

■ Reconsidering Love in Japanese and Korean Trendy Dramas

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Since the early 1970s, TV soap operas have been embraced as one of the popular forms of entertainment in East Asia (Chua and Iwabuchi, “Introduction” 1). In addition to being consumed by domestic viewers, melodramas produced in different parts of this region have been circulating across geographical boundaries and generating transnational audiences. These exchanges have nevertheless been very uneven, with serial TV dramas mostly unilaterally flowing from Japan and Korea into predominantly ethnic Chinese markets, including Taiwan (Chua and Iwabuchi, “Introduction” 2-3). The inflows of Japanese and Korean TV dramas into the rest of East Asia developed into a great presence on the regional cultural scene. Despite the diversity of genres on offer, a majority of the Japanese and Korean dramas that gain the most popularity in Taiwan and other East Asian countries are about love stories unfolding in modern environments (Chan 173; Chua and Iwabuchi, “Introduction” 6; Iwabuchi 63; Rawnsley 219; Yang 64). Take Taiwan as an example: the local craze for Japanese dramas started with the airing of *Tokyo Love Story* for the first time on Star Chinese Channel in 1992, and *Autumn in My Heart* is considered to have launched the Korean Wave on the island (Huang 8; Iwabuchi 64; Kim Youna

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129). The plot of the former revolves around the complicated love relationships among five young people who are pursuing study or career development in Tokyo. The latter follows the bumpy romance between two tragic lovers against the backdrop of beautiful scenery. Both Japanese and Korean romance dramas emotionally engage their viewers with the portrayal of bitter-sweet love between leading characters who serve as ideal role models and demonstrate how to develop romantic relationships. These are not coincidental similarities since the Korean TV industry, aiming at cultural expansion in East Asia, followed the formula of Japanese romance drama that has been crucial for marketing Japanese cultural exports (Creighton 20-21; Huang 6-7; Cagle 196). Korean soap operas, however, not only filled the void left when Japanese ones began to wane in popularity in the early 2000s but also generated new audiences with a unique take on romantic narratives (Chen 22; Chua 19; Kim Hyun Mee 196; Shim 25). This paper seeks to provide an overview of the distinctions between the romantic images furnished and the underlying perceptions of romantic relationships cultivated by Japanese and Korean dramas. A special focus will be put on the potential of Korean dramas to explore the possibilities of atypical romances that might induce the restructuring of love and desire in romantic relationships.

As mentioned, the Japanese dramas, known as Japanese trendy dramas or idol *dorama*, that swept through East Asia in the 1990s feature modern urban life and the romantic stories among young heroes and heroines (Chua 19; Iwabuchi 55; Kim Jeongmee, "Introduction" 8). *Tokyo Love Story*, which sparked the popularity of Japanese *dorama* abroad, paints a picture that exemplifies these elements. The serial begins with Nagao Kanji relocating from his hometown, Ehime, to Tokyo for his new job. He soon meets an energetic new colleague, Akana Rika, who later falls in love with him. Kanji nonetheless wavers between Rika and Sekiguchi Satomi, his former high school classmate who has an affair with Kanji's best friend, Mikami Ken'ichi. After Satomi breaks up with Mikami, Kanji chooses her over Rika. The audiences, contrary to Kanji, are overwhelmingly in favor of Rika. In stark contrast to Satomi, a hesitant and traditional woman, Rika "represent[s] a desirable image of 'modern' or 'new age' woman" who is both professional at work and ardent in love (Iwabuchi 64). Her unswerving pursuit of the so-called "pure love" (or *chun ai*, a sincere love that is its own reward and seeks no return) and effort of making thoughtful gestures of love particularly constitute her appeal as both a dream lover and ideal role model (Iwabuchi 64). Classic scenes and quotes from *Tokyo Love Story* are thus often cited as examples to fans regarding what to make of love and how to communicate feelings in a romantic relationship. For instance, the scenes where Rika recurrently refers to the feelings of passion rather than emotional security

as the touchstone of love highlight the role of female agency in developing a romantic relationship. Those sentimental knick-knacks she gives to Kanji, such as the mini snowman she brings all the way back from Niigata, showcase an idea of romance that focuses on emotional connection rather than the exchange of pricey gifts. Tokyo, portrayed as a place of both hardship and promise, becomes a romantic scenario where these beautiful love stories can take place (Leung 71). Scholars observe that the imaging of the characters' lives in an urban setting allows depiction of modern and stylish lifestyles which is considered to be a big draw for viewers of Japanese *dorama* (Iwabuchi 63). The hustle and bustle of urban life also creates a vibrant atmosphere in which breathtaking possibilities of romance can be explored (Leung 72). The beloved bright smile of Rika that shines up at Kanji whenever she sees him in the crowd epitomizes the beauty of an urban romance.

Researchers argue that Japanese *dorama* highlight the romantic aspects of loves and lives of young city dwellers, which prompts identification with the good-looking leads of the story (Iwabuchi 66-67; Leung 70). The emotional involvement paves the way for favorable response of the audience to the import of endeavoring towards one's life goals which is carried by many of the dramas. Life can be rough. For those who persevere in life and rise to challenges, at the end of the day true love will nevertheless prevail and compensate for all the hardships they experience (Leung 68). The combination of such motivational overtones and romantic themes translates into a focus on aspects of social relations emerging in various forms of human encounters in a city that, I argue, distinguishes Japanese *dorama* from Korean romantic dramas. Shifts in gender roles and gender expectations in modern Japanese society are explored in romantic dramas featuring new categorizations of men and women, such as the "dried fish woman" in *It's Only Little Light in My Life*, or transforming ideas of sex and marriage, such as in *The Full-Time Wife Escapist*. To sum up, Japanese *dorama* tend to consider romantic love in the context of interpersonal relationships.

Although Korean romantic dramas, as mentioned, are hugely influenced by Japanese productions, they develop alternative approaches to romance which prove to reach new fan bases, most prominently middle-aged women, and, I would argue, even open up the possibilities of cultivating a desire for non-humans (Kim Hyun Mee 196; Mori 128). It is often noted that the Korean romantic genre is highly formulaic (Kim Hyun Mee 196; Chen 42-43). Whether tragic or comic in tone, Korean dramas tend to tell simple love stories featuring a scenario where stunningly wealthy and handsome men are unconditionally devoted to one woman (Chan 189; Kim Hyun Mee 192). Such an image of

gender is said to represent the emergence of a new woman-centric social ideal despite the mixed opinions on whether this woman-centrism might challenge or bolster the patriarchal status quo (Chan 189; Schulze 296). Among scholarship on how Korean dramas might empower women watchers in certain ways, Kim Hyun Mee observes that the fantasy of enjoying certain “unrealistic” wholehearted devotion from men constitutes the major appeal of Korean romantic dramas to middle-aged women who would love to have their life of hardships rewritten into something as beautiful as what they see on the screen (192). Schulze goes one step further and calls attention to the “sexual pleasures and desires” involved in the reception of K-dramas (296). By provoking the fans to express their own sexual desire, K-dramas render visible and even legitimate certain desires that have been regarded as inappropriate, especially those of middle-aged women for younger men (Schulze 314). Delivering the charm of *oppas* (meaning the older brother or romantic interest of a female) rather than messages regarding the nuances of human relationships, K-dramas come with their share of prompting the redefinition of sexual norms.

Building on the observations mentioned above, I would like to add to the debate and argue that Korean romantic dramas have more often than not presented the audience with alternative imaginaries of Romeo that entail reshaping perceptions of romance. A prominent approach is to introduce certain cross-species relationships between human females and non-human males. Two of the most well-known examples of non-human males are an alien stranded on Earth for hundreds of years in *My Love from the Star*, and a 939-year-old immortal goblin in *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God*. The effects of new media and digital technology on romantic lives also find their way into the genre. In *Memories of the Alhambra*, an Augmented Reality (AR) game about medieval battles around the Palace of Alhambra not only offers the background against which the plot unfolds but also prompts the transformation of the leading male character, Yoo Jin-woo, into a new species of “AR lover” and hence the creation of a novel contour of romance. In the process of playing the AR game, which leads to the irrevocable blurring of the boundary between the real world and the AR world, Yoo comes to realize that the physical body of the human player becomes melded with the program codes of the game. Instead of remaining an autonomous subject who can take up and log out of the game at will, Yoo finds himself implicated in an assemblage where elements as heterogeneous as “humans” and codes work together to form new entities and thereby new politics of intimacy. Another romantic drama, *W: Two Worlds*, centers around the love relationship between the main character of a webtoon and the daughter of the author of the webtoon. Fully aware of the possible allegation that such a rela-

relationship is at best unrealistic and at worst absurd, the female lead shouts out an apology for her falling for a webtoon character in a quarrel with her mother in episode 9: “I know it is nonsensical but I just can’t help it!” Her agony brings our attention to the power of desire that breaks down the dam of the so-called real life. While critics often dismiss romantic dramas as presenting unrealistic expectations of love and experiences out of a fairy tale, it is actually possible to reassess the potential of the genre to look beyond the ordinary reality for an alternative configuration of desire. The instances of K-dramas mentioned above delve into the possibilities of unconventional romances between humans and non-humans, each with its own unique take.

An approach that draws from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s interpretation of love might provide a framework to facilitate further discussion of the significance of the romantic relationships between humans and non-humans. For Hardt and Negri, love induces creation rather than results in repetition of the same. That is the reason why they think of the prevalent notion of romantic love in the contemporary society as one of the corrupt forms of love when love is rendered as a process of becoming the same. They blame the normalized development from couple to marriage to family for corrupting the notion of romantic love. The “barren” marriage of the wasp and the orchid, unlike that between bees and flowers which leads to the production of fruit, involves the encounter of singularities and thereby the composition of new assemblages (186). Such new assemblages entail the composition of the new “common,” a new space for politics which promotes open access to resources and non-exclusive participation in decision-making. This is why they emphasize that love is creative in the political sense (186). Here I would like to put more weight on their observation:

Love is productive in a philosophical sense too—productive of being. When we engage in the production of subjectivity that is love, we are not merely creating new objects or even new subjects in the world. Instead we are producing a new world, a new social life. Being, in other words, is not some immutable background against which life takes place but is rather a living relation in which we constantly have the power to intervene. Love is an ontological event in that it marks a rupture with what exists and the creation of the new. (180-81)

Taking *Memories of the Alhambra* as an example, the interaction between the male and female leads induce the incessant movements between the physical world and the virtual world. These movements produce a cartography of novel engagements that disrupt the well-established sense of romantic love and the marriage norms long promoted in romantic dramas. The process of falling in love thus deviates from the set course of a couple merging in unity and

rather becomes one in which new relations are being produced when the leading characters keep exploring how, as is the case of the wasp and the orchid, “the encounter of singularities of their love” might work (Hardt and Negri 188).

How exactly the romantic relationships between humans and non-humans work and what implications there are remain to be explored. What is for certain for now is that these relationships cannot be dismissed lightly as some nonsense, especially when the digital environment we now find ourselves in increasingly demands the reconsideration of meanings and values of love and desire. Some of the Korean romantic dramas have made their attempts, and there will definitely be more to come in the years ahead.

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