

INTRODUCTION: SERIALS IN EAST ASIA

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This special issue of *Series* offers an introduction to the television serial industry that has flourished in East Asia over the past half century and has engaged millions of viewers across China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, amongst others. Serials from South Korea and Japan are frequently sold to other countries and dubbed or subbed into other languages, and thus reach large audiences in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines or Vietnam. It is also common for a serial to be remade elsewhere – perhaps the best known of these is the cluster emanating from the Japanese manga serial *Hana Yori Dango* (Boys Over Flowers) by Kamio Yoko, serialized from 1992 to 2003. It was adapted as a live action television serial in Taiwan in 2001 as *Meteor Garden*,¹ as *Hana Yori Dango* in Japan in 2005, as *Boys Over Flowers* in South Korea in 2009, as *Siapa Takut Jatuh Cinta* (Who's Afraid of Falling in Love?) in Indonesia in 2017, and as a remake of *Meteor Shower* and *Meteor Garden* in China in 2009 and 2018, respectively. The cross-border interest that accompanies such movements also supports drama-themed tourism, as fans of particular serials seek to visit places where favourite scenes were filmed. Such tourism has been cultivated as an element of the 'Korean wave', for example – after the great success of the historical drama series *Dae Jang Geum* (also known as *Jewel in the Palace*) in 2003, a *Dae Jang Geum* theme park was opened in 2004 and remained open to the public until 2014 (it continues as a site for subsequent historical dramas). Informal tourism is also popular, and more recently online sites have carefully documented every filming location in Korea and Quebec that appears in *Dokkaebi: The Lonely and Great God* (2016-2017).² A visit to such a location enables visitors to imaginatively embed themselves within the serial by replicating an action or gesture performed there by their favourite characters and recording it on camera.

Despite the massive popularity of television serials across the region, they remain virtually unknown in the West and have received almost no scholarly attention. The seven articles that follow here deal with a tiny sample of the vast number of drama serials that have been produced.³ They can-

not illustrate how East Asian television drama represents all possible serial genres, although serials are in general not concerned to be generically 'pure' but choose to blend genres in order to tell their stories in the most effective way. Across their range, these serials comprise legal dramas, detective fiction, historical period drama, medical drama, science fiction, teen rom-com, and others. Television serials are mostly tied to realist representation, even in historical period drama, but there has been an increased interest in fantasy in recent decades. Fantasy may be located in exotic supernatural or parallel worlds but is more likely to employ stories from mythology and folklore. In addition to blending genres, serials from different countries will, unsurprisingly, differ modally: for example, Japanese serials lean toward realism, whereas realism in Korean serials is predominantly depicted as melodramatic.

A crucial issue in discussion of East Asian serials is the distinction between *serial* and *series*. The basic distinction here is that made by John Fiske: a series relates a gathering of stories, each of which is contained within a discrete episode, while a serial is constructed as continuous storylines – normally more than one – that continue through each episode (Fiske 1987: 150). From the beginning of their production, East Asian narrative serials have a scheduled definite endpoint and, in comparison with the self-contained programs in American series, for example, would fall within a loose construction of a 'mini-series' or 'limited series' with one continuous storyline. The programs discussed in the following articles range in length from the five episodes of the 2008 Hong Kong mini-series *The Trading Floor* to the forty episodes of both *The Greed of Man* (Hong Kong, 1992) and *Guardian* (China, 2018). There is no meaningful median figure, as the four production industries discussed here have different conventions. Japanese serials, also known as *doramas*, usually comprise ten to fourteen one-hour episodes, in which one story runs throughout the episodes and thus character and situation can be explored more deeply than in a series made up of discrete episodes. The most common duration of Korean serials is sixteen one-hour episodes, although longer serials are not uncommon and a very popular program that has not been pre-produced can have two or more episodes added. At the time of writing, China has the longest running serials, with forty episodes each of forty-five minutes the median length. However, the crucial point is that all of these programs are not series but serials with one main narrative arc. The live-action Japanese fantasy serial *Guardian of the Spirit* (22 episodes, 2016-2018) is thus framed by the quest of female hero Balsa to protect Prince Chagum from the as-

1 Because of the long timespan over which a manga serial can extend, and the inclusion of many self-contained episodes without any connection to other parts of the series, it is not unusual for intermedial adaptations to appear before the original series has concluded.

2 For example: <http://www.flyhoneystars.com/2016/12/26/filming-location-goblin-the-lonely-and-great-god/>; <http://pheurontay.com/drama-goblin-filming-locations/>; and <https://myhungrypress.com/goblin-filming-sites/>.

3 The online site 'Dramaload' (<http://www.dramaload.se/drama-list/>) enables viewers to watch or download around 850 South Korean drama serials produced since 2000 and here made available subtitled in English. The list is far from comprehensive and represents only one country in the region.

sassins who seek to kill him, but the building blocks of the narrative are discrete episodes. *Guardian of the Spirit*, like the Korean serial *Let's Fight, Ghost* (2016), works within a structure in which, according to Jason Mittell (2015: 19), plotlines are centred on series-long arcs while still offering episodic coherence and resolutions.

This principle of the integrity of episodes within an overarching frame is overtly disrupted in *Dokkaebi: The Lonely and Great God* by spreading a segment within a micronarrative across two episodes. A self-reflexive example appears within a recurrent story-line involving attempts by the greedy aunt of Ji Eun-Tak, the female protagonist, to find Eun-Tak's bankbook and gain access to the money from her mother's life insurance. In Episode 2 the aunt attempts to get rid of two buffoonish loan sharks by telling them about the bankbook, and so they kidnap Eun-Tak as she leaves school. The episode concludes on a country road with an exaggeratedly dramatic cliffhanger when Kim Shin and the *jeoseung saja*,⁴ the two immortal male leads, appear in order to rescue Eun-Tak. The rescue is accomplished in the first eight minutes of Episode 3 in a segment which is one of the serial's funniest: its melodramatic comic mode combines action, the characters' appearance in long black coats (which instantly became the pinnacle of Korean fashion) and dissonant contrasts on the soundtrack to hilarious effect. This organization of the constitutive elements of the fiction illustrates the great potential of interweaving multiple story strands within serial structure.

Serality is inherent to fiction, a fact which is underscored by the intersections of the lives of the immortal characters in *Dokkaebi* with the short lives of humans, some of whom appear in subsequent reincarnations. Such effects of serial transformation of narrative embed the audience within the pattern consisting of a present action which is also a component of the drive toward an eventual outcome. The embedding effect then further induces its audience to become co-author of the serial by speculating about the as yet undisclosed past and possible futures (Oltean 1993: 11). As Veronika Keller shows in her study of music (this issue), musical motifs are another device that may link episodes within the larger structure. A further aspect of audience embedding is the extensive appearance of product placement in serials across East Asia, by now an old phenomenon but increasingly essential to the funding regime of production. Manya Koetse (2019) points out that a strong current trend in the Chinese

advertising and marketing industry is to develop branded content deals with television programmers and other relevant sectors. Koetse argues that although product placement can alienate viewers if it is overly intrusive, it can also provide them with "a sense that they've become some sort of an insider, that they are part of the story. Chinese audiences appreciate that feeling of familiarity in the programs that they watch" (Koetse 2019: n.p.). Fans can also respond to product placement by seeking to embed themselves more deeply by means of drama tourism to cafés or shopping centres that appear in a serial. In a clip posted on YouTube, Limpeh from Singapore and Indra from Indonesia together visit the *BBQ Olive Chicken* café in which many scenes in *Dokkaebi* are set. As they enter, Limpeh affirms, "It is always such a very magical feeling to come into one of the actual places you've seen in the drama", although they are a little disappointed that they are unable to sit at a particular table featured in the serial and have their photos taken.⁵ The makers of *Dokkaebi* at times treat product placement self-reflexively and humorously, as when, having fallen in love with the proprietor of the chicken outlet, the *jeoseung saja* visits every evening to buy takeaway chicken, even though he is vegetarian, and displays it to viewers as if he is in an advertisement.

On a larger scale, audiences may engage with a serial on the basis of familiarity when it is an adaptation of a pre-text that exists on one or more media platforms. Three of the serials discussed in the following articles are intermedial adaptations: *In This Corner of the World* (Japan), *Guardian of the Spirit* (Japan), and *Guardian* (China). Audiences often view an adapted work not as a potentially unique creation but as a secondary product inevitably inferior to the original because it cannot replicate the primary act of creation which brought forth that original. In his analysis of *In This Corner of the World* – the manga (2008-2009), the anime film (2016) and the nine-episode television serial (2018) – Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto explores the notion of fidelity in relation to three multimodal platforms. He argues that the basis for such a discussion is not a matter of priority, or the relative importance of each medium, but of the possible comparisons between texts produced in two different types of media. What common elements exist that might enable comparison? He argues that manga and anime have a close affinity as aesthetic media, but whether a particular adaptation is faithful to its original cannot be discussed by simply interpreting their semantic core (meanings) or comparing perceptual similarities

4 A *Jeoseung Saja* ('Afterlife Messenger') is a Korean psychopomp who guides newly deceased souls down the road that leads to the afterlife.

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j99pLVnHX14> (last accessed 06-11-19).

(stylistic features). The idea of fidelity has little to do with measurement of the degree of resemblance or interconnection between individual textual elements, but instead needs to address the relationship of the original and the adaptation in terms of a process of structural transformation of one semiotic system into another. For Yoshimoto, the aim of adaptation is not to faithfully replicate the original in a different aesthetic medium but to produce a new work by creatively using the result of a close reading of the original. He argues that creative freedom exercised without “accurate reading” produces a new work derived from the original but not an adaptation and thus finally concludes that although the TV adaptation of *In This Corner of the World* is a well-made drama it is a lesser work than its predecessors because of a lack of artistic self-consciousness – that is, it fails to adapt the reflexivity of the original manga and the anime version either faithfully or creatively.

Helen Kilpatrick offers a different perspective on adaptation, arguing that viewer familiarity with the pre-texts of *Guardian of the Spirit* (novels and/or anime) is countered by the introduction of different narrative techniques from those encountered previously, techniques which demand different ‘reading’ strategies, such as the more complex ways in which characters’ viewpoints and motivations need to be pieced together by viewing audiences. Such narrative strategies add a further dimension to the serial’s fantasy genre and replacement of the usual masculine samurai hero with a warrior heroine to produce affective engagement with gendered positionings, especially a deconstruction of dominant patriarchal ideologies. Employing an analytic approach grounded in cognitive narratology, Kilpatrick demonstrates how the serial’s narrative techniques prompt viewer mental processing with regard to cultural schemas and scripts of, for instance, male/female roles in family relationships, women’s participation in the employment sector, and marriage and childbearing. Focusing on the four episodes of the First Season (2016), which introduce the series’ main tropes, she thus argues that *Guardian of the Spirit* is a model of how a drama series can interrogate some of East Asia’s dominant masculinist discourses by subverting dominant gender binaries and by provoking deep consideration of the main female protagonist’s rejection of conventional feminine, familial and employment roles within Japan’s conservative and stratified social milieu.

Yue Wang explores a different kind of issue in adaptation and active audience engagement in an examination of the drama serialization of *Guardian*, an online Chinese *danmei* novel. *Danmei*, or Boys’ Love (BL), is a genre of male-male ro-

mance created by and for women and sexual minorities (Yang and Xu 2017: 3). During the adaptation process the drama’s production team heavily expurgated the content of the story in an apparent attempt to evade the heavy censorship likely to be imposed by censors. In Chinese (post)socialist ideology homosexuality has been considered a violation of the patriarchal heterosexual family, supernatural narratives have been viewed as backward superstitions, and socially wronged lower-class members are seen as a threat to social stability. The “top-down expurgation” elides homosexuality by emphasizing brotherhood and replaces supernatural and fantastic tropes such as ghosts with science fiction devices. The response of fans of the novel to the expurgation has been active and creative, so that the adaptation of *Guardian* and its reception have become a battlefield of strategic compliance and resistance, where economic demand and political power, modern liberal attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and equality and traditional values concerning harmony, conformity, and authority contest and negotiate. In a remarkable performance of participatory pop culture, fans of the novel, who call themselves “Guardian Girls”, creatively utilise a subversive strategy in their comments, artworks, and fictions, and these strategies together with their affective investment actively dismantle the monopoly of official discourse that aims to silence the marginal outcasts and maintain order. The fans’ “bottom-up subversion” indicates the increasingly visible feminist and queer desire for alternative content in Chinese media, where representations of heterosexual romance subservient to the patriarchal ideology have long dominated the screen.

Moving away from adaptation of successful pre-texts, and focusing on a sub-set of a Korean genre she calls “the supernatural serial”, Sung-Ae Lee examines how in the 21st century South Korean television drama has turned to folklore and folkloric supernatural tales as media for humour and social critique. Shared scripts (models we construct to make sense of people and things in the world) have evolved that constitute intertextual linkages amongst the supernatural dramas, especially in the modifications of and additions to Korean folklore about supernatural beings with which audiences can be assumed to have some familiarity. Supernatural serials may draw on a range of non-human or undead characters, but Lee considers a group in which each serial has a ghost and a ghost seer as one of the principal characters, and each blends ghost story with other genres (especially romantic comedy, bromance, school story, crime story, and culinary drama). This blending is used to foreground the plight of characters who are marginalized and alienated from mainstream society.

The serials on which Lee focuses were all made for cable television, so the potential audience is smaller than for public broadcast channels, but writers and directors for cable television will at times address their audience as a more discerning one – for example, by including more intertextual and metacinematic jokes or by offering audiences viewing stances in which strong empathy with characters interacts with a more analytical perspective. Because Korean dramas usually have a single director and a single screenwriter they are apt to be internally consistent in narrative and directing styles, a strength which is further enhanced by a trend to move away from live production towards complete or partial pre-production. The benefits are evident in areas such as the use of exotic overseas settings, high production values, sophisticated special effects, and outstanding soundtracks (see also Veronika Keller's analysis of pop music in Korean serials in this issue).

The telling of ghost stories as a medium for social critique aligns “the supernatural serial” with a general concern with social problems in East Asian television serials. Such concern appears across all genres but is readily associated with realism. In her discussion of the Japanese serial *Woman* (2013, 11 episodes), Forum Mithani argues that reimagined nostalgic images of motherhood and rural childhood in the serial explore the contradictions inherent in these images. The technical aspects of the production turn on a visual style employed in other cultural products which engage in nostalgic depictions of the post-war past. Scenes were characteristically filmed in natural light with only one camera, and a fixed focal length was preferred to zoom. The soft “real life” lighting, shallow depth of field and extensive use of close-ups help create the illusion that viewers are part of the drama and intimately connected with the characters' thoughts and feelings. Viewers thus feel comfortable with a nostalgic fantasy that seems real.

The images represent nostalgia for a past that never existed, but was invented in the years after World War 2 in response to anxieties over the rapid social changes Japan was experiencing during the process of modernization. Mithani suggests that these idealizations of a native place centred on a devoted, benevolent mother have been principally the conceptions of male scholars, intellectuals and producers of culture, and recent attempts to revive them reflect a dissatisfaction with the weakening of Japanese masculinity in an era of economic decline and job insecurity. Where men look to the past as a bulwark against an uncertain future, women in contrast now strive to change their circumstances by

achieving equality in the home as well as the workplace and do not wish to embrace the nostalgic conception of motherhood and home. Counterpointed narratives in *Woman* which depict a warm maternal embrace and then deconstruct that representation disclose that the pseudo-nostalgic maternal ideal is implausible in contemporary society.

Winnie Yee argues that television serials in Hong Kong have a long history of realist story-telling, and while television stations are reluctant to portray politically sensitive matters, they do deal with issues which are at least implicitly political such as identity formation and cultural differences among Chinese communities. Television drama plays an important role in forging and challenging the collective idea of Chineseness, and in the case of Hong Kong expresses postcolonial Hong Kong identity. Yee examines the financial crime thriller, a film and serial genre extensively cultivated in Hong Kong. In considering examples produced twenty-six years apart – *The Greed of Man* (1992) and *The Trading Floor* (2018) – she traces how Hong Kong's identity has been located in its financial prosperity, which has acted as a shield separating Hong Kong from the Mainland. She notes shifts that have taken place toward the growth of transnational collaborations intended to appeal to a wider Asian market and in the advent of the sequential-episodic structure discussed above which have internal coherence and resolution but which are also imbricated with a series-long narrative arc. A comparison of *The Greed of Man* and *The Trading Floor* demonstrates the continued dominance of finance in the everyday life of Hong Kong people and also illuminates the cultural response to this fixation on finance in the post-1997 era in such outcomes as the replacement of family values by professional bonding. People who are motivated by a shared sense of outrage join together either to fight for democracy and equality or simply to retaliate for some harm they have experienced.

Finally, Veronika Keller's research into pop songs in Korean television dramas offers a perceptive exposition of an area that has received very little attention outside Korea, where music is usually only perceived as mood enhancers for individual scenes and not as a pivotal part of both the narrative and the emotional tone of a serial. Purpose-composed pop music became integrated into serials in the early 1990s, first as theme songs and later to mark crucial moments in the developing relationships of the protagonists. Functioning in much the same way as a leitmotif, once established as a song for a character, a couple or a mood, a particular pop song recurs throughout a serial. Songs, therefore, add a new layer of meaning to a scene, not only through lyrics and music, but

especially by referring to past developments and incidents, thus becoming an integral part of the connecting narrative arc and giving the serial an individual character. Keller pays close attention to “couple songs”, which have provided the most recognizable connection between music, narrative and recurring images or themes in almost every romantic Korean drama in recent years. She shows that it is thus possible to connect multiple images and meanings to certain pop songs so that later scenes are not only directly linked to the overall narrative but new layers of meaning not explicitly shown in the actual scene are also added. These tight connections between pop songs and narrative themes have become so overtly used in recent serials that they have in themselves become narrative formulas of the whole genre, creating a sign system of its own in interaction with visual sign systems.

The articles in this special issue on East Asian serials make a rich and varied contribution to the field of serial studies. They draw attention to the vast pool of serials that has been produced in East Asia and demonstrate some of the heterogeneous approaches that may be taken toward the forms and social assumptions of these multiple and blended serial genres. For future work, it would be interesting to extend some of these perspectives to comparative research in order to elucidate patterns, characteristics or trends of serial television across the various production industries. For example, do the generally shorter Japanese serials create a nexus of auditory and visual sign systems in a way similar to South Korea? How do contexts of production shape non-realist genres? In what ways is the dominant structure of a series-long narrative arc punctuated by internally coherent episodes being varied? The field seems wide open, and we invite our readers to enter it.

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