

Chapter 6

Foreign but Familiar: Genre and the Global Korean Drama Fandom

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ABSTRACT

The global rise of the South Korean entertainment industry, commonly described as the Korean wave or hallyu, has been the subject of scholarly study because it presents a challenge to Western media hegemony. This chapter uses mixed methods to assess how hybridized genre conventions and familiar storytelling structures in South Korean television dramas create a media product that is accessible to a diverse fandom. The Korean drama fandom extends beyond Eastern Asia and the Asian diaspora, and there is a dearth of research on this larger global audience. Theories of cultural proximity are insufficient to explain a popularity that transcends culture and language. The importance of a media text's structure is also under-studied in research on fandom. By combining survey data from Korean drama fans living outside of South Korea with a critical assessment of the use of melodrama and other genre conventions in Korean dramas, this chapter argues that the shared symbolic language of genre plays an important role in building a global fanbase.

GLOBAL KOREAN DRAMA FANBASE

Korean dramas are a global phenomenon. A 2014 study by the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA) estimated that 18 million Americans watch Korean dramas “based on numbers of visitors to popular streaming sites” (*The Korea Times*, 2014, para. 11). The growing fanbase has attracted the attention of Western media companies. MTV, *Teen Vogue*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Variety*, *New York Magazine*'s Vulture Blog, and *Forbes* have written articles on the phenomenon and begun reporting on deals and partnerships with streaming services in the United States. U.S. entertainment companies like Netflix and Amazon are now offering Korean dramas on their subscription services and producing dramas (Frater,

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2018). The success of Korean dramas, part of the larger surge in Korean entertainment media known as the Korean Wave, is in opposition to Western media dominance. Therefore, it presents researchers with an intriguing case to explore how a media text can appeal to a global heterogeneous audience.

There is evidence that the Korean drama fandom, dominated by women, is diverse in terms of language and nationality. Yet, there is limited research on the popularity of Korean dramas beyond regional trends or the Asian diaspora. This oversight is part of a wider problem of fandom studies paying limited attention to cross-border fandoms identified by Chin and Morimoto (2013). Those studies that do focus on cross-border fandoms predominately grapple with such fandoms in a nation-centric manner. This approach often limits the scope of the research to concerns of cultural appropriation. Scholars often neglect the media text itself in discussions of global fandoms, particularly if the text is not of Western origin.

To expand the discussion around the Korean drama's international popularity, this study focuses on how global genre conventions within Korean dramas make these media texts accessible to the global Korean drama fandom. Critics often deride Korean dramas as formulaic and melodramatic, but it is the formulaic nature of Korean dramas, as well as their adherence to melodramatic narrative conventions, that makes Korean dramas accessible and appealing to international audiences. Further, the presence of known genre formulas appeals to audiences' pre-dispositions about what type of media content they enjoy.

This study relies on an interdisciplinary, mixed-methods approach that leverages film studies, cultural studies, and Hollywood marketing studies. Film studies scholarship attests to the ways film genres are able to accommodate cultural specificity while maintaining some of their defining formalist and thematic traits. Literature from cultural studies on hybridization and culture flow also supports how genre mixing within the Korean television industry results in a form that is both familiar to global audiences while still rooted in South Korean culture. Marketing studies on film demonstrate that genre is one of the key characteristics in determining audience behavior.

Following the interdisciplinary discussion of the hybridization of genre in Korean dramas, this chapter presents two studies. First, a close reading of five Korean dramas critiques how the melodramatic mode of Korean dramas and other hybridized genre conventions frame the narrative of these texts in ways that are understandable to people with limited knowledge of Korean culture. Second, survey results are presented from 158 Korean drama fans living outside of South Korea. The survey tested the importance of genre as a factor in determining viewing behavior in the Korean drama fandom.

The results of the mixed-method analysis suggest that the use of a variety of genre codes in Korean dramas gives audiences multiple places to find familiarity and enjoyment and the melodramatic structure helps viewers follow the story. Korean drama fans were cognizant of the presence of genre tropes and relied on genre information to determine which shows they would watch. Even with barriers of language and culture, genre acts as a bridge for understanding and enjoyment.

HYBRIDIZATION OF GENRE IN KOREAN DRAMAS

Contra-flows, subaltern cultural exchanges that move in opposition to Western hegemonic media (Thussu, 2007), are complex, underinvestigated, and controversial in their importance as they exhibit what Appadurai (1996) described as “disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics” (p. 33). In contra-flow, capitalist power structures are insufficient explanations for the dissemination of media texts across borders, cultures, or language. Appadurai theorized the channels that transmit culture as “ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33).

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