Korea: King the Land Is a Netflix Hit About Love and Labor Rights

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Can romance's fantasy of wealth survive the labor rights movement? Let's ask, uh, this frothy K-drama.

As the WGA/SAG-AFTRA double strike wears on, the constant flow of brand-new, original Hollywood content seems headed toward a dripping, dribbling end. With many shows and movies delayed, viewers are already feeling the lack, which in turn means finding other stuff to watch. On Netflix, international content, especially popular Spanish telenovelas and Korean dramas, have long been part of the platform's core offerings.

Currently, Korean rom-dramedy *King the Land* has spent eight straight weeks in Netflix's global Top 10. The show began airing on Korean TV in June, after which Netflix picked it up and released its 16 episodes weekly over the past two months. In that time, it's racked up a gargantuan 66 million views on the streamer. That puts it in a tier with major US hits like *Lincoln Lawyer* and *The Witcher*.

On the surface, the show, about a cute hotel concierge (Im Yoon-ah, a.k.a. veteran K-pop star Yoona of Girls' Generation) who becomes entangled with the hotel magnate's rebellious son (Lee Jun-ho, a.k.a. veteran K-pop star Junho of 2PM), seems somewhat standard within the pantheon of similar rags-to-riches, hate-to-love Korean rom-coms in its class. But *King the Land*'s low-stakes vibes are impeccable, replete with soft lighting, a lush K-pop score, likable characters, and infectious chemistry between Yoona and Junho as they navigate their prickly relationship toward a happy ending.

While its tropes may be pedestrian, however, *King the Land* also features a streak of acknowledgment about their dark underside — in this case, the way rom-com's longstanding fantasy of wealth, power, and privilege rests on a romanticization of labor exploitation and class struggle. It's the kind of Korean drama we're seeing more of in a post-*Parasite*, post-*Squid Game* landscape. It's also the kind of show that occupies an interesting place in a world where unions, workers' rights, and labor exploitation are getting more and more attention. For viewers who find themselves watching this particular delightful K-drama as a result of the writer's strike, the irony will be what's really rich.

Note: *This story contains a major spoiler for* King the Land *season one*.

Romance has always been built around a fantasy of benevolent wealth — but in the typical K-drama, that's complicated

In so many ways, romance is a genre built on fantasies of attainment. The characters in romance novels and rom-coms pursue true love, and once they attain true love, they often find a cornucopia of rewards in addition: more money, a found and/or new nuclear family, their dream career, more adventure or stability (depending on which one they need more), and above all a more full and meaningful life.

Romantic love in this genre becomes a form of power — and actual power and privilege become romanticized. Power in a romance leads to protection, security, and abundance, not just for the person who has it, but for their community.

The ur-version of this trope is the classic Cinderella story: A poor character, often one with a dysfunctional family dynamic, meets a very rich character, and they fall in love. The course of this love elevates the Cinderella figure, ultimately giving them a way out of their former unhappy life and a new identity as a wealthy, enfranchised member of society.

In this basic scenario and in countless variants, wealth, power, and privilege are all inherently benevolent: Marriage further stabilizes the rich character's wealth and power, which benefits the community at large. The typical romance sees the rich character learning, through the evolution of falling in love, to become more worthy of their wealth so they can use it even more wisely.

One rom-com subgenre sets this trope within the workplace. The rich character is usually the owner of, or heir to, a huge corporation, so their character growth directly impacts all their employees. In a string of films released just before the end of the aughts — *Two Weeks Notice*, *Maid in Manhattan*, and *The Proposal* — the primary conflict that has to be resolved is a question of power: Will the cocky rich boss remain cocky, or will they learn to humble themselves and become a better person and a better manager and caretaker of their corporate environment?

Movies like these took the worldview that the boss's maturity and the health of the corporation were inherently linked. But these themes wouldn't outlast the era of Occupy Wall Street. As anti-capitalist sentiment increased in the US, many Hollywood rom-coms (if not all; Hallmark still loves a good Cinderella story) quickly moved away from this power dynamic toward ones in which either both parties were roughly economic equals, à la *Set It Up*, or else the richer character ultimately proved willing to walk away from their wealth, à la *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Korean dramas, however, have fully embraced the office romance trope. Since the typical K-drama is serialized, their plots tend to be more dizzyingly indulgent than American rom-com films, replete with classic romance tropes and cliches. That also means there are countless K-dramas of workplace romance involving a very rich character and a very average working-class character, with the latter usually educating and humbling the former. *King the Land* is no exception: Its very light plot hinges around the spoiled rich kid Gu Won (Lee) learning to pay more attention to his employees and care about their well-being.

But *King the Land* is also reflective of a South Korean entertainment landscape that frequently nods to South Korea's own economic issues. Shows like *Squid Game* present characters whose personal financial struggles mirror the nation's own collapse and slow recovery during the 1997 Asian financial crisis. So, while Korea still clings to capitalism and generally remains staunchly anti-communist, Korean drama is typically self-aware enough about capitalism's dark underbelly that it won't straightforwardly present a romantic fantasy of a benevolent corporate overlord without some effort at acknowledging that things aren't that simple.

Getting Gu Won to care more about his employees and their struggles isn't a huge stretch; it quickly becomes clear that his brusque exterior masks a soft heart, and that while he may have been groomed for corporate life, he distrusts the empire his father has built. That empire, the King corporation, is a vast machine that's built to depersonalize the entire experience of work. So Gu Won finds himself trying to inject some humanity back into the flagship King Hotel; he seeks out older employees to learn their stories, goes on a road trip with his new girlfriend and her working-class friends (who all work for various King subsidiaries), and improves working conditions where he can.

Ironically, he falls for the bright-eyed Cheon Sa-rang (Im) even though she's everything he is wary of: a perfectly professional concierge whose winning smile and ambitious work ethic make her a favorite with guests. To Gu Won, these are the fake and insincere trappings of a false corporate facade. Sa-rang, however, has wanted to work at King hotels since she was a child; she sees the luxury and service it provides as a true form of escape from daily life, and initially sees the work she does as a kind of calling. For her dedication, she's rewarded with getting to work at the highest concierge level — the King the Land VVIP lounge, literally on the top floor.

The idea that a customer service job could be a calling is in itself a fantasy of capitalism, but *King the Land* makes clear that the reality is much drearier. Sa-rang and her two best friends are consistently exploited, bullied, or harassed by their customers, managers, and co-workers, with nary an HR department in sight. When Sa-rang nearly dies because she's sent on a physically harrowing work trip, the company higher-ups don't want to waste the money it would take to save her life. The corporate drudgery and pressure to increase their work performance is relentless. When Sa-rang finally reaches the pinnacle of her profession, she finds the work she's tasked with to be utterly dehumanizing: She's ordered to don a maid's uniform and perform the role of silent servant to the Gu family.

At this point, you might be thinking: 1) None of this sounds very romantic, and 2) this hotel could sure use a union!

King the Land addresses the first problem with copious amounts of swoony scenes of the couple being cute and endless flashback montages to the swoony romantic scenes you just watched. There are drone fireworks and carnival rides, lots of banter, and a hot make-out session under an alarm sprinkler system. It's charming.

The second problem, though, is much trickier.

Why we can't have nice things in K-dramas — and by "nice things," we mean "unions"

In South Korea, unions are largely socially stigmatized and scrutinized heavily by the government. Just 14 percent of the workforce is unionized, and the only legally authorized unions are split into two large trade union networks, the more liberal of which, KTCU, is frequently targeted by the government.

The last major strike by a workforce was the 2009 strike of workers at auto manufacturer Ssangyong, which was referenced in *Squid Game*. This strike led to violent crackdowns on the strikers, the arrests of hundreds, and thousands of workers losing or leaving their jobs, with many later dying from suicide or other related health conditions brought on by the strike. Ssangyong's union, as well as the original organizers, are still dealing with the fallout nearly 15 years later. Today, unions are relegated to little more than salary and wage negotiations; broader forms of political organizing via labor unions are illegal, and the government's increasing crackdown on what many union members see as legal union activity led one chapter leader to carry out a protest suicide in May.

It’s within this agitated sociopolitical context that *King the Land* lobs one of its only real twists. Throughout the series, Gu Won has been searching for information about what happened to his mother, who used to work for King Hotel, married his father while on staff, but was then abruptly banished and sent away for unknown reasons, after which nearly all records of her history with the hotel were erased. In its penultimate episode, she shows up abruptly for a confrontation and tentative reconciliation with father and son. During their first meeting, Gu Won’s father casually drops this bombshell: His mother was kicked out of the family, not for any of the usual K-drama scandals, but for trying to start a union.

To the Gu family, this was an act of sheer betrayal, one that had to be punished by separating Gu Won’s mother from her son and then all but erasing her identity. The series’ emphasis on scrubbing her history from the hotel records was never about personal drama, but rather about making it harder for her to serve as an inspirational figure to any labor organizers that might come after her.

Gu Won’s mother refuses to apologize for her union activity back then. Instead, she castigates Gu Won’s father for abandoning the principles and beliefs they once both believed in. From the context of Gu Won’s journey toward responsible stewardship, we understand that these values are probably about workers’ rights and freedoms, about valuing people above profits.

But while she may be steadfast and not at all apologetic, the show is not nearly so bold. This revelation, coming so late in the season, has little effect on the overall plot, and once it gets brought up, it’s simply never dealt with again. We don’t learn what new socialist rabble-rousing Gu Won’s mom has done in the intervening decades; we don’t even learn what she’s done with her life since, whether she’s remarried, or even what her career is. Learning about the union doesn’t inspire Gu Won and Sa-rang, nor anyone else, to start a trade union or begin a new era of labor reformation at the King Hotel. Instead, the show strongly implies that the problems of the workforce can be fixed with things like better coffee and massage chairs in the break rooms.

The relationship of this show, with its 66 million Netflix views, to the conversation around labor, especially arriving during the time of the Hollywood strike, is something of a paradox. Korean dramas, now well-known for attracting global audiences, don’t exist in a vacuum; in the age of massive international Netflix audiences, they have to appeal to a huge variety of cultures outside of their own. (A case in point: The show received considerable backlash for one troubling stereotype of an Arab prince, for which it has since apologized.) Yet, to be successful, most K-dramas also have to reflect the socially conservative cultural norms of their home country. As a K-drama, *King the Land* doesn’t bother to suggest that the answer to the many problems its workforce faces might be to unionize; instead, as a thematic compromise, it does the bare minimum: It acknowledges that unions could potentially exist, then completely sidesteps the possibility of them existing here. So, while international shows like *King the Land* are gaining more attention and importance during the strike, *King the Land* itself inadvertently becomes a subtle commentary on the strike.

It’s also worth noting that as the strike carries on in the US, Netflix is currently refusing to meet with the Korea Broadcasting Actor’s Union, South Korea’s version of SAG, to discuss the platform’s refusal to pay its Korean actors residuals.

King the Land essentially plays out in a world where a union is virtually unthinkable. That means the onus of the romance plot — because this is still about romance — is that true love has to make the corporate overlord better because his benevolence is the only thing the workers can really depend on if they want better livelihoods.

At one point in the series, Gu Won surprises the workforce by handing out cash bonuses. When his astonished assistant asks him why he didn’t just go with the usual minor perks, he replies that when

he conducted a survey of the workers, most of them said they wanted money. So he gave them what they wanted.

Listening to workers, it seems, can be surprisingly effective. If only there were some structured way to make their voices heard.

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