

The Analysis of Korean TV Drama's Industry

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Abstract

In order to understand the success of Korean TV dramas across the world, it is essential to look back on history and analyze the main factors influencing the development of the Korean drama industry and the characteristics of Korean TV drama's production. This paper attempts to outline how Korean drama developed with television stations, highlighting three main determinants: governmental policies, economic conditions, and technological development and how Korean TV dramas are produced under this background.

Keywords

Korean TV Drama; Culture Industry; TV Drama's Production.

1. The Overview of Korean TV Drama History

According to different characteristics, this history can be divided into three periods: the beginning period, in which drama was regarded as a means of social control; the rapid development period, characterized by intensive competition; and the gradual improvement period, characterized by cooperative relationships between production companies and television stations [1].

1.1. The Beginning (1961-1989): Drama as Social Control

1961-1989 served as the beginning period of the Korean drama industry. After 1953, when South Korea and North Korea signed an armistice, South Korea had an opportunity to recover from the war and its economy had a stable domestic environment in which to develop. During the Park Chung-hee (박정희) regime (1961-1979), the first terrestrial television network station—the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), a state-owned public network television station—was founded in December 1961, only seven months after the military coup that put Park in power. This timing implies that the military government recognized the great potential of television to promote governmental ideologies and regarded it as a means of social control. KBS's broadcasting aims, to “cure the sick minds of citizens” and to “display an image of the recovering nations,” definitely showed the military government's expectations [2]. KBS produced and broadcasted the first K-drama, *I Will Become a Man* (나도 인간이 되련다), which mainly promoted democracy and criticized communism. In August 1969, the second terrestrial television network television station, Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), started broadcasting as a commercial television station.

During this period, the government had strict control over the television stations. The Park regime regarded television stations as a political means to promote its message and consolidate its power. The Park regime openly introduced censorship through an amendment to the Broadcasting Act in 1973. Under this censorship, “negative” scenes, such as tragic historical facts in historical dramas and immoral conduct in melodramas, were strictly prohibited. The government itself defined the “negative” scenes [3]. As a result of direct control from the government, K-dramas were limited to “positive” programs, such as those that showed the harmony of the extended family and women sacrificing themselves for the overall happiness of family, which were quite popular among the middle-aged female audience. In addition, because

of the strict intervention of the autocratic Park regime to prohibit broadcasting stations from producing dramas with political or social themes, melodramas and historical dramas were quite rare.

However, in 1980, the Chun Doo-whan (전두환) regime forced the television industry to fundamentally restructure through the so-called "Mass Media Reorganization." During this restructuring, KBS became MBC's majority owner, purchasing 70% of MBC's stock. As a consequence, the government controlled the entire television industry, because there was no independent program production and programs were produced exclusively by the network stations [4]. However, the rapid improvement of the Korean economy, along with technological development, produced positive effects on the development of K-dramas. The lack of recording and playback technologies gradually improved, and with more funding, television stations could produce higher quality dramas. In addition, as living standards improved, the number of television owners significantly increased, rising from 13,000 in September 1961 to almost 6 million in 1979 [5]. Increasing audiences encouraged stations to produce more daily dramas.

1.2. Rapid Development(1990-1999): Intense Competition

Next came the rapid development period of the 1990s. During this period, economic factors had an increasing influence on the Korean television industry. Along with the expansion of world capitalism came consistent pressure on global media industries to commercialize their public broadcasting systems [6]. For instance, the Seoul Broadcasting System (SBS), the first commercial terrestrial network television company, opened in 1991. Regarding MBC, in the 1990s, its largest shareholder switched from KBS to the Foundation for Broadcast Culture (FBC), which was established by the National Assembly of Korea. As a result, MBC does not receive government subsidies or collect license fees, but is not free political influence. Then in the Korean television system, the three main network stations KBS, SBS and MBC were established. Moreover, eight other local television stations were launched throughout the nation from 1995 to 1997. The first turning point in the K-drama industry occurred in 1995, when cable television service was inaugurated [7]. By 1998, 77 cable stations were operating nationwide. The Korean broadcasting industry had entered a multichannel television era marked by intense competition [8].

During 1990s, the government's influence tended to be more supportive. In general, the Kim Dae-jung(김대중) regime (1998-2002) is acknowledged as having developed the first substantial cultural policies to recognize the potential of the cultural industries as a source of competitive content in the international market. The Kim regime also weakened almost all government control over broadcasting content, abolishing all preview censorship and introducing a self-regulation system for each broadcast [9], which gave more room and freedom for stations to produce K-dramas.

In addition, economic factors had an increasing influence on the K-drama industry since the early 1990s. First of all, the commercialism of the Korean television industry grew substantially and stations had more capital with which to produce dramas. Secondly, K-dramas became viable export products. The flow of K-dramas to the East Asian market began after the popularity of *What is Love All About?* (사랑이 뭐길래) (MBC, 1991-1992), which was broadcast on CCTV in China in 1997. Since then, the popularity of K-dramas has concentrated in Taiwan, China, and Japan, increasing significantly every year [10]. This rapid development was also connected closely to technology. The new Korean cable television system began operating in March 1995, with 21 cable channels broadcasting in eight large cities simultaneously. Since the launch of the cable television system, more and more channels have been authorized. The development of this technology made competition for viewership increasingly intense.

1.3. The Golden Age (2000-Present): The Co-production System

In the 21st century, the K-drama has become well-developed and popular all over the world. K-drama developed its own production system during this period. The following section will explain how technology promoted the drama industry and how the co-operation system works.

First of all, technological development contributed the most to the expansion of the K-drama industry. On 1 May 2005, digital multimedia broadcasting (DMB), a technology that sends multimedia and data-casting to mobile devices all over the world, officially started in Korea [11]. The widespread use of mobile phones and broadband internet infrastructure brought Korea into a new era of digital convergence. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the rate of internet per household in Korea reached 95.9% in 2009, the highest rate in the world. Further, along with the global trend, the rapid development of broadcasting and telecommunication technology enabled the rapid increase in the number of television channels. The increasing number of television channels, starting with the opening of 21 cable channels in March 1995, reached a maximum of 272 channels in March 2011 [12]. Thus, technical development has provided individuals with a wide variety of content and contributed to more active and diversified audiences. This, in turn, has encouraged the production of more diversified K-dramas.

Secondly, since the 21st century, with economic globalization and increasing demand for K-dramas, more and more independent production companies in Korea have emerged in order to provide TV drama production. First, above all, the three stations can reach larger and broader audiences of potential viewers. Audience ratings are an important criterion for dramas and also closely connected to profits. More audience means higher commercial value, which in turn attracts higher advertising revenue. Certainly, advertising revenue is one of the fundamental sources of income driving the economics of broadcast television. Second, as the production cost per K-drama increases annually, independent production companies have barely managed to meet their necessary production budgets, and few are capable of financing the entire production cost of a drama project. By contrast, the three main stations have strong financial abilities because they possess the national (or even regional) broadcasting power to attract advertisers.

Third, under intense competition, cooperation with one of the three networks means that a given drama has a channel to come out on, and, due to the three stations' self-feeding channels and scheduling, that it can avoid the risk of being buried. Last but not least, the three stations have another strength in their overseas program distribution models. Due to relatively stable funding, the stations can find foreign TV stations to buy the rights to air dramas in foreign countries. For example, CCTV and Fuji TV are important partners for the three Korean television stations². These long-term relationships are significant assets for the networks' future international K-drama distribution. Therefore, cooperation with the three networks is the best way for K-dramas to manage intense competition. Once they have agreed to cooperate, the production companies and TV networks employ the Co-production system to create K-dramas.

In 2006, the government passed a new cultural act specifically to promote TV content production as an amendment of the Media and Cultural Industry Act. This act specifies that media content production can only be performed using a special purpose company (SPC) system involving limited period firms, which are registered to only create media content [13]. For TV drama production, an SPC registers with the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism at the advent of Pre-production operations and continues its function until post-production ends. In addition, the government offers a tax benefit to SPCs for TV drama production [14]. These measures not only enable independent production companies to make more profits stemming from foreign investment, pre-broadcast right sales to foreign television stations, remaking

license sales, product placement as advertising sponsorship, and merchandising tie-ins, but also improve their control in programming and the production management overall as co-invested partners vis-a-vis the television stations. In addition, television stations also welcome the SPC system because it reduces their burden of providing full financing for a planned drama project. To some extent, SPC production is closely tied to the direct distribution of completed K-dramas to foreign TV channels, starting in the Pre-production stage. Thus, the government's SPC policy helps the TV industry with funding, active Co-production, risk reduction, spending and production budget transparency, and procedural efficiency during drama production.

2. The K-drama Production System

As demonstrated in the history section, the Co-production system with SPCs works well for independent production companies and network television stations. By analyzing the process of drama production under the Co-production system, we find that there are three main characteristics of Korean TV drama's production: no full Pre-production, the central role of screenwriters in production teams, and the combination of the producer and director roles.

2.1. No Full Pre-production

K-dramas do not go through a full Pre-production process, but rather continue shooting and producing through broadcasting. This enables production teams to adjust their dramas according to responses and feedback from markets and audiences. Before production, screenplays are typically only one-third or less complete. When a drama is broadcast, a website promotes it and collects feedback from the audience. This allows the production team to have a good understanding of viewers' motivations and thinking. This way, the production team can continuously adjust and change the drama, regardless of the original screenplay, the actors, the background music, etc., in order to appeal to the audience. For example, *The Moon Embracing the Sun* (해를 품은 달), which aired on MBC in 2011, changed its ending from the death of the lead actress to a happy ending because its audience strongly opposed the original tragic ending. This adjustment caused the audience ratings for the last two episodes to increase to 37%, the highest mark in 2011 [15].

In addition, this model optimizes resource distribution, simply because dramas that perform poorly are not fully produced. As a result, there is no waste in production. However, there are also exceptions to this model, such as *The Legend Of The Blue Sea* (푸른 바다의 전설) and *Descendants of the Sun*, both which were fully produced before broadcast and also enjoyed good audience ratings.

Besides that, the rating system also contributes a lot. The Korean Media Rating Board (영상물등급위원회) divides its age rating system into five age groups according to the frequency, intensity, and cumulative impact of sex and nudity, violence, language, horror, drug use, and imitable behavior, General (all ages admitted), 12+, 15+, Adults Only, and Restricted. When companies receive their dramas' age ratings, they simply follow the corresponding requirements. In addition, because of improved legal and administrative systems, there is not much time wasted on the regulation of productions.

2.2. The Central Role of Screenwriters

When it comes to the structure of production teams, the screenwriter is the central position compared with the director and the actors. In Korea, influence within a K-drama is distributed as follows: screenwriters 70%-80%, actors 20%, and directors 10%. The Korean industry regards the screenwriter as the heart of the production team. Professional screenwriters enjoy higher salaries than actors, especially taking into account the bonuses they receive when their dramas enjoy high audience ratings. Further, if their dramas are broadcast or re-broadcast on other channels or abroad, screenwriters could also get sizable benefits.

Screenwriters enjoy great power in their relationships with other main players. Above all, production companies would respect screenwriters' creative ideas and their opinions on actors. Some screenwriters even have the power to decide actors directly. Further, when network TV stations seek investment or to schedule a drama, they take the screenwriters' views into important consideration. As for PDs (producer and director), screenwriters mostly enjoy a higher status, even though there are cooperative relations between them. During drama's press conferences, hosts clearly introduce screenwriters before PDs. When shooting a scene, the PD shows great respect to the writer's screenplay and voice. Similarly, the actors must strictly follow the screenplay. If they want to change their lines, they must receive agreement from the writer. However, when it comes to viewers, screenwriters have no absolute authority. As mentioned earlier, Korean dramas do not go through full Pre-production, but rather shoot while broadcasting. This means that if a drama is not popular among viewers, it will end earlier than expected. That the audience ultimately decides the length of the drama causes great pressure on the screenwriter and makes him or her work harder. Screenwriters with two consecutive cancellations go on the industry's blacklist that it is difficult for the writers to be hired again.

All professional screenwriters are members of an organization called the Korean Radio & TV Writers Association (한국방송작가협회), established in 1957. On one hand, the association serves as the protector of the screenwriters. For example, in 1978, a serious disagreement arose between a network station and screenwriters. With the help of the association and the long-time defend, the court decided that the copyright for dramas belongs to the screenwriters. This decision was of epoch-making significance. On the other hand, screenwriters have an obligation to the association and cannot violate copyright law. If a screenwriter plagiarizes, he or she is expelled from the association and forced out from the industry. Therefore, due to pressure from the audience and the restraint demanded by the association, screenwriters are more prudent and responsible for their work.

In addition, it is worth noting the interesting phenomenon that more than 90% of screenwriters are female. Because the great majority of screenwriters are female, the most common K-drama genres are related to love and family. Among them, that most screenwriters are professionally trained. For example, the famous screenwriter, Kim Eun-sook (김은숙), writer of Descendants of the Sun, graduated with one major in Literature and Art from the Seoul Institute of the Arts. The subtle reflections, skillful construe, and clear logic in her work is deeply based on her professional training. Some screenwriters come from other backgrounds, such as entertainment writer, actress, and so on. The hot drama, My Love From The Star (별에 서온그대), is written by Park Jieun, who was formerly a professional chess player. The variety of previous work experience makes screenwriters more creative in drama production and leads to more diversified genres.

In conclusion, screenwriters play an essential role in K-drama production. They not only have strong power and abilities, but also great responsibility for dramas due to pressure from audiences and the Korean Radio & TV Writers Association.

2.3. The PD: The Combination of the Producer and the Director

Another distinct characteristic of the K-drama production system is the producer -director (PD) roles. If the screenwriter is the brain of a production, the PD is the arms and legs, meaning that the PD obeys the screenwriters and manages a huge workload. During Pre-production, the PD mainly works as the producer. The PD provides the drama project and the production company reviews the drama outline, analyzes the market and network stations, and then makes an annual drama production plan. The PD mainly works as the director in the mid- and late stages of production. The role of the PD centralizes power and saves time, as the PD's decisions can be put into practice immediately. This is vital during the intense production schedule.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the government's policies, Korea's economic conditions, and technological advancements have helped K-drama development to varying extents across history. Nowadays, the three television stations, KBS, MBC, and SBS, act as dominant players in the drama industry, and Co-production between stations and independent production companies is common for drama production system in Korea. And the process of drama production works as follows. In Pre-production, the PD works as the producer and gives the drama project to the production company. The production company and the television station then put the drama project into practice through the Co-production system. The success of Pre-production and Co-production mainly depends on the screenwriter and his or her screenplay. However, at this stage, the screenplay is usually only an incomplete draft. During shooting, the PD works as the director, following the screenwriter's work and suggestions. After one or two episodes, the drama goes to the station to broadcast. The screenwriter then continuously revises the screenplay according to audience feedback, and the PD continues shooting episodes; the drama continues shooting while being broadcast.

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