



INTRODUCING KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE

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10 Netflix and Korean Drama

Cultural Resonance, Affect and Consumption in Asia

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This chapter explains the popularity of Korean television/online dramas, from *Boys Over Flowers* to *Squid Game* under a broad framework of Asian cultural resonance. South Korea (hereafter Korea) has shared similar social conditions with many Asian cities/countries, such as rising living costs and high social inequality. The social conditions have become the backdrop of television dramas in that class differences are precisely the obstacles to romance, marriage and achievement. For the past 20 years, Korean dramas have constructed affective and imaginative solutions to these social problems, while the recent co-productions of Korean dramas (e.g. *Squid Game*) between the local productions and Netflix have chosen to foreground such power relations and inequality as the main narratives, thereby interrupting the long-existing harmonious discourse framed by Korean's own productions.

Squid Game is an online drama co-produced by a local Korean producer and the global media subscription streaming giant Netflix. Released worldwide in September 2021, this dystopian story about debts, class stratification and a bloody survival game swiftly swept around the world and became the most watched drama in history on the Netflix platform (Tassi 2022). In 2022, *Squid Game* achieved a milestone success at the Emmy Awards, with 14 nominations and an award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series (Young 2022). Based on these achievements, *Squid Game* signals the new history of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), which has attracted researchers' attention to understanding the changes in Korean TV dramas under the influence of the global media power Netflix (Jagan and Kalyan 2022; Jin 2022; Young 2022). In Asia, the series has also had a notable impact on the media landscape. Statistically speaking, *Squid Game* has led to notable contributions to the number of Asian subscribers of Netflix. In the first quarter of 2022, the series added one million new subscribers in the region to Netflix, despite the total decline of platform subscriptions in the global market (Gordon 2022; Vercoe 2022). Why are Asian audiences so affected by *Squid Game*? Can the popularity of *Squid Game* be understood under the same logic as previous Korean TV dramas?

Previous studies have attempted to explain the popularity of Korean dramas in Asia by drawing on several theories and concepts – for example, resonance, affect, cultural capital, cultural proximity and cultural translations (Iwabuchi 2004; Lin and Tong 2008; Kim 2013; Fung and Choe 2017). The central idea involves how audiences from different Asian countries have historically shared some common values, and Korean popular culture, among various cultures, bears a sense of “Asian modernity,” which other Asian nations are prepared to acquire and learn from (Iwabuchi 2004). These studies have provided a rich analysis of the texts of successful Korean dramas, such as *Autumn in My Heart*, *Winter Sonata* and *Boys Over Flowers*, for the last 20 years.

As mentioned, what differentiates *Squid Game* from previous famous Korean dramas is the mode of production – the collaboration with Netflix. This initial distinction further leads to different themes, plots and ways of reflecting reality in cultural construction. In particular, as

Squid Game focuses on the theme of class and social inequality, this chapter compares how *Squid Game* (2021) constructs this social issue in comparison with previous successful Korean dramas. One representative case that also involves the issues of class and social inequality is *Boys Over Flowers* (2009). This chapter compares the texts of *Boys Over Flowers* and *Squid Game* within the framework of cultural resonance to understand their affective and reflexive consumption in Asia.

Cultural Resonance, Social Inequality and Affect

To explore the popularity of Korean television/online dramas, from *Boys Over Flowers* to *Squid Game*, this study adopts the concept of cultural resonance as the main theoretical framework. This concept has been used widely to study the impact of cultural objects on individuals' ways of puzzling and reflecting through practical challenges (Lin and Tong 2008; McDonnell et al. 2017). According to McDonnell, Bail and Tavory (2017: 1), originating in sociology, “resonance” has been used as a metaphor to describe “the fit between a message and an audience's worldviews.” They argue that cultural objects (e.g. TV dramas) can provoke cultural resonance among audiences to catalyze broader mobilization and social change. According to Kubal (1998), cultural resonance contributes to understanding the interrelations between the cultural environment and the movement frames, which further expands the possibility of social change in the form of collective actions. This chapter considers *Boys Over Flowers* and *Squid Game* as important cultural objects that may help audiences critically reflect on, and deal with, the practical challenges of their realities, such as class stratification and social inequality.

Specifically, cultural resonance has been applied to studying transnational TV drama consumption in the particular contexts of Asia. Iwabuchi (2004: 3) suggests that “intra-Asian cultural flows newly highlight cultural resonance and asymmetry in the region under the decentering processes of globalization.” By using the term “cultural resonance,” Iwabuchi attempts to explore the construction of Asian “modernities” in intra-Asian media texts as a challenge to American media imperialism and Western discourse of capitalist modernities. In line with Iwabuchi's argument, Lin and Tong (2008) discuss cultural resonance in relation to cultural proximity and difference in the context of Asian audiences' consumption of Korean dramas to imagine the cosmopolitan “Asian us.” By cultural proximity and difference, they mean that Asian audiences may consume media content from other neighboring countries for the sake of the co-existence of exotic and fantasy-like appeal and cultural closeness (e.g. shared traditional Confucian values and the socioeconomic status quo). Consequently, cultural proximity and cultural difference together constitute cultural resonance for viewers in East Asia and Southeast Asia. In relation to the views of McDonnell, Bail and Tavory (2017) and Kubal (1998), a sense of cultural resonance is articulated in the representation of social justice, modern love and urban consumerist life in intra-Asian drama texts, which drive audiences to *both* temporarily escape from their social lives *and* be self-reflexive in their social realities. As Toru (2004) argues, an intricate relationship of realism and fantasy is presented as a key factor in popular dramas, which constitutes a transcultural imaginary landscape for viewers to engage with.

A status quo of rapid economic growth and increasing social inequality is shared in various Asian societies, especially East Asia (e.g. Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China). It operates as the prerequisite and reflected reality for the cultural resonance provoked in intra-Asian drama texts (Lin and Tong 2008). With the “miraculous” economic growth in recent decades (Chu and Kong 2022: 4), the rise of the new middle class and upper class in these societies is reflected by the development of a vibrant local creative industry and gentrified places, such as the proliferation of coffee shops in Seoul's Gangnam district, Hong Kong's Shum Shui Po or Taipei's Songshan (Park and Jang 2018; He et al. 2021; Rogelja 2021).

The gentrification of places signals the construction of fantasyland in reality that can project a sense of “modernity” for Asians in contemporary urban life.

On the other hand, these societies all experience issues related to the distribution of their economic “miracles.” Despite the rise of the new middle and upper class, radical inequality co-exists. As the main theme framed in *Squid Game* and in the Academy Award-winning Korean film *Parasite* (2019), social inequality in Korea has been increasingly visible in recent years. Although the country experienced a relatively stable change and a medium level of Gini coefficient (around 0.35) over the last 30 years (Chu and Kong 2022), Yang (2022) argues that the Gini coefficient may obscure what Korean individuals actually experience and feel in reality; a growing social inequality in Korea is due to the *chaebol* (family-owned business conglomerates such as Samsung, Hyundai and LG) privilege, precarious labor and income, downward mobility and increasing anxiety. A similar *chaebol* phenomenon (often equivalent to the term “Zaibatsu” in Japanese) has also been historically salient in Japan, exemplified by companies such as Mitsubishi, Sumitomo and Nissan. Although most Zaibatsu have been dissolved, their impacts on the Japanese socioeconomic landscape remain notable in the form of “Keiretsu” (referring to the companies that have interlocking shareholdings and business relationships) (Park and Yuhn 2012). Among all these Asian societies, Hong Kong has the highest Gini index, which rose from 0.479 in 1990 to 0.539 in 2015 (Chu and Kong 2022). Inequality in the city is evident due to its continuously widening income dispersion and real estate hegemony (Lui 2018; Chiu and Siu 2022). In the dystopian society within the imagination of Western and Japanese cyberpunk films and literature (e.g. *Bladerunner*, *Cloud Atlas* and *Ghost in the Shell*), Seoul, Hong Kong and Tokyo have often been framed as symbolic cyberpunk metropolises, where mega-corporations control society and most people would live in a nihilistic status of “high tech, low life” (Yuen 2000; de la Iglesia 2018). The social condition has become the backdrop of TV dramas in that class differences are precisely the obstacles to romance, marriage and achievement.

In Western liberal societies, the issues of social inequality that incorporate class, gender and race have been important themes for representation on-screen, and many TV dramas and films are highly critical of these social inequalities in response (Espiritu 2011; Cloarec et al. 2016). In comparison, according to Fung and Choe (2017), although social and economic inequality could also be represented and reflected by Korean TV dramas, they tend to be diluted by the cultural affect. Fung and Choe (2017: 3) define “affect” as “the forces that empower the underprivileged in society,” which lays the foundation for potential social change. Rooted in psychology, the notion of affect is associated with how emotions, sensations and sentiments are organized in connection with typical responses, such as enjoyment, excitement, surprise, anger and disgust. According to Tomkins (1995: 111), the affective experience is yielded through the human innate mechanism and an intricate matrix of “ideo-affective formations,” which incorporate how ideologies and affect are nested and how they interact. Tomkins (1995) argues that affect plays an important role in people’s motivations of actions. Media and cultural studies scholars have applied affect by assuming that cultural affect is channeled and sometimes structured and patterned through entertainment media to empower and disempower individuals who belong to certain social groups classified by class, gender, ethnicity and so on (Fung and Choe 2017). For example, Fung and Choe (2017) compare the articulation of affect in *Boys Over Flowers* and *Let’s Go Watch Meteor Shower*, two TV dramas that were based on the same original Japanese manga story *Hana Yori Dango* but were produced in Korea and China, respectively. Through the analysis of the media texts, they conclude that affect was used to empower characters to resist the social backdrop of hierarchy, especially class. Yet at the same time, the frame of affective relationships across the upper and lower classes “dilutes” the class struggle and social conflicts by creating an ideal and perfect fantasy world. Cultural resonance among

audiences from different Asian countries can be achieved through the consumption of the cultural affect in dramas. The analysis of the media text is vital for the understanding of the articulation of affect and cultural resonance.

Netflix as the Agent of Change

Currently, the landscape of Korean dramas is evolving and changing with the participation and co-operation of global media producers, such as Netflix. Netflix is a world-leading streaming digital platform that provides over-the-top (OTT) video, video-on-demand (VOD) and online television services. Originating from the US, the platform has expanded its business and services in 190 countries by 2022, except China, Crimea, North Korea, Russia and Syria (Netflix 2022). In addition to global distribution, Netflix has also actively engaged in the process of the global production of media content, including films, TV dramas and animation. According to Afilipoe, Iordache and Raats (2021), there are four typical modes of production in non-US countries – licensed distribution of local products, continual deals, co-producing or co-financing, and Full Original Series – although the boundaries for these four modes are often blurred. In the case of *Squid Game*, Netflix invested in *Squid Game* as an original series but still offered the director Hwang Dong-Hyuk and his team large-scale creative freedom with no limit (Lee 2021). Fung and Chik (2022) suggest that Netflix is applying a highly viable model of cultural globalization/localization through the co-production of content that can benefit both the distribution of Asian content globally and the smooth integration of Western platform business in Asia.

This co-production between the East and the West also reflects the phenomenon of “reverse globalization” driven by Western media power (Zhang and Gu 2021; Fung and Chik 2022). Rather than a reverse flow of media content from the East to the West, this “reverse globalization” refers to how the West “manages” cultural content produced by the East through investment and distribution control. As a result of the hybrid co-production between Netflix and local Asian producers, the content is no longer purely Asian but also a reflection of Western interests and concerns in the Asian context. Driven by the features of individualistic viewership and binge-watching, Netflix is famous for producing critical, sensational and dark content, such as *House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black* and *Making a Murderer* (Kim 2022). These elements are also highly visible in *Squid Game*, which differentiates *Squid Game* from traditional romance-dominated Korean dramas. An interview with Hwang Dong-Hyuk revealed that the director had the idea about *Squid Game* in 2008 and finished his script in 2009, but he encountered difficulties in finding investors: “At the time, it seemed very unfamiliar and violent. There were people who thought it was a little too complex and not commercial. I wasn’t able to get enough investment, and casting was not easy. I dabbled in it for about a year, but I had to put it to sleep then” (Lee 2021). This indicates that the genre and themes of *Squid Game* are very different from typical Korean TV dramas and therefore not favored by local investors. Then, what genre and themes of Korean TV dramas have generally been favored by local investors and the market? The popular drama *Boys Over Flowers* is a suitable object for comparison.

Comparing *Squid Game* and *Boys Over Flowers*

Twelve years prior to *Squid Game* (2021), *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) was the most popular Korean drama. Its audience ratings reached the top by Episode 7 on Korea’s KBS 2 TV, which was later maintained at over 30 percent after Episode 10, almost double compared to other on-air Korean TV dramas, and it eventually reached 34.8 percent for its final episode. Based on the adaption of Japanese manga *Hana Yori Dango*, which has been widely adapted to TV dramas in Japan and

Taiwan (known as *Meteor Garden* in 2001 in Taiwan), *Boys Over Flowers* also became a big hit after broadcasting in 11 Asian countries (Fung and Choe 2017).

Boys Over Flowers and *Squid Game* are worthwhile to be compared based on their shared similarities. First, the creation of both stories implies a shared inter-Asian social reality. As mentioned, the Korean version of *Boys Over Flowers* was the successor of both Japanese manga *Hana Yori Dango* and two regionally popular adaptations in Japan and Taiwan. The director and creator of *Squid Game* also acknowledged that *Squid Game* was inspired by several Japanese manga works such as *Liar Game*, *Kaiji* and *Battle Royale* (Brzeski 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that the assemblages of Korean, Japanese and Taiwanese cultural elements lay the foundation for the cultural resonance of Asian audiences for a shared inter-Asian social reality framed in the stories.

Second, both stories focus on the themes of social inequality. *Boys Over Flowers* is a youth love story among high school students from different classes. The story takes place in Shin Hwa school, a privileged institution established by the Shin Hwa Group that is portrayed as the top corporation in Korea. This school is designed for upper-class children without the pressure of admission as it includes kindergarten, primary school, middle school and high school. The heroine from the lower class, Geum Jan-Di, attends Shin Hwa high school by mistake. In the beginning, she is bullied by her classmates under the command of the Flower Four (or F4) group, comprised of four handsome boys from super-rich families. She bravely resists the F4 group and later develops a romantic relationship with Goo Jun-Pyo, the leader of the F4 group and the heir of the Shin Hwa Group. In the end, their love overcomes the social and class differences.

Squid Game mainly focuses on lower-class adults struggling in a survival game organized by mysterious upper-class people. The anonymous game organizers wear masks and apply strict rules upon the players and their own workers. The survival game consists of six rounds of inhumane and bloody childhood games in which the losers are killed. The game organizers also permit dog-eat-dog killings between the players in the middle of different grounds. The winners of all six games may clear their debt with the cash award of 45.6 billion Korean won (around \$38 million). The protagonist, Seong Gi-Hun, is a divorced gambling addict who has financial difficulties in claiming custody of his daughter. He is the only survivor and winner of the cash award; but he does not use the prize money due to guilt and is determined to reveal the real identity of the game organizers at the end of the first season. According to the basic plot, both series are framed by social inequality, but the ways the stories are framed are different. In the following analysis focusing on the metaphor of “hell,” we argue that *Squid Game* emphasizes realism and moves away from the creation of a fantasy of society through affect in comparison to *Boys Over Flowers*.

The metaphor of “hell” appears in both dramas. In the first episode of *Boys Over Flowers*, Geum Jan-Di rescues a male student who attempts to commit suicide on the roof. This student is bullied by the majority of students in the school, who are followers of the F4 gang. In their conversation, Geum Jan-Di is surprised by his intention of suicide: “Die? Do you want to die? Why? You are in such a good school...” The boy says, “This is not school. This is hell.” Geum Jan-Di refutes, “I tell you, the real hell is outside this school. Have you heard of the hell by the name of school entrance examinations?” The bullied boy describes this school as hell because it is dictated by F4. The rich heirs from large *chaebol* companies have privileges over other students. These students also have privileges over common people outside the school in several ways, such as the guaranteed school promotion from kindergarten to high school without the pressure of school entrance examinations. Geum Jan-Di also experiences hell when she is bullied in the beginning. Later, when she has increasingly intimate interactions with Goo Jun-Pyo, she also experiences a transition from hell to heaven. In Episode 2, Goo asked his servants to “kidnap” Geum to visit his house. She is surprised by the expensive dress prepared for her and

the environment of the exotic and elegant house and the beautiful garden surrounded by stewards and maids. She asks the steward whether she is still in Korea. In Episode 5, Geum is invited by Goo to visit a beautiful private island and has an exquisite afternoon tea on the beach. He tells Geum, “As I told you, what you couldn’t imagine, I can show it to you every day.” She is touched, and cries and laughs. She says, “It was like magic... This place was so good. I think my parents never had a chance to visit such a place. They would definitely be happy if they could see.” These types of plots imply the construction of a heaven-like fantasyland. According to Lin and Tong (2008), cultural resonance is provoked by cultural affect among Asian female audiences of Korean dramas due to a shared escapism from reality to fantasy. These beautiful and romantic scenes create the ideal world that serves their desire to escape from the reality of social inequality.

In contrast to a transition from hell to heaven in *Boys Over Flowers*, the scenario is more like from hell to hell in *Squid Game* – a loop of hells. The title of its second episode is literally “Hell.” After the first round of a life-or-death childhood game, the game participants realize the severity of the risk behind the dreamful cash prize. The organizers allow participants to have a democratic referendum to decide on the continuance of the game. Before the vote, players with different opinions quarrel. Many people believe that continuing the game is their only hope. Player 212 refutes people who want to stop the game: “So, what will happen if we leave? Is anything different out there? It’s hell out there anyway.” Player 322 agrees: “I don’t have a home to go back to anyway. At least here, I have hope. But out there? I got nothing out there.” They argue that reality is more like hell than this survival game because there is no chance to change their economic and social status in the real world. As a result of the referendum, slightly more than half of the players agree to stop the game, and all players escape from the secret game spot to their daily lives. Nevertheless, 93 percent of the players return to the game eventually. Player 001 tells Seong Gi-Hun: “Now that I’m back out, I realize everything they said is true. It’s a worse hell out here.” By framing the despair of lower-class people in reality, *Squid Game* reflects the trend of increasing social inequality and decreasing chances of class mobility in a radical manner. In this scenario, the survival game seems to be a plausible avenue and a source of hope of class mobility for the desperate lower class. Nevertheless, the story intensifies this “loop of hells” by implying that no fantasyland exists at all. In the final episode, Il-Nam, the old man who is Player 001 in the game, is revealed as one of the organizers of the squid game. Before dying, he tells Seong Gi-Hun that his motivation for organizing and attending the squid game was to “have fun.” He remarks:

Do you know what someone with no money has in common with someone with too much money? Living is no fun for them. If you have too much money, no matter what you buy, eat or drink, everything gets boring in the end.

This implies a sense of nihilism in capitalist society; even after becoming super rich, people still feel unsatisfied in the highly consumerist sociocultural environment.

In this case, the cultural resonance among Asian audiences may be provoked not by fantasy but by realism. For the past 20 years, the nature of Korean dramas, as represented by *Boys Over Flowers* for example, has tended to construct affective and imaginative solutions to these social problems, whereas *Squid Game* offers a different solution. Compared to *Boys Over Flowers*, which allows for a shared temporary escapism, *Squid Game* reminds Asian audiences of a shared ongoing anxiety of encountering low class mobility and high social inequality. *Boys Over Flowers* dilutes class conflicts through cultural affect, while *Squid Game* intensifies class conflict through an allegory of the bloody survival game. *Squid Game* director Hwang remarked in his interview: “I wanted to write a story that was an allegory or fable about modern capitalist

society, something that depicts an extreme competition, somewhat like the extreme competition of life" (Lee 2021). Nevertheless, Hwang also suggests that he did not intend to depict absolute despair as the characters in the series show their humanity, courage and determination of resistance. Given the potential of cultural resonance, it can be argued that Asian audiences have developed a mutual and critical awareness of the social inequalities in their respective societies through the collective consumption of *Squid Game*. As suggested by many researchers including McDonnell, Bail and Tavory (2017) and Kubal (1998), self-reflexive consumption of popular media culture may possibly pave the way for a critical awareness and collective action attempting to resolve social problems in the form of social activism and movements.

Conclusion

Through the comparison of *Boys Over Flowers* and *Squid Game*, this chapter has addressed the popularity and change of Korean television/online dramas with the advent of Netflix. By drawing on the concept of cultural resonance, it has suggested how Korean dramas as cultural objects can provoke resonance among audiences to potentially facilitate critical self-reflexivity, broader mobilization and the imagination of social change. Korea has shared similar social conditions with many Asian cities/countries that also face rising living costs and high social inequality. These unsolved social conditions have become the backdrop of recent television dramas in that class differences as well as gendered differences are the main obstacles to self-actualization and well-being. Korean dramas in the past, such as *Boys Over Flowers*, generally constructed affective and imaginative solutions to these social problems, while the recent co-production of Korean dramas (e.g. *Squid Game*) between the local productions and Netflix more explicitly foregrounds such unequal power relations and social inequality as the main narratives. *Boys Over Flowers* allows for a shared temporary escapism, while diluting the issues of class conflicts through cultural affect and the construction of a fantasy-like ideal world. On the other hand, *Squid Game* not only provokes cultural resonance among Asian audiences through critical realism and intensifies the class conflicts through an allegory of the bloody survival game, but importantly it also interrupts, wittingly or unwittingly, the conventional production of harmonic and resolvable discourses of social inequality embedded in many traditional Korean dramas. Through the collective and critical engagement with popular media culture, audiences can gradually develop a stronger sense of awareness of the social inequalities and the possibility of resorting to collective activism in their societies.

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