

How *Pachinko* Mirrors Migrant Life

Rethinking the Temporal, Spatial, and Linguistic Dimensions of Migration

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes the Apple TV+ series *Pachinko* (2022) to comprehend its cross-historical and cross-regional metanarrative unfolding from the organization of temporality, spatiality, and language. As the TV adaptation of Min Jin Lee's eponymous novel, *Pachinko* depicts a family's migration journey from Korea to Japan after the 1910s and emphasizes their suffering from systemic discrimination against temporary Korean residents. Produced by talents from Korea, Japan, and the United States, *Pachinko* displays strong hybridization that combines American TV conventions with a distinct East Asian culture and history. The hybridized, multicultural, and multilingual background of the production necessitates a transnational and interdisciplinary framework to analyze its critical success and cultural implications. Expanding Harvey's notion of time-space compression, the paper conceptualizes the temporal and spatial experience of watching a transnational production via global streaming as a mirrored experience of migrant life. It tackles television dramas as a strategy to understand contemporary migration and globalization by first outlining the evolutionary trajectory of television, and then identifying the movements, mobility, and the transnational cultural flows in *Pachinko*. Moreover, this paper analyzes the linguistic aspects of *Pachinko*, particularly in translation and multilingualism, to establish a connection between language and cultural

identities. Inquiring into previous literature on translation, this paper also seeks to understand the complexity of communicating in multiple languages, both literally and metaphorically. Finally, this paper examines how migration and migrants are reimagined in *Pachinko* at a time when national borders and cultural and linguistic barriers are quickly eroded by global streaming TV.

Keywords: Transnational Television, Asian American Studies, East Asian Popular Culture, Migration Studies, *Pachinko*

Introduction: K-drama, American Style?

After the success of several K-dramas and movies in global distribution, such as *Kingdom* (2019), *Parasite* (2019), *Squid Game* (2021), and *Minari* (2021), streaming platforms are creating space for an increasing number of South Korean productions. The premiere of *Pachinko* on Apple TV+ represents the first time that American culture has delved deeply into the painful migration journey of Koreans during the Japanese occupation of Korea. Adapted from the original novel written by Min Jin Lee, *Pachinko* is a family saga that spans eighty years of history from 1910 to 1989, depicting a family's migration from Busan, Korea, to Osaka, Japan. In 1910, The Empire of Japan colonized Korea and attempted to erase any traces of Korean culture and language. In the process of forced Japanese assimilation, many Koreans lost touch with their cultural roots and eventually moved to Japan for better chances of survival. Many of them lived in Japan as temporary residents where they faced systemic discrimination that also extended to their Japan-born descendants. Sunja's family represents the life story of many Korean migrants, and the character of the grandson, Solomon, serves as "the product of a clash of different countries tied to historical animosity."¹ The

1. Seung-hun Oh, "'Pachinko'—a Story by and about Korean Diaspora—Captivates the World," Hani, May 2022, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_entertainment/1042830.html;

series speaks about the culture and history that are uniquely Korean, such as the story of “Zainichi,” temporary residents of Japan since the 1910s, and “han,” a term created to capture the sorrow, grief, anger, and regrets that were endured across Korean history. There are also universal themes that resonate with the global audience in general, such as family, memories, and trauma. Besides high expectations from cultural critics, statistic show that in the first two weeks of release, *Pachinko* ranked as the number 1 most watched television show across all over-the-top (OTT) platforms.²

In terms of form and style, *Pachinko* is reviewed as a “K-drama in American style.”³ The original novel of *Pachinko* was written in a linear story order, but the adapted TV series intentionally breaks this linearity. The intense crosscutting and constant eclipses and flashbacks disrupt the audience’s usual perception of time and space. The creative choice displays apparent traits and conventions of complex TV, an era of TV production in America since the 1990s. Theorized by Jason Mittell, the key feature of complex TV includes continuous narrative enigmas, moments of narrative spectacles, and operational aesthetics.⁴ As suggested by Mittell, “Complex narratives often reorder events through flashbacks, retelling past events, repeating story events from multiple perspectives, and jumbling chronologies.”⁵ Following these conventions, *Pachinko* also incorporates complexity by constantly altering the time lines of multiple stories that deliberately confuse temporality.

Ashley Hajimirsadeghi, “Pachinko Review: Revisiting Korean History and Diaspora,” MovieWeb, March 25, 2022, <https://movieweb.com/pachinko-review/>;

Kia Fatahi, “‘Pachinko’: Revealing History through the Lens of a Korean Family,” *Observer*, April 2022, <https://fordhamobserver.com/68804/recent/arts-and-culture/pachinko-revealing-history-through-the-lens-of-a-korean-family/>.

2. Geca Wills, “Lee Min Ho, Kim Min Ha’s ‘Pachinko’ Dominate OTT Ranking for Two Consecutive Weeks,” *KDramaStars*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.kdramastars.com/articles/124586/20220411/lee-min-ho-kim-ha-pachinko-dominate-ott-ranking.htm>.

3. Mike Hale, “‘Pachinko’ Review: K-Drama, American-Style,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/arts/television/pachinko-review.html>.

4. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

5. Mittell, “Complex TV,” 36.

Another element that adds to the complexity of *Pachinko* is multilingualism. According to *Time*, *Pachinko* is the largest multilingual show ever in the history of Hollywood.⁶ In the process of finding distributing platforms, Soo Hugh, the writer of *Pachinko*, insisted that streaming in native languages is the only way of presenting this story.⁷ The switching of languages plays a vital role in character-building, as it reflects cultural identities and personal history. Before the start of each episode, a user-interface menu appears that states, “*Pachinko* is presented in its two original languages, Korean and Japanese. To turn on subtitles or dubbed audio, pause the video and choose the following icons.” After, the interface continues to state, “Japanese dialogue subtitles in blue, Korean dialogue subtitles in yellow.” The interface requires the audience to select the most appropriate translation for them before the show can proceed playing. The audience cannot idly wait for the show to automatically start playing itself. Thus, apart from narrative complexities, *Pachinko* also demands the audience’s capacity to listen to multiple languages and to comprehend multilayered linguistic references. This makes *Pachinko* relatively challenging compared to other domestic-themed melodramas. *Pachinko* requires a great deal of attention to watch, whether it is in reading subtitles, identifying languages being spoken, or keeping up with the story world.

Recruiting resources and talents across three countries, *Pachinko* is a truly hybrid, multicultural, and multilingual production that targets a transnational audience on Apple TV+. The series also makes itself unique from the previous coproductions because the story constantly relocates between Korea, Japan, and the United States. In other words, it is hard to pinpoint the nationality of *Pachinko*, which is different from the traditions of soap

6. Andrew Chow, “How Apple TV+ Made ‘Pachinko,’ One of the Biggest Multilingual Shows Ever,” *Time*, March 2022, <https://time.com/6157906/pachinko-apple-tv/>.

7. “‘Joy Luck Club’ to ‘Pachinko’: The Asian Diaspora On-Screen,” NPR, May 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/20/1100380098/joy-luck-club-to-pachinko-the-asian-diaspora-on-screen>.

operas that often emphasize one specific nationality. When I watched the series, these questions appealed to me: Is *Pachinko* an Americanized K-drama or a globalized American drama? How does *Pachinko* depict a migrant life by constructing temporality and spatiality? Can streaming free us from national borders, time zones, and language barriers? How do we connect multilingualism to conceptual frameworks of personal history and identities? These questions subsequently become the research questions of this essay to investigate the temporal, spatial, and linguistic dimensions of migration. By looking into the perception of time, space, and language in *Pachinko*, the essay seeks to identify the cultural implication of watching transnational programs in the age of digitization and globalization.

Migrant/Migration Melodramas

Mainstream TV reviews generally regard *Pachinko*'s genre as an epic and a family saga, due to its emphasis on genealogy and a long chronological span.⁸ However, *Pachinko* is indeed a show about migration, as the family is scattered across three different countries and continues to take a diasporic path. Migration is the drive, motivation, and twist in almost all the characters' fates. Scholars in literary studies have termed these characteristics

8. Caryn James, "Pachinko Review: A 'Dazzling, Heartfelt Korean Epic,'" BBC, March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20220323-pachinko-review-a-dazzling-heartfelt-korean-epic>.

Stuart Jeffries, "Pachinko Review—a Sumptuous South Korean Epic like Nothing Else on TV," *Guardian*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/mar/25/pachinko-review-min-jin-lee-south-korea>.

John Powers, "Deeply Felt and Unpredictable, 'Pachinko' Follows the Epic Rise of a Korean Family," NPR, March 23, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/23/1088179222/pachinko-apple-tv-review>.

Daniel D'Addario, "'Pachinko' Is a Multigenerational Saga Whose Time Jumps Sap Its Power: TV Review," *Variety*, March 24, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/tv/reviews/pachinko-tv-review-1235213057/>; Kathryn VanArendonk, "Pachinko Builds Epic Family Drama on an Exquisitely Intimate Scale," *Vulture*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.vulture.com/article/pachinko-review-apple-tv-series.html>.

as the genres of migration melodramas and migrant melodramas.⁹ Ford's "migration melodrama" refers to Hong Kong's 1980s and 1990s movies like *An Autumn's Tale* (1987), which typically centers on "a range of stories of people who left Hong Kong for new lives elsewhere."¹⁰ The generation of Hong Kong migrants from the 1980s to 1990s are called "astronauts" because they often transit back and forth from Hong Kong, spending a fair amount of time on planes. On the other hand, Puga's definition of migrant melodrama refers to contemporary cultural production that "trains a melodramatic imagination on migrants and emphasizes suffering as a necessary step in the process of inclusion."¹¹ Her analyzed examples focus on the representation of undocumented child migrants and the underlying logic of the "political economy of suffering" in these works.¹² As *Pachinko* chronicles the eventful period from 1910 to 1989, the family's migration history evolves from suffering migrants, such as Sunja and her peers, to flexible autonomous migrants, such as Sunja's grandson Solomon in his later life.

As *Pachinko* begins, travel and migration have been intimately associated with tragedies and traumatic memories. Each time a character moves, he or she is either escaping from a catastrophe, a major life crisis, or a devastating loss. In this particular drama, almost all relocations can be considered involuntary and forced migrations because the characters run away from misery, leaving their homeland with profound regrets and uncertainties. Sunja leaves her hometown of Yeongdo for Osaka after ending a shameful and all-consuming affair with the wealthy married man Hansu. In Hansu's formative years, he also leaves the town of Yokohama

9. Ana Elena Puga, "Migrant Melodrama and the Political Economy of Suffering," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 72–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770x.2016.1183982>.

Stacilee Ford, *Mabel Cheung Yuen-Ting's An Autumn's Tale* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).

10. Ford, "Mabel," 2008.

11. Puga, "Migrant," 72.

12. Puga, "Migrant," 72.

after losing his home and family in the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake and then takes on his long-term exile. Solomon, the youngest character in the series, is sent to the United States after being caught in a shoplifting incident and fistfight in Osaka. In the season finale, Solomon decides to face the bygones and unresolved trauma by staying in Osaka and continuing the family business. He refuses to flee to America again by saying, “America is not the solution, it is a fantasy.” Solomon’s decision marks the end of his family’s eighty-year history of escapism, exile, and living in displacement. His decision to return to Osaka suggests the “mobility turn” that is missing from his grandmother’s generation—migration is no longer a one-way flow but multiple transnational movements.¹³ Solomon’s first migration was involuntary—as it was arranged by his father—but his second time was a voluntary and spontaneous choice. Migrants like Solomon demonstrate multiway mobility in their capacity to flow back and forth between places due to factors such as a high-skilled work background (Solomon’s educational and professional credentials) and capital accumulation (Solomon’s generational family business).

As *Pachinko* emphasizes the history of suffering, it still touches on many hopeful and heartening moments, such as celebrating the birth of a new baby, reuniting with a long-lost friend from the homeland, and completing the dream of a dying lover toward the end of her life. The bright side of an involuntary migration is the chance for a new beginning and the betterment of life. Having overcome the pains of separation and alienation, the migrants usually find more hope than continuous misery. Though suffering and survival set the tone of the migrant narrative in *Pachinko*, the opportunities to start fresh and live differently, due to the stoic and persistent acts of migration, are equally significant.

13. Claire S. Lee, “Temporal Dimensions of Transient Migration Studies the Case of Korean Visa Migrants’ Media Practices in the US,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Media and Globalization*, ed. Dal Yong Jin (New York: Routledge, 2021).

Theoretical Framework: Time-Space Compression and Television Evolution

Media communication has undergone tremendous technological evolution since the 1980s. Media has brought our “imagined” global community to life.¹⁴ Television, especially after satellite TV, has enabled us to experience “a rush of images from different spaces almost simultaneously, collapsing the world’s space into a series of images on a television screen.”¹⁵ This idea of a shrinking world affected by media and transportation technology is what Harvey terms the “time-space compression.”¹⁶ It refers to the fact that “the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions immediately over an ever wider and variegated space.”¹⁷ After the 1990s, some scholars have started to revisit and modify the concept of time-space compression in the evolving social, cultural, and technological conditions of modernity. In 2003, Servaes and Wang revisit the time-space compression theory by saying, “Time and space are compressing but not eliminating.”¹⁸ The flows of capital and technology must eventually land in distinct places where people live their “local lives.”¹⁹ Moreover, it is common for human beings to long for a sense of belonging that is constructed by the sense of place and cultural identity.²⁰

14. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

15. Harvey, “Conditions,” 293.

16. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1989).

17. Harvey, “The Condition,” 147.

18. Jan Servaes and Georgette Wang, “Introduction,” in *The New Communications Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

19. James H. Mittelman, “How Does Globalization Really Work,” in *Globalization: Critical Reflections* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997).

20. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Hodder Arnold, 1996).

Though time-space compression envisions a world without temporal and spatial barriers, the sense of place and its connection to a local culture constitute the critical factors in the restructuring of the global communication industry.²¹

As one of the most common media, television is thought to have a significant role in the compression of time and space since “it constantly delivers distant events and concerns to people’s homes and minds around the world.”²² In the aspect of technological character, television has undergone a series of revolutionary transformation, from broadcast to satellite and to current Internet streaming. As early as the 1970s, Williams foresaw that the rising satellite TV service would penetrate or circumvent national broadcast TV.²³ Similarly, in the early 2000s, the cord-cutting trend threatened to replace and cancel the relatively traditional cable video service and satellites.²⁴ In the new era of media communication, OTT platforms like Netflix and Apple TV+ further utilize Internet protocols to free the audiences from the then-national borders of broadcast TV, at the same time providing stronger Internet and more targeted programming than the satellites.²⁵ Streaming/OTT platforms emerge as the new site of encounter that connects temporality, spatiality, and globality. Despite the ongoing panic that accompanies technological transformations, OTT is never meant to kill television but to distribute television in an alternative way and to improve what we watch.²⁶ The current place of OTT platforms, like the former satellite beams and cable wire, can be seen in terms of a repeated pattern of technological evolution rather than a series of eliminations. The various ways of

21. Servaes and Wang, “Introduction,” 5.

22. Servaes and Wang, 6.

23. Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Raymond Williams, “Alternative Technology, Alternative Use,” in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge, 1974).

24. Amanda D. Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

25. Lotz, “We Now,” 135.

26. Lotz, 5.

watching and distributing television across history will also affect the way we perceive time, space, movement, mobility, and cultural identities.

In terms of the transnational character, the concept of transnational television develops with respect to the advent of cable, satellite, and Internet streaming. For much of its history, broadcast television was closely tied to nationality and operated within national territories.²⁷ Starting from the 1970s, the emergence of satellite technology undermined the structure of national TV, and by the 1990s, the world media market dominated by national enterprise has been gradually eroded by transnational satellite television.²⁸ In the contemporary time, the OTT platforms redefine transnationalism as they construct a global media system that “takes television away from its national context, appealing to global audiences rather than national ones.”²⁹ Simultaneous with the advent of transnational television, a cultural-linguistic market emerges after the dominance of American TV in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁰ The cultural-linguistic market, such as the increased demand for Latin American television, creates space for cultural products of diasporic and minority communities.³¹ This emerging market in television-making is led by hybridization, as the method to blur the boundary between foreign and domestic.³²

Like satellites have enabled long-distance market entry for Latin American television, OTTs have further expanded the transnational reach of Korean film and television—a regional cultural industry that has always been popular in regions of proximity has burst onto the global scene with great success in recent years. The above technological and transnational characteristics have enabled the broader production and distribution of K-dramas

27. Lobato, “Netflix,” 62

28. Labato, 62; Servaes and Wang, “Introduction,” 8.

29. Mareike Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

30. John Sinclair, “Geolinguistic Region as Global Space: The Case of Latin America,” in *The New Communications Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

31. Sinclair, “Geolinguistic Region,” 8.

32. Servaes and Wang, “Introduction,” 8; Sinclair, “Geolinguistic,” 20.

and movies on global streaming platforms. Theresa Kang-Lowe, the executive producer of *Pachinko*, once expressed the difficulties of producing ethnic minority-themed dramas ten years ago and how she can finally execute today. As she says in the interview, “I have been waiting 20 years for the culture to catch up with my personal taste. The culture was not ready yet, unfortunately. I believe that we are here now. I do think these OTT platforms have equalized the playing field.”³³

TV Research as a Methodology to Understand Migration and Globalization

In recent years, the social-scientific turn to human migration and the rapid development of communication technology has called for interdisciplinary research that combines media studies with migration studies; for instance, digital migration studies examines the relationship between migration and digital connectivity.³⁴ In terms of television, the medium always has an intimate connectivity to our lived world, whether it is broadcasting news, educational shows, or TV dramas. As we often use the word *relatable* to capture a feeling after watching a show that speaks our mind, television can often better describe people’s nuanced and intangible perception of the world they are situated in. Following TV’s evolutionary trajectory as the starting point of the inquiry, this paper undertakes television research as the methodology to understand migration and globalization. It then closely analyzes *Pachinko* as a case study to describe the temporal, spatial, and linguistic qualities of the TV drama that are reflexive of migrant life.

33. “‘Pachinko’ Executive Producer Theresa Kang-Lowe on Korea’s Hollywood Breakthrough: ‘I’ve Been Waiting 20 Years for the Culture to Catch up with My Personal Taste,’” CNBC, March 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/video/2022/04/14/pachinko-executive-producer-theresa-kang-lowee-on-koreas-hollywood-breakthrough-ive-been-waiting-20-years-for-the-culture-to-catch-up-with-my-personal-taste.html>.

34. Lee, “Temporal Dimension,” 259

On the temporal dimension, TV series are typically twenty to sixty minutes in length and have at least two episodes, although some have several seasons that last for years. For *Pachinko*, instead of adopting the binge-watching mode, Apple TV+ chose to release the episodes on a weekly basis. The TV schedule simulates the common sensibilities of stoppage, waiting, and resuming that happen in a migrant's temporal perception. On the spatial dimension, the sensory experience of sound, camera movements, camera distance and shot-by-shot transitions in *Pachinko* turn the abstract concepts of space and place into aural and pictorial sensibilities. Last but not least, the linguistic dimension. A show with an international ensemble cast and considerable loads of dialogues, translations, and subtitles encourages audiences to follow the linguistic and cultural conventions of the local, distinct, or cultural-specific places. In order to explain the three dimensions of migration in *Pachinko*, this paper focuses on two types of storytelling: the first is visual storytelling that conveys time-and-space perception by implementing television form and style; the second is dialogue storytelling that conveys linguistic multiculturalism through verbal communication. The temporal and spatial dimensions not only look at methods in film and television studies but also theories of human migration and geography. The third dimension, which moves on from visual storytelling to dialogue storytelling, delves into the metaphorical and symbolic representation of human languages during migration and globalization.

Spatial Dimension: Space, Place, Placelessness, and Displacement

The concept of spatiality in *Pachinko*'s migration trajectories is not only about the geometric abstraction of space but also the direct experience and relationship associated with places. Edward Relph suggests that the meaning of space, particularly the lived space, comes from the "existential

and perpetual places of immediate experience.”³⁵ Heidegger also argues that spaces receive their being from places, not the space; and dwelling as the essential property of human existence is constituted by humans’ relationships to places.³⁶ Based on Relph’s theories of space and place, I draw the correlation that in a migrant life, the meanings of place often involve rootedness, the home place, and placelessness.³⁷ Rootedness in a place is associated with the communal and personal experience of knowing and being known in the place, and having a root means long-lasting caring for the place. For example, Yeongdo in Korea is the root of the family because it is their homeland and locus of heritage. The home place is “a particular setting in which we are attached” and a point of departure “from which we orient ourselves in the larger world.”³⁸ Osaka is not the root of the family in *Pachinko*, but they develop a new connection to the place as they make their homes there. Placelessness, on the contrary, describes “the monotonous, shallow and placeless flatscape that lacks intentional depth,” particularly coming from “the undesirable, inauthentic aspect of the modern age.”³⁹ Though geographical uniformity is not a new phenomenon, the scale of placelessness is expanding partly because of media communication. The way media affects placelessness is similar to time-space compression. As Relph argues, “Media communication includes television, radio, journals and newspaper and other media that have reduced the need for face to face contact and freed communities from their localities. They tend to report problems as general and widespread rather than local and specific.”⁴⁰ In *Pachinko*, there are representations of rootedness and the home

35. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).

36. Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (London: Harper & Row, 1971), 143–61.

37. Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 37.

38. Relph, 39.

39. Relph, 79–80.

40. Relph, 90.



Figure 1: Yeongdo, Busan, Korea, in *Pachinko*.

Winnie Yanjing Wu_Fig 1

Source: Apple TV+

place, such as the Busan fishing village by the sea where the main character was born in 1910 and the muddy immigrant neighbourhood in Osaka where the character relocates in 1931. There are also placeless scenes in the show such as skyscrapers, offices, and banquet halls in 1980s Tokyo and New York City.

Apart from place and placelessness, another significant experience with space and place is the sense of displacement. As mentioned by Robert Tally, displacement “underscores the critical importance of spatial relations in our attempts to interpret and change the world.”⁴¹ When time-space compression generates new geographies over time, people are constantly landing in new places, losing old places, and being displaced. The sense of displacement fills the entire series in *Pachinko*, whether it is manifested in the characters’ lives or reflected in the audience’s viewing experience. *Pachinko* tracks the characters’ life journeys across generations and locations, mapping the spatial changes through title pages, camera movements, and noncontinuity editing. The camera pans through four

41. Robert T. Tally, *Spatiality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

places, Busan, Osaka, Tokyo, and New York City, in wide soaring aerial shots as the language of the epic, implementing special effects such as superimposition to transit from one locality to another. Title pages in three languages—English, Japanese, and Korean—overlay the varying magnificent landscapes. As the audiences receive the televisual techniques, they are immersed in the same sense of displacement as the characters and in constant questioning of where they are in this show. When television narratives help us transcend spatial and temporal barriers, they have the power to “revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter.”⁴² Fitting multiple plotlines in one metanarrative hints at the problem of not having enough time to thoroughly experience a single event at a distinct place, at the same time mirroring the disorienting experience of a migrant.

Temporal Dimension: Temporality on Screen and Temporality in Migration

History, narration, and stories all take place in time. Film and television use time to shape our understanding of narrative action. In *Film Art*, Bordwell uses temporal order, duration, and frequency to define the variants of time in a film that are subject to manipulation.⁴³ In a similar vein, Mary Ann Doane disentangles filmic time based on its subjective perception, calling it the temporality of apparatus, temporality of diegesis, and temporality of reception.⁴⁴ In television terminology, Jason Mittell distinguishes three types of time in all narrative works. Story time refers

42. Harvey, “Condition.”

43. David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2015).

44. Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

to the time frame of the diegesis; the time passes through the story world in the manner of the real world. Discourse time is the temporal structure and duration of the story as told within a given narrative. Narration time is the total duration of telling and receiving the story, such as a two-hour film, a ten-episode series, or a ten-chapter novel.⁴⁵ The theories of time in cinema and television share a commonality in that the time experienced in the real world is often different from the time perceived in the narrative world. Narrative works, including literature, films, and television series, have the long-standing practices of manipulating temporality by skipping, repeating, or prolonging story events. It has become a creative strategy to reimagine time from its objective and quantitative dimensions. In other words, film and television are also the most convenient media in compressing time with their storytelling techniques and visual and aural languages.

Combining the previous conceptualization of time by Bordwell, Mittell, and Doane, I describe two types of time in *Pachinko*. First, the time of the story world. It refers to the objective time of eighty years that Sunja's family tree has grown, spanning the lifetimes of three generations and the main character Sunja's transformations from a little girl to a grandmother. Second, the audience's time. It is the time experienced by the audience as they watch the entire eight episodes of the show. On the screen, the uneventful time spent by the characters—such as cooking, sleeping, commuting, and working—is skipped, hence the decades of family history are trimmed to forty-five minutes each week in a two-month streaming period. Audiences can also perceive the time of particular events as much longer or shorter than they would through various techniques such as fast and slow motions, repetition, and elongation. Moreover, the audience's time is deliberately confused by the plot as *Pachinko*'s narrative is in nonlinear story order. The audiences are constantly "time-travelling" in the show—living

45. Mittell, "Complex TV."

in the 1910s with Sunja in the past minute and situating themselves with Solomon in 1980s New York City in the next—all by a subtle switch of shots.

To bridge the temporal connections, I suggest that the temporality of media is reflexive of the temporality of migration, as they are both subject to human experience. The temporal dimension of migration concerns time and temporality differently—time refers to its quantitative, objective nature and temporality refers to the subjective experience of time. Time is usually manifested in “everyday work, leisure and media time, or the length of time associated with a visa,” but temporality shows how time passes differently for migrants when they are waiting and being stuck, without the legal status to work and live properly in the country.⁴⁶ On the other hand, in the world of screen media, there are many techniques and visual languages that intentionally make events feel shorter or longer than the events normally last. Common stylistic choices are fast and slow motion, skipping and repetition, pauses and interruption, etc. In episode 7 of *Pachinko*, the character Hansu is thrown into a cataclysmic disaster, the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake. The shock only lasts momentarily but the episode uses slow-motion camera movement, point-of-view shots, and subjective sound to emphasize the long-lasting effects of the earthquake—a quick but fatal shock that took thousands of lives away and perpetually changed everything about the people and the land. For about twenty minutes of the episode, we see Hansu stumbling on the street, searching for his friends, dodging fallen rocks, waking up from a coma, and witnessing more people die around him. The rest of the episode feels like a walk that never ends, with massive fears from the subjective perception of time and space created by images and sound. As the temporality of migration is subject to how migrants internalize wait time and stoppage, the temporality of media is subject to how the writers and artists depict the events and how the audiences experience them on screen.

46. Lee, “Temporal Dimension,” 260.



Figure 2: Hansu, performed by Lee Min-ho, after the 1023 Great Kanto Earthquake, episode 7.

Winnie Yanjing Wu_Fig 2

Source: Apple TV+

Linguistic Dimension: Language, Translation and Multilingualism

Language is a major barrier in migration because the incapability to speak cuts off the possibility to assimilate and integrate. When people migrate, they are compelled to pick up new languages in order to start new lives; meanwhile, they also try to remember old languages as the most direct connection to their heritage. Eventually, people utilize multilingualism and translation to facilitate inconvenient situations due to language barriers. This section of the essay focuses on the language problem in migration—particularly the question of whether it provokes personal trauma or fashions cultural identities—in an environment dominated by discrimination and racism.

In the Christian tradition, speaking multiple languages bears negative connotations that stand for catastrophe, punishment, and curses. In the Bible story of the Tower of Babel, all humanity lives in one single place and

speaks one common language.⁴⁷ Human beings communicate and collaborate very well in a single language; therefore, they began the ambitious project of building a massive tower that leads to heaven. God is offended by the power of humanity. He puts an end to the project by deliberately confusing the common human language, causing them to speak many different languages so they would not understand each other. Losing the tool to properly communicate, humans abandon the tower, return to the earth, and speak different languages thereafter. The Tower of Babel is the mythic origin of the human population being scattered in different countries and disconnected by language barriers.⁴⁸ It is God's way to punish humanity for usurping his omnipotent power.

Lydia Liu further discusses the problem of language in cross-cultural literary studies in her work *Translingual Practice*. She particularly refers to the story of Babel as a symbol of the chaos of human communication. In the countless versions that have been circulated, the Babel story not only suggests "the impossibility of translating among the irreducible multiplicity of tongues but also projects a desire for completion and for original Logos."⁴⁹ However, the story of Babel is contradictory in nature because we read about this narrative through translation, yet it continuously emphasizes the failure of collaborating across different languages. Aside from Babel, Liu discusses the translator's active negotiation between the "source language" and the "target language." She urges us to consider "in whose term, for which linguistic contingency and in the name of what knowledge someone is translating between cultures."⁵⁰ This question is also applicable to cinema and television since literary texts became more convergent. For instance,

47. Genesis 11:1–9.

48. David J. Gunkel, "Machine Translation Mediating Linguistic Difference in the Era of Globalization," in *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Media and Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 198–205.

49. Lydia He Liu, *Translingual Practice Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

50. Liu, *Translingual Practice Literature*, 2.

the source language in *Pachinko* is Korean and the target languages are the over forty languages of translated subtitles provided by Apple TV+. The options appear to be abundant. However, the positions of languages become more ambiguous in dubbing: only Korean dialogues are dubbed and the Japanese and English dialogues remain original; mainly Anglophone and European languages are provided in dubbing, such as French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian. The dubbing options demonstrate that first, the acts of aural translation are still in Western terms, possibly due to the origin of the platform; second, the Japanese language holds a strange position, which is neither original nor targeted, in the translation of this show. Thus, the strange position of the Japanese language coincides with the characters' underlying psychology of not having a sense of belonging to Japan.

The complex consequences of speaking multiple languages as one's identity are insinuated in *Pachinko* multiple times—not just literally but also metaphorically. The following analysis examines how speaking multiple languages can enable or perhaps burden someone in navigating their migration trajectories. I analyze a scene in episode 8 as an example, when Noa translates for his mother in a critical situation. Noa is the child of a Zainichi woman in Osaka. At a very young age, he has to be the translator of the family because Sunja, his mother, does not speak Japanese. In the scene, Sunja's husband is arrested for a mysterious cause, and Sunja has to investigate and brings Noa with her as a translator. Sunja is introduced to Mr. Hasegawa, who has information about her husband's arrest. When Noa and Sunja enter the room, Mr. Hasegawa and his daughter are sitting in a dark corner. Noa walks into the room and speaks to Sunja in Korean, "He said come in and sit." Then, Mr. Hasegawa speaks while Noa translates. In the beginning, the conversation is still calm, polite, and mundane. Here, Noa's role is merely a translation machine, keeping his distance from the content of the conversation. As the conversation escalates, Sunja is stunned by her husband's secret life as a communist. She then starts to fluster, scream,



Figure 3: Noa, performed by Park Jae-joon, appears in episode 8.

Winnie Yanjing Wu_Fig 3

Source: Apple TV+

and weep. Without much capacity to comprehend the actual situation, Noa can only understand that his father is in danger through his mother's emotional expressions. He then stands up and yells at Mr. Hasegawa, "You are lying!" Then, the scene ends with a group of police breaking into the room.

The scene links translation with catastrophe and trauma in a number of ways. First, when Noa translates, he is at the center of the "chaos of human communication" because he is the only person who can perform as a common-language mediator. Metaphorically, he becomes the lone man in the Tower of Babel.⁵¹ As the phrases get harder, he faces the impossibility of translating among the "irreducible multiplicity of tongues."⁵² Second, he feels the sense of displacement of a second-generation immigrant who relocates and is disoriented between cultures. Noa is only a

51. Liu, 11.

52. Liu, 11.

seven-year-old child who has limited linguistic skills. For instance, he could barely understand the word *communist*. In the process of translating, he is gradually exposed to the facts about his father's arrest, even before his mother has access to the information. He stands at the front of a family catastrophe when he should be the one protected from it. Third, we see the illiteracy of the audience. Apple TV+ intends not to sync the translation of the Japanese dialogues when the Hasegawas are talking. As non-Japanese speakers, we are as ignorant as Sunja and can only depend on Noa's translation. We thereby further sympathize with Noa's situation of being exposed to trauma firsthand. To Noa, multilingualism is a situation and a result of his cultural identity. As the offspring of a Zainichi family, he has to master both languages to support the family to survive in a discriminating society. The later story alludes to the fact that Noa develops post-traumatic reactions after he grows up and eventually commits suicide.

As the show writer Soo Hugh expresses in an interview, "Language defines a huge part of who we are and how history is unpacked. Switching language tells so much about a person, how the character speaks that language makes a character complete, or how the language is being lost."⁵³ Solomon, who appears to be a grown-up version of Noa, also masters most languages in this show. Language is a tool for Solomon, as he can speak the Korean dialect to convince the elderly neighbors to sell the land; he can use native Japanese to communicate with his Tokyo coworkers; he can use English fluently to negotiate deals with his white bosses. Multilingualism reflects the character's talents, capacities, and status—as Solomon is often considered "the one who made it" in the family by attending Yale University and evolving into the elite. However, multilingualism is also accompanied by insecurities in the constant pursuit of external validation. Being called a pachinko's son throughout his formative years, Solomon bears generational

53. "Joy Luck Club' to 'Pachinko,'"



Figure 4: Solomon, performed by Jin Ha, is walking in a building at Wall Street in New York City, episode 1.

Winnie Yanjing Wu_Fig 4

Source: Apple TV+

expectations and strives to shed the shame of a “Zainichi’s kid.” He is benefited—and also burdened—by his exceptional ability to assimilate. As cultural identities get more complicated, contradictory, and relentless, one cannot simply resolve the identity crisis by assimilation and by denial of the past. Seamlessly transitioning between English, Korean, and Japanese, Solomon’s language skill is the symptom of adjusting and assimilating to a global metropolitan culture in a shrinking world. This interpretation finally leads to the conclusion of this paper, calling for an understanding of navigating between K-drama and Hollywood and between barrier and assimilation.

Conclusion

As Hale puts it in a *New York Times* review, “Hollywoodization, voluntary or not, is the operative word when it comes to both ‘*Joy Luck Club*’ and

'*Pachinko*.' And to the extent that glossy melodrama pulls audiences into a story that puts people we haven't seen before onscreen, and treats the hatred and injustice they face with some degree of honesty, it's not a dirty word."⁵⁴ The review is partially right. It indicates that criticism is less concerned about American imperialism in the new era of TV, because many transnational programs today are learning to adapt to each other instead of the one-way copying of the American-centric model. *Pachinko*, with the ambition of bringing East Asian history to Hollywood, is a show that reflects on the collective endeavor in multicultural and multilingual storytelling. It maintains the "soap-operatic" appeal of a K-drama and at the same time adapts to the narrative conventions and audiovisual language in American TV.⁵⁵ Thus, *Pachinko* is rather hybridized than Hollywoodized by being able to balance the elements between the global and the local.

Film and television can give us a world by creating unique viewing experiences with its narrative forms and styles. However, condensing eighty years of history into eight episodes leaves many stories unspoken. A year after the premiere, season 2 is in the making, but the audiences' attention is harder to sustain in the streaming era. With an abundance of transnational programs and a short turnover time, the global digital platform epitomize the time-space compression we are currently experiencing. We as viewers and perceivers are given enough choices to time-travel with streaming series from here and there, now and then, but we are given less time and space to react to the whole picture of history. On the other hand, the disorienting viewing experience, whether it is because of the frequent relocation or switch of languages, mirrors the uprooted lives in *Pachinko*. The current time-space compression constantly creates new geographies and imaginations; meanwhile, it evokes a more complex combination of feelings such as excitement, confusion, stress, and anxiety.

54. Hale, "'Pachinko' Review."

55. Hale.

Pachinko makes a significant move by maintaining the original languages. For a long time, audiences have borne the out-of-context English dialogues in non-Anglophone films and TV. A counter-example is Netflix's *Marco Polo* (2014). Despite the fact that the TV show is in foreign settings and the actors are able to speak the local languages, the story is still told in English dialogues. The use of language implies that the production is only made for English audiences, which makes *Marco Polo* a "cross-cultural clunker."⁵⁶ The inevitable trend of transnational TV may change the orientation of original-language shows. Besides, *Pachinko*'s multilingualism is accredited to its much more precise translation and subtitling service. The subtitles in *Pachinko* not only translate but also give the personal, cultural, and historical contexts of the language being spoken. From the audience's perspective, listening to the original languages provide more backstories and depth to the characters. In the Tower of Babel, the dream of a common language was taken away by God. With the various options in subtitles and dubbing provided by streaming platforms, humanity seems to have the ability to collaborate on the Babel project again. Aside from streaming without national constraints, multilingualism and subtitle viewing have opened up more space for transnational cultural production.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank professor Ying Zhu and professor Tze-lan Sang for their support of this paper, starting from its draft that was presented at the Associations for Asian Studies annual meeting in 2023 through the final completion of the manuscript. The author also wishes to extend her gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback and her special thanks to Alvin Luong for his editing support.

56. Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, "Netflix's 'Marco Polo' Is Cross-Cultural Clunker," *Foreign Policy*, December 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/24/netflixs-marco-polo-is-cross-cultural-clunker/>.

