Special Issue Topic

Netflix and East Asian Audiovisual Culture

DAL YONG JIN

Abstract

Netflix has been on the constant lookout for new genres and themes that have proven successful elsewhere, including in East Asia. Netflix has also driven changes in audiences' consumption habits in Hong Kong, Singapore, and other countries. The ongoing evolution of global over-the-top (OTT) platforms asks scholars from diverse fields, including media/cultural studies, film studies, area studies, sociology, and anthropology, to entertain under-addressed issues and explore new approaches to understanding digital platforms' effects in the East Asian cultural sphere and beyond. The articles in this special issue commonly discuss the impact of Netflix in tandem with Asian popular culture and the dynamic interplay between Netflix and local cultural creators. They use a case study approach to address recent developments and help unpack our understanding of East Asian popular culture and OTT platforms. Through interdisciplinary and transnational discussions, we hope to shed light on current debates and place them in perspectives that have relevance for future transnational cultural and audiovisual media studies.

Keywords: East Asia, Netflix, digital platforms, transnational culture, audiovisual media studies

Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, Netflix fundamentally shifted the delivery model for global audiovisual content, and its unique characteristic as a

program curator has made it a cultural mediator with the ability to shape local content productions. As global over-the-top (OTT) platforms, including Netflix and Disney+, play a pivotal role in cultural production, East Asian cultural products such as dramas, reality shows, films, and animation have experienced changes in genres, themes, visual style, and narratives. Netflix originals or licensed cultural programs are circulated simultaneously in many countries, compelling local cultural creators to adjust their production norms to attract Netflix and Netflix users.

Netflix has been on the constant lookout for new genres and themes that have proven successful elsewhere including in East Asia. In South Korea, for example, the local audio-visual industry started to develop zombie, sci-fi, adventure, and dark thrillers, and there are now a multitude of television dramas and films that focus on these genres and themes in the era of global OTTs.[1] In Japan, based on the global success of several Anime products, Netflix plans to develop live-action and animated feature films originating from the country. US platforms, including Netflix, "appear to be emerging as the dominant pathway for Japanese dramas to reach broader, non-Japanese audiences."[2] Netflix has also driven changes in audiences' consumption habits in Hong Kong, Singapore, and other countries. The influx of streaming content from overseas is in full flow, and local film and television industries need to consider more globally "if there is to be any future for Hong Kong culture."[3] East Asian cultural creators have reoriented their standards in cultural production.

1. B. Han, "Netflix Korea and Platform Creativity," *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6934–51; D. Y. Jin, "Netflix's Effects on the Korean Wave: Power Relations Between Local Cultural Industries and Global OTT Platforms," *Asian Journal of Communication* 33, no. 5 (2023): 452–69.
2. D. Humphrey, "Japanese Dramas and the Streaming Success Story that Wasn't: How Industry Practices and IP Shape Japan's Access to Global Streaming," *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* 3, no. 1 (2023): 3, https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.3668.
3. K. Yang, "Netflix: Great for Hong Kong Viewers, Not So Good for Home-Grown Talent," *South China Morning Post*, January 13, 2016, https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1900642/netflix-great-hong-kong-viewers-not-so-good-home-grown.

The ongoing evolution of global OTT platforms asks scholars from diverse fields, including media/cultural studies, film studies, area studies, sociology, and anthropology, to entertain under-addressed issues and explore new approaches to understanding digital platforms' effect in the East Asian cultural sphere and beyond. The idea of this special issue also came out after my Zoom presentation at Hong Kong Baptist University. When Professor Ying Zhu invited me to give a talk in September 2023, I mainly presented a paper on the recent trend of the New Korean Wave in the digital platform era, focusing on current influences and future direction. Zhu initiated the idea of working together for a special issue that focuses on the dynamic relations between Netflix and East Asia audiovisual contents for *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images*. *Global Storytelling* has previously explored the broader relationship between serial narrative and streaming platforms (https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/gs/issue/214/info/). I'm delighted to lead the efforts in putting together this special issue, which seeks to further advance aspects of this large topic.

The articles in this special issue commonly discuss the impact of Netflix in tandem with Asian popular culture and the dynamic interplay between Netflix and local cultural creators. They use a case study approach to address recent developments and help unpack our understanding of East Asian popular culture and OTT platforms. Through interdisciplinary and transnational discussions, we hope to shed light on current debates and place them in perspectives that have relevance for future transnational cultural and audiovisual media studies.

Netflix Effects on the East Asian Cultural Markets and Contraflow

Netflix has massively shifted the norms of cultural production in Asia, both structurally and textually. Global streaming platforms, including Netflix, have emerged as primary outlets for the worldwide circulation of cultural

content, including East Asian serial dramas,[4] regardless of the emergence of local OTT platforms in Asian countries. Previously, global cultural production companies, mainly in the United States, developed runaway cultural production through the international division of labor.[5] While shooting films and dramas in other countries in order to reduce production costs and utilizing local sceneries, these global forces created original products through their own cultural creators, such as film directors and drama producers. Of course, they directly hired local staff and wage workers in a few different international locations. Once they produced cultural content, they exported them to global cultural markets, which consisted of a one-way flow of cultural programs, primarily from the United States to countries in the Global South. As cultural programs that were created through runaway production were owned by global forces rather than local cultural industries firms, these programs expedited the global dominance of a handful of countries in the Global North.

Since Netflix entered the Asian cultural markets, including Japan in 2015 and South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore in 2016, respectively,[6] the media ecology surrounding cultural production has fundamentally changed. As Zhu[7] aptly puts it, China has become one of the largest cultural markets and, therefore, Hollywood studies are highly interested in the Chinese cultural markets; however, Netflix is not working in China and North

---

4. T. Sang, L. Qu, and Y. Zhu, "East Asian Serial Dramas in the Era of Global Streaming Services: Special Issue Editors' Introduction*," Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* 3, no. 1 (2023): 1, https://doi.org/10.3998/gs.4292.

5. T. Miller and M. C. Leger, "Runaway Production, Runaway Consumption, Runaway Citizenship: The New International Division of Cultural Labor," *Emergences: Journal for the Study of Media & Composite Cultures* 11, no. 1 (2001): 89–115, https://doi.org/10.1080/10457220120044684.

6. N. Sun, "Netflix Now Available in Hong Kong and Almost Everywhere Else—Except Mainland China," *South China Morning Post*, January 7, 2015, https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1898459/netflix-now-available-hong-kong-and-almost-everywhere-else-except.

7. Y. Zhu, *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market* (New Press, 2022).

Korea. Netflix has massively invested in a handful of East Asian countries to utilize local cultural powers. Netflix already understood that these Asian countries had developed several cultural programs and, therefore, it wanted to ride these local forces.[8] Netflix has focused on Korean dramas and reality programs, Japanese anime, and India's Bollywood movies. Local cultural creators in these countries have attempted to work with global OTT platforms to secure production costs and global circulation networks that could not easily be provided locally. Although they continue to work with local cultural industry firms and local OTT platforms, their major contacts are global.

Consequently, these two major changing media environments have influenced the international division of labor and cultural flows. On the one hand, unlike in previous years, Netflix has focused on its own cultural creators. While providing production costs, it simply asks local cultural creators to proceed with the entire production process, from script writing to post-production, rather than using American cultural creators, which is a new trend. Since Netflix must create as many cultural products as possible in these Asian countries, it cannot use its cultural creators, which costs Netflix more than what they are spending. On the other hand, the flow of cultural products has significantly changed. Although they are still Netflix originals, cultural products that are created in Asian countries as local cultural programs go global, which shows the increasing trend of contra-cultural flow.[9]

The increasing role of Netflix in Asia has also changed business norms—in particular, intellectual property rights, as "streaming platforms, including Netflix, are capitalizing on intellectual property rights."[10] When local cultural creators produce films and dramas funded by Netflix, they cannot secure intellectual property (IP) rights as Netflix provides production costs in return for the IP rights, as can be seen with *Squid Game* (2021), which is

---

8. D. Y. Jin, S. J. Lee, and S. K. Hong, "Is Netflix Riding the Korean Wave or Vice Versa?" *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023): 6887–7074.
9. D. Thussu, ed., *Media on the Move: Global Flow and Contra-Flow* (Routledge, 2007).
10. Han, "Netflix Korea and Platform Creativity," 6944.

one of the primary packages that Netflix secures. Since IP rights are some of the primary assets for cultural creators and cultural industry firms, Netflix, as the IP holder of these locally produced programs, has increased its financial gains and overall control over the global flow of popular culture.

Meanwhile, Netflix has greatly changed textual elements in Asian cultural production. Most of all, local cultural creators have developed new genres and themes that global audiences prefer. Global audiences used to enjoy what Netflix has provided and, therefore, they mostly want to watch similar genres and themes. Thus, again, local cultural creators developed unprecedented genres, including zombie, adventure, and dark thriller, that were not popular in Asia. As *Squid Game* in Korea also implies, local cultural creators develop survival genres. Second, with the advent of global OTT platforms in Asia, local cultural industry firms develop locally based transmedia storytelling.[11] Several Asian creators utilize several local genres, such as webtoons, anime, web dramas, and web entertainment, to transform them into big-screen culture films, dramas, and digital games.

Netflix's effects are enormous, and global OTT platforms, including Disney+ and Apple TV, also invest in Asian cultural markets.[12] Digital platforms have become some of the largest and most significant cultural sectors in the contemporary cultural sphere. What is significant is that global OTT platforms are mostly gaining profits, as local cultural creators are subordinated to them. Cultural creators have taken a chance to work with global OTT platforms when local platforms and cultural industry firms do not provide them. Netflix is changing the business norms for Asian cultural creators. However, as Netflix controls value and monopolizes profits, each government in East Asia needs to provide the necessary provisions—for

---

11. M. Freeman, *Historicising Transmedia Storytelling: Early Twentieth-Century Transmedia Story Worlds* (Routledge, 2017).
12. Jin, "Netflix's Effects on the Korean Wave"; H. S. Yim, "'Netflix Effect' Lifts Korean Content but Market Control Worries Grow," Reuters, June 20, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/netflix-effect-lifts-korean-content-market-control-worries-grow-2023–06–19/.

example, by securing IP rights for cultural creators.[13] In East Asia, cultural industries have been reshaped by Netflix, and the imbalances between the local and global have increased, although local cultural industries get some benefits, including the necessary funds and circulation networks.

As Netflix has continued to increase its power in Asia, several works analyzed the influence of global platforms through various perspectives, including critical media industry perspectives, political economy, and audience studies. Unlike previous publications, this special issue primarily focuses on textual dimensions by using symbolic or distinctive cultural programs, such as *Squid Game*, *Bloodhounds*, *The Glory*, *The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House* (2023), *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories, Our Beloved Summer* (2021) from Korea, *First Love* (2022) from Japan, *Wave Makers*, and *Bling Empire*. Several authors in this special issue deal with numerous focal points related to textual adaptation, transformation, hybridization, and cultural flows. These essays together shed light on our current debates on the increasing role of global streaming service platforms in Asian cultural production and aesthetic transformation.

Works Included in This Special Section

Benjamin Han discusses seriality related to Netflix. Seriality is one of television's most important and recognizable elements since its inception and has been understood in terms of gaps, interruptions, and repetitions. Seriality has also long been linked to the mode of melodrama and the soap opera genre. However, with the rise of Netflix, seriality has taken on new meanings that redefine the textualities of original Korean series. He examines how streaming seriality must be reconsidered under the logic of lack, deviating from previous scholarship on seriality firmly grounded in the discourse of excess in terms of aesthetics and affect. To illuminate these points, he

---

13. Yim, "'Netflix Effect' Lifts Korean Content but Market Control Worries Grow."

engages in a close reading of *The Glory* (2023), a popular original Korean series on Netflix, to explore how its seriality, inflected in the logic of lack, shapes its textualities and speaks to the new political economy of streaming seriality. In examining how seriality is being reconceived in the age of streaming services, he questions how Korean TV dramas on Netflix prompt us to reexamine the concept of seriality.

Kirk Kanesaka explores Netflix's role in disseminating Japanese culture globally by focusing on *The Makanai: Cooking for the Maiko House* (2023) and *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories* (2016, 2019). He believes, starting in the 2000s, Japan embraced its "soft power," heavily exporting its cultural identity through the "Cool Japan" campaign, which aimed to market Japanese culture globally. Scholars analyze "Cool Japan" as a cultural phenomenon and its impact on national branding and Japanese nationalism. As technological advancements increased access to Japanese cultural goods, the ownership of Japan's cultural narrative shifted away from the government's campaign. *The Makanai* challenges stereotypes surrounding maiko while *Midnight Diner* pairs Japanese recipes with heartwarming stories of overlooked individuals. Netflix redefines storytelling by featuring complex characters deeply rooted in Japanese culture, promoting active engagement among viewers and challenging Western stereotypes. Utilizing Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity, Kanesaka illustrates how Netflix content respects the complexity and mystery of Japanese culture, fostering a deeper understanding and respect.

Vivien Nara offers a reflection on two recent romance series offered by Netflix: *Our Beloved Summer* (2021) from Korea and *First Love* (2022) from Japan. Both series seem to be successes for their local industries, and a review of their production histories as well as their place within a broader Netflix programming ecology highlights the strategies Netflix is taking with its increased investment in the drama industries of both nations. Importantly, both series also share a temporality in their romance storytelling, one that moves between a youthful, recent past and a lackluster, adult present. Though the texts are not necessarily adjacently marked in the Netflix

interface itself, both series present key similarities that hint at a winning narrative formula. Drawing on critical scholarly literature on popular romance and modernity, she argues that while the temporality of "romance in the recent past" might not necessarily be marked as a working microgenre in the Netflix algorithm, it certainly presents as a transnationally translatable storytelling mode that narrativizes, entertains, and consoles audiences coming from similar experiences of modernity.

Jiahua Bu's article delves deep into the complex phenomenon of the Korean television show *Squid Game*, migrating, by active fans, from Netflix to Bilibili due to the show's unavailability in mainland China. Operating within media studies and fan culture theories—with particular reference to Elizabeth Evans's:Engagement Model" as its focal point—this article takes an ethnographic approach and employs digital ethnographic methodology in exploring Bilibili's platform dynamics, with particular attention being paid toward fan community contribution to creatively shaping and reappropriating the show's content, as well as, most significantly, expanding *Squid Game*'s influence across mainland China. Evans's model presents four categories of engagement behavior: receptive textual, receptive peritextual, interactive textual, and interactive peritextual. While Evans's framework provides an essential way of understanding audience interactions with media content, this study adds a temporal component. This study's discoveries shed light on Bilibili community members' responses to *Squid Game* over time, aligning with various categories of engagement behavior articulated by Evans's model.

Dal Yong Jin examines webtoon-based transnational transmedia by mapping out the ways in which webtoons become big-screen culture as a new trend in the Korean Wave phenomenon. It discusses why cultural creators pay attention to webtoons in Korean cultural industries. By textually analyzing the genres and themes that cultural creators are keen on in webtoon-based transmedia storytelling, it maps out the primary features of webtoon-based transmediality. With a case study of *Bloodhounds* (2023), which is one of the successful webtoon-based Netflix originals, the review examines the major characteristics of webtoon-turned-into-big-screen

culture and the implications of webtoon-based transnational transmedia storytelling.

Yixin Xu analyzes *Wave Makers*, a Netflix original Taiwanese TV series, which has not only captivated audiences with its compelling narrative but also sparked the #MeToo movement in Taiwan. The drama, set against the backdrop of a presidential election, intertwines personal and political narratives. This review explores the show's impact, its unique approach to political storytelling, and its role in promoting social reform through media, illustrating how it encourages victims to speak out and inspire a discussion on gender equality and social justice.

So Young Koo discusses Netflix's *Bling Empire*, the first American reality TV series with an all-Asian main cast. She emphasizes that the twenty-first century saw a rise in popularity and interest in East Asian cultural and media products. First created for the local audience, they are now disseminated globally, carrying with them the cultural and identity conflicts of their respective societies. She discusses that *Bling Empire* foregrounds exaggerated caricatures of Asian Americanness and instead globally circulates surface-y stereotypes. The inability to fully grasp the cultural insight necessary to understand these cultural and media products is a further commentary on the danger of "glocal" products of the twenty-first century. Netflix's *Bling Empire* embodies seemingly contrasting American and Asian experiences in the United States. Inspired by Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, she attempts to analyze how the gaze functions in the identity-making of the cast members as they interact in the construction and reception of the series. While unified in their expression of material wealth, the cast members range from immigrant to Asian American to adoptee experiences. The varying backgrounds of the cast members reflect existing structures of real-world cultural interactions. The series weaves very personal struggles of marriage, family, infertility, and relationships to the heightened awareness of the gaze cues. Therefore, the gaze helps to explain the internalized external gaze cues the cast members and, by extension, the audience must negotiate in the understanding of their constructed world.