

Vietnam's 'Squid Game' comedies entertain, but to what end?

Copycat fad shows how a single hit cultural product can shape public imagination



A screenshot of "Squid Game Parody," a Vietnamese show on YouTube that satirizes the Netflix original.

Lien Hoang

I heard a commentator say the world is split into two: those who've seen "Squid Game" and those who haven't. Here in Vietnam, many have fallen into the grip of the South Korean show's dystopian tentacles -- including two creators of "Squid Game" parodies on YouTube channels that have adapted the hallmarks of the megahit series: the uniforms, the games, the income inequality.

The remakes by Thien An and Vo Tan Phat have drawn as many as 10 million views an episode, as well as some criticisms that they copied other creators. But who gets the credit here is less interesting than the question of what these "Squid Game" parodies and other stories bring to the table.

Screen media should entertain, or show us something about ourselves -- or both.

You'd be forgiven for the impulse to run away screaming at the prospect of yet another "Squid Game" regurgitation. The decked-out Halloween houses, the protestors dressed in red jumpsuits, the real-life games. Does the squid's reach have no limit?

The Vietnamese shows take the mania a step further, though, dedicating weeks and tens of thousands of dollars to production. In considering their value I thought of Martin Scorsese. The director once said of Marvel movies that they seem "closer to theme parks than they are to movies as I've known and loved them throughout my life." After all the content we streamed in lockdown, it's easy to dismiss so much entertainment as just that: entertainment.

But that is to forget the power of media -- maybe its greatest power -- to shape our views of the world in ways both big and trivial, on every conceivable topic.



A grocery store in Ho Chi Minh City taps the "Squid Game" craze, decorating its storefront with a giant doll based on the Korean hit show. (Photo by Lien Hoang)

Stories are our only entree into certain places, people and ideas, for better or worse. We meet Che Guevara in the form of Gael Garcia Bernal in the film "The Motorcycle Diaries." We go to watch "The Code," a TV drama, for some hacker espionage thrills, and walk away with a glimpse of Aboriginal life in the Australian outback. Films like "Tampopo" or "Sorry to Bother You" may be born out of artistic desire to create and connect, but they also become something more, normalizing aspects of female power or labor organizing in subtle ways that lectures and debates cannot.

We get socialized, we accumulate Humean impressions of everything, inspired by the Scottish philosopher David Hume -- romance, office space, mortality, political plots, time traveling -- from cultural products, not least of them screen media.

"Squid Game" is over the top but inventive (except, notably, for the flat ending that explains away the game too easily). It is colorful, smart and exhilarating, with just enough fodder on dire poverty, ethical peril and North Korea for serious thinkers. To my mind, it could have done with less blood and more open street scenes, as most of the intrigue happens in an artificial setting.

But it also offers another break from the Western male hegemony of Hollywood, even if it is funded by the New Hollywood that Netflix represents, and even if it is a reminder of the

meticulously constructed South Korean machine that reliably and profitably pumps out culture for our consumerist pleasure. The machine has become familiar terrain by now: K-pop, K-drama, even KFC (Korean fried chicken).

The Korean series ticks many of the boxes; the Vietnamese re-imaginings ... not so many. Before asking whether it's fair to compare a couple of budget YouTube shows to a Netflix juggernaut, ask if the web series shows us anything worth seeing.



The thumbnail for "Squid Game Parody." Many hope for a cultural product that shapes the world's view of Vietnam, the way "Squid Game" burnished South Korea. (Screenshot from YouTube)

The Vietnamese titles translate as "Rowdy Family" and "Squid Game Parody." They are brimming with camp, slapstick and sounds of flatulence mixed in with Vivaldi. But they do reveal, in addition to a penchant for zany kazoo sound effects, a snapshot of local life, nationalism and some meta humor.

In one scene of "Squid Game Parody," players reach the *dalgona* sugar candy round and expect an easy Korean game. But a dark-hooded game master outwits them, twists the rules and cries with morbid glee: "Hey! You're not the only one who watched the series!"

Amid such references to the Korean show, the Vietnamese comedies attract mixed reactions, with some commenters crying imitation while others indicate they don't mind.

Cases of plagiarism deserve rebuke, but this is not one of them. In fact, some argue that misuse of copyright law has gone too far, that stealing a wallet is not the same as taking a plotline, a melody or other ideas. While "there is clearly no gain to society from plundering other people's physical property, there is clearly a social benefit from the wide dissemination of

intellectual property -- i.e. ideas and their expression," UK-based scholar John Naughton wrote in *The Guardian*.

Critics dismiss "Squid Game Parody" and "Rowdy Family" as cheap knock-offs, but what they really crave is more than just originality. Several wonder when Vietnam will have a smash hit show like South Korea.

That sentiment, that nationalist striving, follows decades of seeing Vietnam's image controlled by others, especially Hollywood. Locals want foreigners to look at Vietnam and associate it with something besides "Full Metal Jacket" -- in the same way that foreigners now look at South Korea and think of Samsung, *soju*, BTS and "Squid Game" -- not the Korean War.

Soft power is not Vietnam's only option, but sometimes a single cultural product is the thing that breaks through and leaves a lasting influence. "Hotel Rwanda" is probably the thing that defined the genocide in the memories of millions of outsiders. The film is to the country as "Interstellar" is to astrophysics -- a defining influence on the popular imagination, the sole entry point for many who will never travel to space nor, for that matter, to Rwanda.

Vietnam's "Squid Game" parodies go for quick laughs and won't leave much of a mark, nor were they meant to, though they serve up some local idiosyncrasies. In "Rowdy Family" we see trash recyclers, card games and women outside in pajamas. At one point a character runs out of phone credit, so another one shows her how to top up with Zalo, a popular Vietnamese app.

On or off screen, this is what I want to see in stories, the peculiarity and particularity of a place and time. Novels like Iran's "Then the Fish Swallowed Him" and Vietnam's "The Mountains Sing" tell stories as compelling for their politics as for their social and physical environments. With books, film, and TV we encounter other realities -- Iranians having sex, Vietnamese napping on motorbikes, dinosaurs, Aristophanes, stoner hijinks -- if not in our own worlds, then in the ones we create.

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