

## **Korean Cultural Proximity towards Asian Audiences**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the appeal of Korean dramas among Asian audiences, focusing on Korean cultural proximity's role in shaping viewer preferences. It explores how themes like family values, love, and perseverance resonate across various Asian countries, including Malaysia. Through qualitative interviews with Korean media participants and Malaysian industry experts, the research reveals how Korean dramas harmonize traditional and modern values, aligning with shared Asian sensibilities. The findings suggest that the success of Korean dramas lies in their ability to evoke familiarity and nostalgia, transcending regional boundaries while maintaining a distinct cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Korean Dramas ; Cultural Proximity ; Asian Audiences ; Cultural Identity

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v10iSI29.6908>

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### **1.0 Introduction**

Culture is deeply embedded in consumer behaviour. Cultural orientation significantly influences thinking, persuasion processes (Aaker & Maheswaran, 1997), and emotional patterns (Markus & Kitayama, 1994, as cited in Hung et al., 2011). Consequently, culture plays a critical role in forming relationships, creating networks, and adapting to the global market (Fang, 2001; Tornroos & Miller, 1993). Fletcher & Fang (2006) argue that a nation's culture evolves through cultural exchanges. This evolution results from subtle influences such as information exchange, media influences, responses to different cultural stimuli by various age groups, changes in political and economic circumstances, shifts in social attitudes (e.g., gender norms), and the assimilation process.

According to Kim & Kang (2000), there is now a better balance between media and cultural interchange compared to the 1990s, including the import and export of media content and services. Similarly, Ching (2000) and Iwabuchi (2002) assert that international marketing of films, fashion, pop music, and television programs impacts and transforms local culture and sensibilities. Popular culture thus serves as a major vehicle for promoting cultural globalization (Yoshimoto, 2003).

Thomas and Ford (1995, as cited in Fletcher & Feng, 2006) explained that culture influences network actors by promoting implicit norms for acceptable behaviour. Anthony Giddens (1995, as cited in Servaes & Lie, 2003), suggested that while humans desire a place of belonging, they simultaneously seek to connect with what lies beyond this 'place.' The inherent human desire for a sense of belonging is natural.

In communication, the concept of cultural proximity was first emphasized in determining newsworthiness (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Trepte, 2003). This term elucidates why consumers may embrace or reject programs (Straubhaar, 1991, 1997), often used to explain

the selection and enjoyment of specific television programs (Hoskin, McFayden & Finn, 1997; Straubhaar, 1991; Trepte, 2003). As Trepte (2003) contends, cultural proximity influences buying decisions as well as media production and usage.

Straubhaar (2003) defines cultural proximity as the inclination or preference for media products that closely resemble one's culture. This concept is frequently employed to describe the appeal of foreign and domestic media in an international context. Cultural proximity is multi-dimensional, existing on multiple levels and associated with various layers of an individual audience's identity, including geographic, cultural, religious, and ethnic factors (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, as cited in Straubhaar, 2007). While many of these factors are intertwined with language, disentangling their exact role in proximity effects can be challenging. However, it is generally believed that when people have access to culturally diverse media materials, they will predominantly prefer media that resemble or are similar to their own culture.

Park and Hwang (2002, as cited in Trepte, 2008) conducted a study investigating the influence of cultural proximity on television program imports to South Korea. They hypothesized that television programs addressing audiences' cultural interests are more likely to be broadcast. To examine the attraction of Korean television dramas to Asian audiences, this study will assess the role of culture and explore how Korean dramas have gained popularity by resonating with Asian sentiments.

## 2.0 Literature Review

The phenomenon of Korean dramas, or "K-dramas," gaining widespread popularity across various Asian countries can be analyzed through the lens of cultural proximity. This concept, as defined by Straubhaar (2003), refers to the inclination of audiences to prefer media products that resonate with their cultural values and identities. Korean dramas, with their strong emphasis on themes like family values, love, and perseverance, have effectively leveraged this cultural proximity to establish a deep connection with Asian audiences.

Korean cultural proximity plays a critical role in the appeal of K-dramas, particularly among Asian audiences, as these narratives often embody values rooted in Confucian traditions. These values, such as filial piety, social harmony, respect for authority, and collective responsibility, are shared across many Asian societies and are regularly depicted in the character dynamics and storylines of Korean dramas (Chua, 2012; Kim, 2020). Studies have shown that Korean dramas often portray moral values such as loyalty to the family and the nation, as well as filial piety towards parents, which resonate with traditional Chinese values (Rana, 2020).

Montreal et al. (2004) emphasize that Asian cultures tend to prioritize harmony, cooperation, and public decorum, all of which are consistently represented in K-drama narratives. Similarly, research indicates that Korean dramas satisfy Asian audiences' emotional needs by being easy to assimilate to a similar lifestyle, cultural proximity, and expressiveness, which contributes to their popularity in Malaysia (Julina, 2018). Moreover, the portrayal of filial piety in Korean dramas has a significant impact on Chinese audiences, as the concept resonates with traditional Chinese values (Rana, 2020).

This cultural alignment significantly contributes to the popularity of K-dramas in countries such as Malaysia, where viewers report a strong emotional resonance with the themes and moral frameworks presented (Yin, 2021). The preference for Korean programs over other types of shows indicates that Asians express sympathy for Asian cultural frames, including family morals, high morality, and love and sacrifice (Julina, 2018).

Recent studies further affirm that the cultural proximity offered by Korean media enhances viewer engagement and loyalty, especially when traditional values are blended with contemporary social challenges (Lee & Huat, 2022; Park & Lee, 2023). For example, the drama *Cheese in the Trap* depicts Korean value systems such as authoritarianism, collectivism, familism, and filial duty, reflecting the influence of Confucianism in Korean society (Kumar, 2020).

K-dramas effectively achieve a balance between traditional and modern elements, which broadens their appeal to a diverse audience. The study by Choe (2000) and Duk (2003) highlights how Korean culture incorporates traditional values like collectivism and long-term orientation while simultaneously embracing modern influences. This dual approach allows K-dramas to maintain their distinct cultural identity while also resonating with broader Asian sensibilities, making them relatable to international audiences. On top of that, the growing popularity of Korean dramas in Malaysia demonstrates that language is not a barrier for Malaysians or people from other countries in enjoying these shows. Instead, it's the portrayal of relatable human experiences such as lifestyle, values, and family that eventually contributed significantly to the success of Korean dramas in Malaysia (Julina, 2023).

The study underscores the importance of cultural familiarity in media consumption. As argued by Trepte (2003), cultural proximity influences media preferences, and audiences are more likely to engage with content that mirrors their own cultural experiences. K-dramas' portrayal of Asian values and lifestyles allows them to transcend regional boundaries and create a sense of nostalgia and familiarity among viewers. Recent research by Lee and Choi (2022) highlights how the global spread of K-dramas has been facilitated by their incorporation of culturally specific themes, making them relatable to a broader, yet culturally sensitive, audience. Korean dramas also have effectively addressed their audiences' cultural interests, which has increased their likelihood of being broadcasted in Malaysia.

This trend aligns with findings by Lim (2024), who points out that media content that reflects shared cultural values fosters stronger viewer engagement and viewership in diverse markets. This demonstrates that audience interest is closely linked to a country's culture, its sensitivities, and prevailing age-related trends (Julina, 2023). Further reinforcing this, Kim et al. (2025) note that cultural familiarity is increasingly pivotal in cross-cultural media exchanges, where the blending of local and global elements ensures content appeals to transnational audiences while maintaining cultural integrity.

In conclusion, the success of Korean dramas in various Asian countries can be largely attributed to their ability to reflect and resonate with shared cultural values. By emphasizing themes like family, love, and perseverance, and by maintaining a unique cultural identity that blends traditional and modern elements, K-dramas effectively engage with Asian audiences, creating a deep sense of cultural

proximity. This appeal underscores the broader role of cultural proximity in media consumption and highlights the potential for media products to foster cultural exchange across different regions.

### 3.0 Methodology

This research was divided into two parts through two (2) interviews. The first was an interview conducted directly with participants who were selected from Korean media participants. The researcher identifies the participants discussion with a Korean officer from the Asian Broadcasting Unit (ABU) to recognize the right participants from KBS and SBS in Korea to be interviewed. To clarify the data obtained is validated and verified, the researcher has conducted a pragmatic validity process as a second part of data collection whereby four participants from Malaysian creative industries experts have been chosen.

They are composed of two Malaysian drama productions through a Media Prima Brand Management Officer and a Senior Associate Compliance & Presentation Astro Malaysia.

To this end, the researcher uses qualitative methods to address the research problems. This method is best used as it aims to investigate human phenomena and investigate interpretations and meaning that are unknown and needed to be explored. Literature reviews may yield insufficient information about the study and thus more information are needed to be gathered through exploration from participants (Creswell, 2014).

Following the methodological approach of the study, which involved qualitative interviews with Korean media participants and Malaysian industry experts, further supports the argument that K-dramas are successful due to their ability to reflect and appeal to the emotional and cultural sensibilities of Asian viewers. The interviews revealed that K-dramas' focus on family-oriented narratives and emotionally resonant storylines is a key factor in their popularity. For instance, the success of dramas like "Winter Sonata" and "Jewel in the Palace" can be attributed to their universal themes of love, family, and overcoming adversity, which are deeply ingrained in Asian cultures.

In this study, the researcher conducted a face-to-face interview with participants and the methodology is designed to be less structured and more open-ended to encourage the participants to freely share their experience and knowledge in detail. The goal of this method is to maximise the depth of information collected. More importantly, the research objectives and problem statements of this studies could be achieved and identified objectively as presented in the following descriptions.

### 4.0 Findings

From the findings, three major themes were identified to answer the research questions namely: a) American, b) Asian, and c) Korean culture. Exploring these themes will bring an understanding of the situation that attracts Asian audiences.

#### 4.1 American

American dramas have historically dominated global drama production, shaping audience perspectives with their portrayals of modern and sophisticated cultural elements for decades. On the other hand, Korean dramas represent a more homogeneous, typifying conventional form of episodes and series (Mittell, 2006). Concerning that, American and Korean TV dramas can each be seen to have their own distinctive features in their narrative strategy. On account, American dramas are more diversified in their genres, including domestic sitcoms, crime thrillers, medical drama, and horror and science fiction (Hoppen-stand, 2009). Meanwhile, Korean dramas primarily present romantic dramas as their most popular genre, especially romantic tragedy (Jiang & Leung, 2012).

Montréal et. al., (2004), identified the three value orientations that are typical of Asians. The first is 'harmony' which translates to mean that Asian culture can adapt to a new environment, although it has strict morals. Second, in terms of action, Asian countries value 'being', meaning there is a fondness for cooperation, compensation in the future, life in organisations and the environment. Lastly, Asians value public space which is closely associated with relationships.

In contrast, Western cultures are pictured differently. Western individuals encourage facial expressivity by considering eye contact to be polite and sincere. They tend to employ more direct speech and are more attuned to facial and semantic information during their social interactions (Ju, 2010). These distinct communicative practices, reinforced by years of culture-specific learning, may well contribute to differences in how Asian and Western cultures attend to and assign meaning to socio-emotional cues encountered in different communication channels (Liu, Rigoulot, & Pell, 2015).

Montreal et. al., (2004), pointed out that plots emanating from Asian culture also have programs that offer more harmonious endings instead of antagonism and friction. They added, "Even the storyline that presents competitiveness might be mixed with cooperation in the ending. This trait is to put stress on the 'being' that Asians adopt not the storyline that places the triumph in sharp conflicts but the storyline that reinforces Asian values through the dynamic turns of a story. Also, Asians have a preference for calmly watching the development of the situation without involving positively in the situation so they prefer to watch love stories rather than political stories" (Montreal et. al., 2004).

According to the informant, Asia has its own value of practice and therefore the exposure of American dramas brings an uncomfortable and dissatisfied feeling. Shim (2010), once pointed out that sharing similar cultures markedly separates Korean programmes from Western ones, and why American programs are unable to present them.

The informant also views that Korean dramas present Asian values and beliefs, and thus closely simulate the Asian way of life. These dramas commonly touch on the daily life aspects of Asians such as family-oriented storylines that differ from the American style.

This statement is in-line with Hanaki, et al., 2007; Chua, 2004, 2008; Lin & Tong, 2008; Mori, 2008, who explored the reasons for Asia's attraction to Korean drama pointed out that these dramas send heartfelt, emotional messages that not generally conveyed by Western TV dramas.

#### 4.2 Asian

Asian culture reflects the interplay of historical events and life experiences of the locals (Ju, 2010). The culture is also regarded as a recipient orientation (Leung, 1992) and its people are flexible in their responses. They are more accepting of uncertainties and external disturbances and regard these as natural phenomena (Lampowski & Emden, 1996 as cited in Fletcher & Feng, 2006), often coping with situations either individually or communally (Fletcher and Fang, 2006).

Montréal, Martin, and Montréal, (2004) asserted that Asian culture and Confucian values are similar. The characteristics of the Asian cultural market based on the different value orientations can be summarized as:

- i) Harmony: This is a basic value that is adaptable to new environments, though it is associated with strict morals;
- ii) Cooperation, compensation in the future, the life in organizations and the environment: Time is used to solve agenda and issues positively; and,
- iii) Public space: Order, hierarchy and deductive-oriented cultures that emphasize abstract thinking and the reality of ideas, moral values, theories, and principles are valued (Montréal, Martin, & Montréal, 2004).

In essence, the Korean Wave TV drama producers have managed to highlight the cultural characteristics of Asians and filter unfavourable Western values. They have also successfully mingled Korea's traditional Confucian beliefs with the dominant modern images in many Asian countries (Chua, 2004; Lin & Tong, 2008). Additionally, these television producers and their crews use skilful, sophisticated techniques to portray contemporary Asians in producing emotionally sensitive and stylish drama (Chua, 2004; Hanaki, et al., 2007; Ju, 2010).

Korean dramas are often family-oriented, focusing not solely on dramatic elements but also emphasizing family and Asian values. These values resonate with viewers across Asian countries, including Malaysia, as they share similar cultural norms. Family values in particular can appeal strongly to Malaysian viewers. Additionally, Korean dramas are characterized by high production quality, minimal violence, and a focus on themes of family and subtle romance. These elements aim to create content that touches the hearts of Asian audiences by reflecting common values and experiences. Therefore, these shared values can resonate well with Malaysian viewers.

Korean dramas embody values that are similar to those in other cultures and are carefully curated to appeal to the Asian audience. Family values and cultural elements play a crucial role in the acceptance and success of these dramas among Asian viewers. This perspective is supported by the second participant, who explains that while Korean dramas are distributed internationally, they do not abandon national or traditional values. Traditional values, particularly family-oriented stories, contribute significantly to their success in Asian countries.

While traditional family values are also present in some Western storylines, Asian audiences find Korean dramas more relatable and comforting as they align closely with their own cultural norms. This cultural resonance enables viewers to understand the storylines more easily. Additionally, Korean dramas have been successful in Malaysia by evoking a sense of nostalgia and familiarity among the audience. Korean productions believe that Asians share common values in life. For example, certain popular dramas such as "Winter Sonata" were initially made for local viewers but it rapidly became popular in other Asian countries including Malaysia as it has the same Asian values.

The producer responsible for creating the program is very popular, but it is unlikely that the producer specifically targeted Malaysian or Singaporean viewers. Instead, the producer focused on incorporating certain values and crafting a compelling storyline. The program was first aired in South Korea, where it garnered a positive response from viewers. As a result, it gained traction among Asian audiences and was subsequently acquired by companies that broadcast it on local channels. The program's success across various regions indicates that the quality of the storyline plays a significant role in its appeal.

Korean drama producers believe that it is crucial to add some values that are understandable and can be related to Asian audiences. They feel that they have to produce something that is enjoyable for the audiences to watch with an added human touch. By carrying out this thinking, Korean drama is not just suitable to the local viewers but also for Asians alike.

Successful products typically share three key elements: a focus on family stories, themes of love, and narratives about overcoming difficulties. These elements resonate strongly with audiences worldwide, making the stories engaging and relatable. Korean dramas often appeal to viewers by addressing human experiences and values. For example, *Jewel in the Palace* highlights the success of women in challenging historical contexts, while *Winter Sonata* explores relationships and family dynamics. These dramas are especially popular in China, where they reflect and satisfy audiences' yearning for family values and emotional connections, contributing to their widespread appeal. Undoubtedly, the participants admitted that their reasons for accepting Korean TV dramas were based on their Asian sentiments.

#### 4.3 Korean Culture

The informant emphasize the profound influence of Korean culture on Korean dramas, noting its unique blend of Japanese and Chinese cultural elements while modernizing without becoming overly westernized. According to the informant, Korean culture effectively caters to the diverse tastes of Asian viewers.

Korean culture is characterized by widely shared values, which, as described by Choe (2000) and Duk (2003), are inherited from previous generations and guide individuals' behaviour according to established norms. These values include high collectivism, authoritarianism (*gwonwijuui*), high anxiety, long-term orientation, and high enthusiasm (*sinmyeong*), which are central to and distinctive

of Korean culture (Choe, 2002a; Duk, 2003). The informant also notes that Korean culture maintains its traditional uniqueness while embracing a variety of global influences. This balance allows Korean dramas to resonate with international audiences, including those from other countries. Adding to that, the informant also mention that when introducing Korean culture to Malaysia, is well-received due to its modern and fresh qualities compared to local culture. Korean dramas do not carry the same Americanized aspects, instead offering a distinct, yet familiar, Asian cultural experience. This familiarity with diverse cultures in Malaysia facilitates the acceptance of Korean cultural elements. Overall, Korean dramas effectively showcase Korean cultural values, which can be shared and appreciated by other Asian countries, such as Malaysia. This exchange reflects a reciprocal cultural sharing between Korea and other nations.

## 5.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

Media producers and marketers aiming to replicate the success of Korean dramas should prioritize culturally resonant storytelling, incorporating universal themes such as familial bonds, resilience, and collective responsibility. Collaborating with regional writers, actors, and production teams will help enhance local relevance. Using data analytics to assess audience preferences and implementing transmedia storytelling, including webtoons, social media content, and interactive platforms, can strengthen viewer engagement. Moreover, high-quality subtitles and dubbing in multiple languages are vital to preserving emotional nuance and cultural authenticity. Marketing efforts should highlight cultural elements such as Korean food, fashion, and customs to appeal to audiences interested in both entertainment and cultural exploration. Engaging with fan-driven communities and adapting content for mobile-first markets are strategies that can expand reach and foster global fanbases.

Future research should expand the scope of studies beyond Asia, focusing on the reception of Korean dramas in regions such as the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, where distinct sociocultural contexts may influence their appeal. Comparative studies across continents could help identify narrative elements that transcend cultural boundaries while revealing localized strategies for enhancing relevance. Additionally, examining the role of diaspora communities, global streaming platforms, and fan-driven ecosystems will offer deeper insights into the international spread of Korean media and its global resonance.

## Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support and contributions of several individuals and institutions. First and foremost, my heartfelt gratitude to the participants from Korean media organizations, particularly KBS and SBS, for their invaluable insights and cooperation during the interviews. Their perspectives were essential in understanding the cultural nuances that make Korean dramas resonate with Asian audiences.

Also, sincere thanks to the Malaysian industry experts, including representatives from Media Prima and Astro Malaysia, as well as the Malaysian drama production teams. Their contributions were critical in validating and verifying the findings of this study, particularly in understanding the local reception of Korean dramas. Finally, huge appreciation to Asian Broadcasting Unit (ABU) for their assistance in facilitating contact with the Korean media participants. Their support was crucial in ensuring the success of the data collection process.

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