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Seung Min Hong
University of Iowa, zshong1997@gmail.com

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Do Ga Ni (The Crucible)

Abstract

This is a film review of *Do Ga Ni (The Crucible)* (2011) directed by Dong Hyeuk Hwang.

After its theatrical release in Korea on September 22, 2011, the film *Do Ga Ni* has proven to be perhaps one of the most influential films in the history of Korean cinema. The movie has been all over the news media, and it has caused the government to strengthen child sexual abuse laws. *Do Ga Ni* is based upon a novel of the same title which is based upon a true story about incidents of child rape in a school for the deaf.

The plot of the film can be briefly summarized as follows: In-Ho is a new teacher at a school for the deaf in a rural area. Shortly after starting his new career, however, he senses that something is not right in the school. Some of the students seem to be defensive, and In-Ho also hears a girl screaming in the bathroom. His colleagues try to convince him that everything is fine, but In-Ho eventually finds out that two girls and one boy in the school have been severely abused and raped. With the help of Ye-Jin, an employee at a human rights center, In-Ho tries to bring those who have committed sexual assault – the principal, his twin brother, and another male teacher – to justice. During the process, In-Ho and Ye-Jin face many difficulties: for instance In-Ho is fired and suffers financial difficulties. In the end, although the court rules that the defendants are guilty, all of the three receive extremely light penalties for the crime they have committed. It turns out that the parents of two of the child victims were mentally

disadvantaged and were led by the defendants' acquaintances to appeal for a reduced sentence.

Another factor that played a role in the court decision was the infamous practice of letting a lawyer who served as a judge before retirement win his or her first case. To make matters worse, the prosecutor who fought for In-Ho and the children was later lured by the lawyer of the defendants to work for his law firm.

As can be seen from the plot summary, the major purpose of this film is clearly to inform the audiences of this tragic incident of child sexual abuse and to question whether the court decision was just. Indeed, the social context for this film is just right: the Korean news media are increasingly covering stories about child sexual abuse. There have been cases which enraged almost the entire population in the Korean peninsula (the most infamous one being the "Doo-Soon Cho case"). After the theatrical release of the movie and the news media's repeated coverage of it, the school is now scheduled to close down, and the government officials are in the process of enforcing stricter laws against child and handicap sex abuse. There are, however, those who critique the excessively emotional appeal of the film and claim that such an approach will not make much of a difference in reality.

Beside the main focus of abuse in *Do Ga Ni*, there are other issues that the film is trying to raise, such as the old practice of “granting the privileges of one’s former post” in legal courts. However, another issue that is raised in the movie that, I believe, is too conspicuous to miss yet NOT being covered by the news media is how the film contemptuously represents Christianity. Christian images are strewn throughout the film. Early in the movie when In-Ho walks into the principal’s office, the audience can see a cross on the wall. Also seen in the center of the screen is a big frame with the bible verse from 3 John 1:2. Crosses are on both sides of the walls facing each other in the teachers/staff room as well as in the classrooms. There is also a cross at the top center of the school’s insignia.

How *Do Ga Ni* disapprovingly depicts Christianity becomes clearer when one considers the rhetoric of the characters that bring up the Christian faith. When Ye-Jin talks to a police officer who tries to defend the principal, the police officer says “He is an elder at his church. He serves Jesus!” When the principal is arrested by the police, he also says “I am an elder at my church! I serve Jesus!” and a female staff, who later turns out to be the principal’s secret lover, says “the Lord will protect you!” Later in the movie, the members from the principal’s church gather in front of the court and protest against the legal process, claiming that their elder cannot have committed such a crime because he “serves Jesus.” They also sing the hymn “Nearer My

God to Thee.” As In-Ho, Ye-Jin, and the children walk through the crowd to get into the court, Ye-Jin says “It’s a good thing that these kids cannot hear them.” During the trial when the principal is testifying, he says that he was trying to find out why God has allowed this suffering to occur to him. Outside the court room, right after the church members end their prayer “in Jesus’ name, Amen,” the principal’s wife comes to In-Ho and spits on him, slaps him on the face, and shouts to Ye-Jin “you satanic bitch!” When Ye-Jin visits the house of one of the victims, she sees the principal’s secret lover walking out of the door telling her that the agreement between the defendants and the child’s guardian is already a “done deal.” She adds the sarcastic remark “You know, sometimes even I think that God is too harsh.” Towards the end of the movie, after the court’s decision, the camera captures the church members praying and singing hymns.

Some recent Korean films have taken the wise approach of avoiding hasty religious generalizations by bringing in characters that can show the positive side of the group against which the film is raising questions. For example, in *The Host* (2006), while the group in question is the U.S. military in Korea, an American soldier courageously fights the monster along with the main character early in the movie. In *Possessed* (2009), the fanatic Christian lady who is the mother of her possessed daughter is countered by a pastor who warns her against

irresponsible interpretations of the bible. In *Do Ga Ni*, however, there is no such attempt.

What is more surprising is that there is in fact a pastor in the original novel who fights against the injustice alongside the main characters, but he is absent in the film!

It is tragic that *Do Ga Ni* is based upon a true story. It is fortunate, though, that the film has been influential enough to make the case known, albeit too late to turn things back, and has led the authorities to at least try and make a difference. Nonetheless, how the film negatively depicts Christianity deserves scrutiny. To all those critical viewers who can watch movies in Korean, I strongly recommend this film. Hopefully, it will be available in English and other languages soon.