

East Asian Serial Dramas in the Era of Global Streaming Services

Special Issue Editor's Introduction

TZE-LAN SANG, LINA QU, AND YING ZHU

Keywords: East Asian serial dramas, SVOD platform, streaming, global cultural flows, IP

The story begins in early 2022 when Tz-lan and Lina contacted Ying, the editor in chief of *Global Storytelling*, to propose a special issue. After brainstorming, we decided to have a three-way collaboration on the theme of East Asian serial dramas in the era of global streaming services and address the growing visibility and international circulation of East Asian cultural products.

Global streaming platforms have emerged as major outlets for the worldwide circulation of transnational programs, including East Asian serial dramas. Despite their tremendous success, the global consumption of East Asian dramas and their impact on storytelling, representation, and national image remain understudied. Many questions remain. For instance, how have global streaming giants influenced local serial drama production, viewer experience, and digital labor? In the era of global streaming, what is the role of the nation?¹ Do state policies—whether pertaining to the enforcement of

1. For a wide-ranging critique of platform imperialism, focusing on the role of the nation-state alongside transnational capital, see Dai Yong Jin, *Digital Platforms, Imperialism and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

international intellectual property laws, to political control, or to national branding—make a major difference? How do the television industries of different East Asian countries inspire one another while also competing for global ascendance? How does the proliferation of East Asian serial narratives on streaming platforms speak to international viewers' existing worldviews and complicate them?

For these reasons, we are especially keen on welcoming research that would address aspects of the interplay between local productions and global subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms such as Netflix and Disney+ in the United States and iQiyi in China. In 2021, *Squid Game*, a South Korean dystopian television series created for Netflix, became an international sensation amid the COVID-19 pandemic and ranked as Netflix's most-watched show ever. In addition to rekindling the crave for K-dramas since the formation of the Korean Wave in the 2000s, the *Squid Game* phenomenon has put a spotlight on East Asian serial dramas on streaming platforms. The enormous success of *Squid Game* demonstrates a new future offered by global SVOD platforms to TV producers in East Asia. Meanwhile, East Asian producers must balance their pursuit of "global appeal" against local political, ideological, cultural, and economic concerns.

The emergence of SVOD has revolutionized television industries as new ways of watching TV are made possible by nonlinear media. The programming logics for Internet-distributed television have thus shifted from scheduling to curation, as a number of scholars have argued.² What and how catalogs of diverse content are curated and/or commissioned for production and how such curated programs are perceived globally and locally have emerged as central questions for industry practitioners as well as academic researchers. This special issue approaches these questions from the perspective of East Asian television studies. We ask how East Asian serial dramas are

2. Amanda Lotz, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Ramon Robato, "Rethinking International TV Flows Research in the Age of Netflix," *Television & New Media* 19, no. 3 (2018): 241–56.

curated and/or commissioned for production by global SVOD platforms as well as investigate the interplay between the global streaming industry and the production, distribution, and reception of East Asian serial dramas.

Our call for papers was met with enthusiasm. After several rounds of screenings and balancing a number of factors, we present here five research articles, two drama reviews, and a short essay. Together, these papers highlight the vitality of East Asian cultural industries and the confluence of multiple forces: government policies, streamers' and media companies' commercial incentives and tactics, and audiences' experiences of not only consumption but also participation and interactive content creation. They draw a complex picture of how television has become global and how East Asian creative talents have generated sophisticated contents to appeal to not only local but international audiences.

David Humphrey delves into the intriguing question of why Japanese serial dramas are relatively scarce on global streaming platforms. In sharp contrast to the rising prominence of Korean dramas on the global scene, the export of Japanese dramas has stagnated in the past two decades. Employing a historical and comparative approach, Humphrey argues that the reason for the stagnation is structural rather than cultural. The dominance of broadcast television in Japan has hindered the industry's transition to streaming. The bundled-rights model, a hallmark of Japan's media industry since its adoption of the international intellectual property (IP) regimes in the 2000s, has limited the transnational and transmedia distribution of mainstream Japanese dramas while facilitating the export of anime and off-mainstream fare because of their lower IP hurdles. Humphrey also probes a conundrum facing Japan's IP-oriented media industry—that is, its increasing dependence on US-based streaming platforms and thus decreasing autonomy. His study underscores the friction between the local and the global in the international transmission of serial dramas: the localized rights and services of broadcasting are being challenged and reshaped by the decentralized streaming ecosystem.

Yucong Hao's article focuses on a new form of serial drama—the radio drama—against the backdrop of the Chinese state's tightening censorship of

queer media. By tracing the history of queer media and *danmei* (Boy's Love) culture in China, Hao argues that the popularity of queer serial dramas on Chinese video-streaming platforms before the nationwide crackdown paved the way to the emergence of queer radio dramas on podcasting platforms. The audio serial drama taps the cultivated queer viewership to gain popularity and market value while substituting queer visuals with voices to circumvent the state's stringent censorship. Building on current scholarships in queer and sound studies, Hao analyzes how the creative deployment of vocal timbre conveys queer motions and emotions in the radio drama *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* (2016) and how such sound effects are collectively interpreted and instantaneously communicated by the online viewership via *danmaku* (bullet screens). The article provides a new angle on streaming media by presenting an intriguing case where voice streaming replaces video streaming to construct a queer mediascape at once elusive and tangible. It also sheds new light on serial storytelling by demonstrating how it can be enriched by active listeners' collective participation.

Winnie Yanjing Wu's article on the popular Apple TV+ series *Pachinko* (2022) reconceptualizes transnational TV through the prism of migration. As a hybrid, multicultural, and multilingual production that depicts the migrant life of a Korean family in Japan and the United States over eighty years, the huge success of *Pachinko* indicates the relevance of migration experience to global audiences in both literal and metaphorical senses. Through nuanced visual and linguistic analyses, Wu delves into the drama's depiction of migrants' quintessential struggles. What's more, she maintains that viewing the multilingual migration melodrama and navigating multiple subtitle tracks on the streaming platform is in itself a disorienting and disquieting experience, one that mirrors, to some extent, migrants' linguistic and cultural struggles in unfamiliar places. In other words, *Pachinko* allegorizes the impact of transnational TV on viewers, as the act of viewing transnational programs via streaming and the act of migration produce similar effects of time-space compression. Streaming platforms have transformed human experience and perception of time, space, language, homeplace, and identity

just as migration has. Wu's refreshing approach contextualizes streaming media within the contested postmodern conditions. The saga of voluntary and involuntary migration illuminates the cultural politics of global streaming services.

Eunice Ying Ci Lim's study of the Taiwanese Netflix series *Mom, Don't Do That!* (2022) interprets nostalgic symbols in the show as self-reflexive commentaries on the rivalry between Taiwanese and Korean dramas. The dominance of Korean dramas in Asian and global entertainment scenes has concerned Taiwanese TV producers in recent years. Lim observes how the show's nostalgic representation of TV watching by ordinary Taiwanese families calls to mind the golden era of Taiwanese dramas in the 1980s and 1990s before the rise and encroachment of the Korean Wave. She also discerns a parodic strategy of representing food consumption and idealized masculinity in the show that critiques stereotypes in romantic Korean dramas. To read *Mom, Don't Do That!* as a metadrama by the Taiwanese TV industry, Lim highlights its undertaking of strategic moves to counterbalance the undeniable prominence of Korean dramas. The article contributes a new perspective to the study of streaming media with a focus on intra-Asia cultural flows and competition. It points out the uneven power dynamics in the global streaming economy while also suggesting streaming's potential to level the playing field.

While the above four research articles zoom in on East Asian serial dramas, Ying Zhu complicates the picture by examining Chinese fansub in the contexts of global cultural flows (from Hollywood to the Chinese Internet) and Chinese state censorship. As Zhu points out, the voluntary and collective labor of fansubbers has created a major channel for circulating authentic and unabridged foreign media content, particularly American films and serial dramas, in China. Although the legality of fansubbed audiovisual materials is questioned by international IP regimes, the political and cultural implications of fansubbing are crucial to the formation of a transgressive grassroots culture with therapeutic potentials in the Chinese cyberspace. As self-claimed cultural brokers, Chinese fansubbers are dedicated to the

mission of introducing foreign cultures to Chinese audiences, whose access to foreign media content is hindered by IP laws and state censorship as well as linguistic and cultural barriers. At the same time, fansubbers undertake a self-healing journey to validate their own emotions and accomplishments through the practice of translating and subtitling. Zhu's work addresses an underresearched aspect of the international circulation of serial dramas and brings to the fore the active role played by media prosumers.

In addition to the five research articles, this special issue also includes two drama reviews and one short essay to provide a comprehensive approach to serial dramas and streaming services. The Korean Netflix series *Squid Game*, a phenomenal hit in 2021, is reviewed by Mei Mingxue Nan. Nan points out strategies used by Korean producers, the themes of neoliberal capitalism and constant surveillance, and the innovative camerawork (especially posthuman POV shots) in *Squid Game*. She also analyzes the issue of cultural appropriation and the flattening of local specificities in the process of packaging and selling East Asian stories for global consumption. Theorizing what she calls the "feeling of platform cosmopolitanism," she observes that many viewers praise the relatability of a series like *Squid Game* without any concern for the pitfalls of flattening. Paradoxically, this leads Nan to posit the possibility of a deeper engagement with the foreign Other, for platformization has enabled greater and faster knowledge-sharing for those who care to investigate and learn. In the nexus of platform-content-human, she discerns the potential of infra-individual intra-actions, to borrow Thomas Lamarre's theorization about platformativity.³

Shuwen Yang's review of *Light the Night*, another popular Netflix series in 2021, offers a detailed synopsis with useful background information about the historical references, locations, and actors in the Taiwanese drama. The show's global success supports Mei Nan's argument about platform cosmopolitanism as a prevailing cultural ideology of global streaming services.

3. Thomas Lamarre, "Platformativity: Media Studies, Area Studies," *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 4, no. 3 (2017): 285–305, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340081>.

Finally, the short essay by Sheng-mei Ma parses the political irony and innuendo underlying an acclaimed crime TV series produced by the Chinese streaming giant iQiyi. For Ma, *The Bad Kids* is an example of what he terms “Red China Noir.” The dark drama walks a tightrope between the government’s upbeat rhetoric of the Chinese dream and the Chinese masses’ fascination with crime and suspense in everyday entertainment. Using the Blakean dyad—the tyger and the lamb—Ma reads the horror and abyss lying just beneath the surface of childhood innocence in this drama. What does this series’s acclaim and popularity tell us about the collective unconscious in China?

With a dedicated focus on East Asian audiovisual storytelling on streaming platforms, this collection of essays and reviews hopes to bring our attention to the growing influence and visibility of East Asian serial dramas during the era of platformization, and to (re)imagine transnational virtual storytelling from multiple geolinguistic, geocultural, geopolitical, and geo-economic persuasions and perspectives.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the scholars who submitted their work for consideration. Thanks are also due the anonymous reviewers for each individual manuscript for their helpful comments.

