently studying alone to take the civil servant exams. Sangbak’s character is important in that, although he ‘left’ school because of the marginalization he faced, he is planning to return to the mainstream society as a civil servant, which is one of the most coveted jobs in Korea due to its stability. As the only male character within the film, he understands Cheonji through his own experiences of being bullied. Furthermore, he is the only character that makes an effort to attentively listen to Cheonji.

In another scene with Sangbak, he finds Cheonji reading a book called ‘Overcoming Depression’. Sangbak senses something is wrong and asks Cheonji. She replies, ‘There is someone in my class who might be going through depression. I want to write down the list of symptoms for depression. If they act the opposite, it won’t look like depression’. Sangbak asks, ‘Why do they have to do that?’ Cheonji answers, ‘If it’s depression, all the friends will leave because they don’t like it. That’s why you have to hide it’. Cheonji’s depression is not unique in that according to the 2007 Annual Survey of Youth Health Behaviors conducted by the Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention, out of 18,424 Korean female middle school students, 43.8% showed depression (Park et al. 2010: 19). In the case of Korean female students, depression appeared 1.83 times higher for those living with single parents than both parents (Park et al. 2010: 27). Despite Sangbak’s questioning of ‘Why must one hide depression?’, this is not sufficient to prevent Cheonji’s death. In other words, the film suggests that Sangbak—as a non-family member and non-classmate—ultimately does not have the necessary influence to change Cheonji’s decision. In other words, the film pushes the central locale needing change to be the home and the school.

Exploring Space, Place, and the Absence of Adults

Min-Ah Jeong (2015) notes that from the early 2010s, the mainstream Korean film industry became reluctant to make teenage films. One of the biggest reasons is that teenagers do not watch these films as they perceive them as untruthful in representing their worlds (Jeong 2015). Nonetheless, ‘the school, a place overlooked by mainstream commercial films, has been rediscovered as a place intensively inhabiting various

problems of our society and adopted as a major subject matter in many independent films' (Jeong 2015: 605). The library contrasts the limited spaces in Korean teenage films described by Jeong (2015), including the school as a space of violence and the home as a space of impoverished single parenthood.

While the spaces of the schools and homes work to visualize the violence and threat that teenagers face (Jeong 2015: 617), the library, shrouded by an abundance of lush green trees, offers a place of solace and safety for Cheonji. It is also at the Aram Municipal Library where Manji finds out the truth about Cheonji's depression from bullying. When Manji comes across Cheonji's library card, she uses it to see the list of books that Cheonji had checked out. The list is heavily dominated by books on depression, and Manji realizes how indifferent she had been to Cheonji. At the library, Manji also runs into Sangbak, who shares what he knew of Cheonji. Manji gets upset that Cheonji spoke so truthfully to a 'stranger'. He comforts Manji by saying, 'Sometimes in life, people open up to strangers more than their family. Don't beat yourself up. Families last a lifetime because they don't know the details'.

In recent Korean teenage films, students from lower-class families have been depicted as becoming more susceptible targets for bullying in school (Jeong 2015). The student-on-student violence is consequently followed by death, and these deaths are treated as an 'incident' or a 'scandal' at school (Jeong 2015: 612). The school creates a 'cartel' or 'collusion' with violence as a means of maintaining the system; anyone who tries to expose this dies (Jeong 2015: 612). In this vein, Jeong (2015) argues that the role of adults within teenage films has diminished significantly in the last decade. In previous decades, adults—either parents or teachers—played a key role in the unfolding of the plot. But this has shifted to the portrayal of parents as either selfish adults who are only interested in their child or as complete bystanders who are completely oblivious to the problems their child faces at school (Jeong 2015).

The parents in *Thread of Lies* fall in the latter category (see Kim's 2017 study on Korean parents' experiences five to seven years after their child's death by suicide). Teachers, similarly, are disinterested in students and only take action after the violence has occurred (Jeong 2015). In *Thread of Lies*, although the homeroom teacher knew of the bullying against Cheonji, she did not go beyond calling Cheonji's mother (see Song, Lee, and Park's 2018 study on individual and environmental factors that make teachers either passive or active interveners against bullying). Even this conversation is revealed through a phone call and not through an in-person face-to-face meeting. It is implied through Manji and Miran's conversation that Cheonji's homeroom teacher is also inexperienced and does not know how to solve problems including trouble between students. Hyun-Sook visits the school only after Cheonji has passed.

Conclusion: Unraveling the Fantasy and Reality of Students in South Korea

The second floor of Aram Municipal Library is where Cheonji places the final letter. The closing scenes of the film reveal a young girl with a red scarf standing in front of the bookshelves. Behind the books on depression lies the fifth thread. The content of the letter is revealed through Cheonji's narration: 'You are doing well, right? After all that has passed, it was really nothing, right? Thank you for surviving'. Chung (2021) argues that through Cheonji's narration, the audiences complete their own mourning for the main character. The chances of Manji or any of the other characters finding this final thread are unlikely; however, it is probable that the note will be discovered by someone in a similar situation as Cheonji. The note can also be interpreted as a letter that Cheonji wrote to herself.

In many cultures, including Korea, the red thread represents an inescapable and connected 'fate'. In the film, it serves as a haunting reminder of how people's relationships are tangled together. Kim (2015: 64) writes that Cheonji's five letters function as a 'communicative death' which paradoxically reveals that Cheonji wanted to live more than anyone else. Jang (2016) argues that the red yarn, by shedding its previously woven form and assuming a changeable state, functions as a symbol of the dual emotions that Cheonji had between love-hate and forgiveness. While Cheonji personally hands each of the letters to the recipients, no one can see or know of her truth until they have bothered to unravel the yarn after her death.

As the film ends, the final scenes capture Manji meeting her mother. They link their arms together in a tender and loving way, something that was not seen previously in the film. Manji tells her mother that Cheonji visited her in a dream. In this dream sequence, Cheonji is 'saved' by her mother and sister at the moment of her suicide and she lives. In essence, while the film begins with death, it ends with a resilient hope for life. But this is a fantasy in that this dream is reserved only for 'those who are left behind'. While not to suggest that films should provide clear solutions or remedies, *Thread of Lies* does not solve or eradicate the cyclical nature of teenage bullying, the complex realities of violence that students face at school, and the potential neglect experienced by students within their families. To prevent teenage bullying, violence, and neglect of students, what is needed is not hindsight action like installing more CCTVs at school. In fact, Hyun-Sook comments on how useless this is when she is talking with a colleague at work. What is urgently needed is an empathetic, mindful, and collective action—at home, at school, and in larger society—to face the 'elegant lies' and to ask ourselves, 'Are you a potential murderer?'

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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