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Transnational Media Flows

The Transnational Properties of Korean and Japanese Romantic Dramas: “*Dae Jang Geum*”, “*Tokyo Love Story*” and others

The very first sentence in Ceeber, Miller, and Tulloch’s “Introduction: What is Genre?” states that “genre simply allows us to organize a good deal of material into smaller categories.” (Ceeber, Miller, & Tulloch, 2008, p. 1). It is further elaborated however that this simple definition of genre is does not accurately depict the complex nature of genre categorization. Amongst the varying definitions of genre given by differing approaches (such as the Aesthetic, Ritual, and Ideological approaches), there is one approach and definition mentioned that is quite interesting, which is that of the cultural approach: “...genres are not lodges in the texts or programmes categorised by particular genres; instead, genres are forged by the cultural processes of categorization itself. Genres are conceptual categories used to link together a number of television programmes, but they also articulate a range of cultural assumptions that become linked to the category beyond the programming itself.” (Ceeber, Miller, & Tulloch, 2008, p. 12) This cultural approach will be implemented in the study of romance drama series.

East Asian dramas, much like the Latin American *telenovelas* and unlike the American soap opera, usually runs for a limited period of time. According to the Tokyo Broadcasting System’s (TBS) program catalog, currently running dramas such as *PINTOKONA*, *Public Affairs Office in the Sky*, *Apoyan* and various other romantic dramas run for 10 episodes, with the first and second episode usually running longer than the rest of the episodes within the series (for example, *PINTOKONA* runs for 130 minutes for the

premiere episode, with the rest of the episodes running the standard 60 minutes for remaining episodes.) Episodes also run during prime time, with new episodes such as *Ando Lloyd-A.I Knows LOVE?* and *Otto no Kanojo* premiering at 9:00 pm, while *Keiji no Manazashi* premieres at 8:00 pm. Korean dramas follow similar suit, although having slightly varied and longer sequence of series lengths: episodes for romantic dramas (*Flower Boys Next Door*, *My Lovely Sam Soon*, and *That Winter, the Wind Blows*) run between 16 to 20 episodes, while currently running general drama episodes on SBS tend to run exactly 70 minutes (*The Inheritors*, *The Mystery Housemaid*, and *Master's Sun*). These dramas occur during late prime time, starting around 10:00 pm throughout the weekday.

These dramas are produced with up to date technology, which allows both South Korea and Japan to create high quality entertainment. An example of this can be seen in South Korea's early entry into Satellite Digital Multimedia Broadcasting and Terrestrial Digital Multimedia Broadcasting in 2005, as well as the implementation of Internet Protocol Television, or IPTV, in 2010 (Song, 2012, p. 354). In Japan, TBS's investment of 10.8 billion Yen "in equipment and facilities during FY2010" (TBS, N.A) shows how funds have also gone towards improving audio and visuals, ensuring high definition broadcasting with high audio quality. The TBS website also mentions the sharing of terrestrial relay stations with NHK, which also brings a huge advantage to TBS when it comes to broadcasting quality since NHK (Japan's public broadcasting system) has recently revealed their development of 8K (Super Hi-Vision) which "makes use of ultra-high definition images consisting of 33 million pixels" (ABU, N.A) this year, at a time when 4K has yet to become to standards in household television sets.

Now that there has been a brief elaboration of the time placement, duration, and technological advances in the production of such programs, there will now be an elaboration on the content of the dramas being studied. Both Korean and Japanese television romance dramas focus primarily (and quite obviously) on the theme of love, but they also strongly center around family ties as well. Here, however, there is distinctiveness between the Korean and Japanese romance dramas. Korean dramas have seen much success in their ability to showcase their distinct traditional Korean cultural norms in their dramas. One of the most widely studied Korean dramas is *Dae Jang Geum* (*Jewel in the Palace*) due to its outstanding transnational success in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and America (amongst Asian-American) audiences. What is interesting is that *Dae Jang Geum* is a romance drama that is also a historical drama, focusing on “the life of Jang Geum, the first female royal physician in the Joseon Dynasty during the reigns of Yeonsangun (1494-1506) and King Jungjong (1506-1544).” (Yu, 2005, p.9).

Its success showcases the transnational appeal of traditional Korean culture, such as the traditional Korean attire (*hanbok*) and hairstyles. The historical colonization of Korea by China can also be seen in the drama as well, for there is a mixture of Chinese cultural elements such as food, medicine, calligraphy, and governing ideologies (Yu, 2005, p. 12), which can also be partly the reason of the dramas transnational success in the Chinese region. Korean dramas with historical backdrops are still quite popular, which can be seen in 2012’s *The Moon that Embraces the Sun* and 2013’s *Gu’s Family Book*. Although there are Korean dramas that showcase modernity, these dramas also showcase strong Confucian values and family ties, bringing forth a hybridity between the modern and the traditional. Japanese dramas however are usually more modern in nature and tend to stray

away from strong Japanese tradition within the context of the film, in order to appear as what Iwabuchi would claim as “odorless”. Japanese films have produced since the late 1980’s what is known to be “trendy dramas” which focuses more on “shifting trends in the economy and Japanese society” which brought forth “hard-edge issues such as teenage violence, child abuse, and the strains of modern family life”. (Zhu, 2008 p.68). Whereas strains of modern family life may be an aspect of a “trendy drama” of Japan, it would most probably be marginalized the strong Confucianist family ties in Korean dramas, which focuses more on a family’s tight bond and strength rather than its strains. It could be said that there is more “Korean-ness” proliferated in Korean dramas, while in Japanese dramas, “Japanese-ness” is not necessarily shown.

This dynamic distinctive in both Japanese and Korean dramas also brings forth a change in the views of gender roles. For the modern “odorless” Japanese drama, there is more leeway for gender roles to deviate from the norm. An example of this can be seen in the Japanese drama *Tokyo Love Story*, which gained massive popularity in Taiwan. According to Iwabuchi, Rika’s (the main female protagonist of the drama) “resolute and independent attitude represent a desirable image of the “modern” or “new age” woman”, with her frank image being showcased in a scene where she “famously exclaims, “Kanchi, let’s have sex!”” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p.143-144). This straightforward and frank nature wouldn’t be seen in most popular Korean dramas. Due to the proliferation of traditional “Korean-ness” in Korean dramas, there are more traditional notions of gender norms and roles based on Confucian philosophy and ethics. These norms can be seen in *Dae Jang Geum*, where the purity of the feminine is explicit and sexual undertones do not exist: “Jang Geum’s love story is classic and subtle. The scenes of her love...consist of infrequent eye

contact, gentle greetings and smiles, occasional conversation, and a short walk. There are no sex scenes, not even a kiss..." This is in stark contrast Rika's strong nature and her willingness to talk about sexuality, for in Korea, the ideology of love and being in love coincides with the concept of purity and innocence.

Of course, not all Korean dramas are based on historical situations. Many Korean dramas are situated in modern day Seoul, showcasing a modern lifestyle and the capitalistic consumerism that comes along with such a way of living. Here, we see the strict binary gender roles of masculinity and femininity blur, with women showcasing stronger "masculine" qualities, and men showcasing softer, more vulnerable "feminine" qualities. This binary institution of gender roles and its shift can be seen in Lin and Tong's "Crossing Boundaries: Male Consumption of Korean TV Dramas and Negotiation of Gender Relations in Modern Day Hong Kong". This blurring however is interestingly asymmetrical. In the study, 15 heterosexual men were analyzed and were asked about their reaction to Korean dramas, and the responses were quite interesting.

While some men believed that it was ok for the male actors to show vulnerability and their "feminine" sides by crying, they had quite a different reaction to Korean women showing strength in the dramas "...male viewers appreciate the particular kind of image of 'strong women' in Korean dramas, in which women's strength is portrayed as in the service of love, and not pose a kind of threat or competition to men."(Lin & Tong, 2007, p.225). Here we see that heterosexual men find that women must be able to retain their feminine qualities while showing their strength in specific situations (ex. loyalty when being in love), while men are still able to retain their masculinity without question while showcasing feminine qualities. This view of gender norms is not only limited to heterosexual males.

While many Taiwanese women find joy in seeing Rika showcase such strong qualities and an openness to topics such as sexuality, they themselves acknowledge that this is not a social norm that can occur in real life. As Iwabuchi has come to note in his interviews with female *Tokyo Love Story* viewers: “On the one hand, they might say, “I have a strong feeling that she is exactly what I want to be,” on the other hand, they might also remark, “I would not be able to become as brave and open as Rika.” (Iwabuchi, 2002, p.144). Although strict gender norms and ideologies seem to be slightly blur depending on the overall theme of the drama (historical vs. modern), one can still see that this is not extremely deviant, and allows men to have much more leeway than women, thus once again supporting the overarching traditional ideology that men are superior to women.

Being a cathartic as well as an escapist mechanism for audience viewers has been a way for both Japanese and Korean romantic dramas to gain popularity within audiences abroad, which has brought forth an emergence of drama fans who are willing to make copies of the drama available to others within their domestic region, both by making it easier to understand (by impeding the language barrier through fan subbing) and by distributing it widely and easily. This is explained in Hu’s “The Power of Circulation: Digital Technologies and the Online Chinese Fans of Japanese TV Drama.” In the article, it states that “...online Chinese fan clubs, the websites for downloads, pirated VCD markets, digital file conversion, and private VCD burning... have linked endless networks for the digitalized circulation and consumption of Japanese TV drama” (Hu, 2005, p.171). The use of the Internet to distribute drama videos has also allowed fellow fans to subtitle Japanese dramas, which “has emerged as a new sub-cultural practice demonstration the spirit of DIY and of precious non-commercial sharing through widespread networking” (Hu, 2005, p.

178). A similar fan community can be seen for Korean dramas, especially in the website viki.com, in which various Korean (and various other) dramas are subtitled by a community of fans. Any viewer of the site can add corrections to the subtitles, fine tuning the translations so the substance may ring true in the foreign language. Viki.com also allows for viewers to annotate notes about various scenes of the drama, allowing a timeline community discussion to occur while the viewer is watching the show. Upon visiting Vicki.com, one could see various Korean dramas translated into more than 20 languages; *Beautiful Man* is translated into 31 languages, *Boys Over Flowers* into 61 languages, and *Madly In Love* in 28 languages. This impressive repertoire of various multilingual subtitles showcases the vast transnational popularity and extremely dedicated and diverse fan base for these Korean romantic dramas. With the use of digital mediums such as Internet, we should then see further reinterpretations of such romance dramas and wider online distributions of drama content further strengthening the popularity of both Korean and Japanese dramas of this sector in not only a transnational but also a global scale.

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