Changes and continuities of *Makjang* drama in the Korean broadcasting industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the changes and continuities of *makjang* drama series within the structural changes that abound in the Korean broadcasting industry. Based on analysis of publications by terrestrial broadcasters and statistics of television ratings, the findings indicate that terrestrial television networks, which have been the major production and distribution outlets of Korean television dramas, recognize *makjang* drama to be important in securing their position following the entry of new players into the market, namely mobile and social media platforms, streaming services, and new broadcasters. While leading screenwriters and production studios strive to evolve and move away from the genre by reflecting the changing tastes of audiences, terrestrial broadcasters continue programming *makjang* drama despite criticisms against the genre as they record high television ratings with strong support from older audiences. In spite of criticisms and controversies over their improbable plots and violent and sensational clichés, the findings of this study explain that much of broadcasters’ persistence in producing *makjang* drama should be understood within the context of industrial changes.

KEYWORDS

*Makjang* drama; Korean television; Korean broadcasting industry; television drama; K-Drama

Introduction

In the mid-2000s and early-2010s, a handful of South Korean (henceforth Korean) television drama series such as *First Wives’ Club* (*Jogangjicheokeulleop*, 2007–2008, SBS), *Temptation of Wife* (*Anaeui Yuhok*, 2008–2009, SBS), *Wang’s Family* (*Wanggane Sikgudeul*, 2013–2014, KBS2), and *Jang Bo-Ri Is Here* (*Watda! Jangbori*, 2014, MBC) garnered notable popularity, recording a rating share of more than 40 percent. However, critics and media railed against their unrealistic and improbable plots and sensational content, arguing that they were inappropriate for audiences. They labelled these series as ‘television drama series that audiences enjoy watching while swearing at them’, ‘television series that cause cancer to audiences’, and most of all, a ‘*makjang* drama’, a metaphorical phrase describing shows that ‘take things too far’ with ‘over-the-top’ narratives that make it difficult for audiences to understand characters and storylines. Despite such criticism, major terrestrial networks—which have served as major production and distribution outlets for Korean dramas, including miniseries, daily and weekend soap operas, and...
morning soap operas—have continued producing and broadcasting television series with these genre characteristics, expecting and receiving high viewing rates.\(^1\)

The production of makjang dramas faced a handful of challenges in the 2010s. Firstly, new comprehensive pay-per-view networks and streaming services introduced new genres to audiences. Their entry into the market made incumbent terrestrial broadcasters—the leading outlets of makjang dramas—sense a crisis in the changing market. Meanwhile, the genre failed to satisfy the changing taste of young audiences accustomed to watching foreign television series (Lee 2014). Furthermore, apart from the genre characteristics, the penetration of social media and streaming services changed television consumption behaviour, bringing terrestrial broadcasters into financial crisis caused by a decrease in their advertisement revenues. Finally, after several makjang dramas like Princess Aurora (Orora Gongju, 2013, MBC) and Apgujeong Midnight Sun (Apgujeong Baegya, 2014–2015, MBC) provoked public outrage at their unrealistic plot contrivances and superficial characters, broadcasters expressed reluctance to work with screenwriters whose works were criticized as makjang (Kang 2015).

Despite various controversies, the makjang drama remains one of Korean television’s main genres. Often distinguished from Korean dramas, or K-dramas, which describe 16-episode miniseries broadcast on weekday primetime and are increasingly popular overseas, makjang drama series are often broadcast during weekday and weekend evenings with more episodes: 120 episodes for the former and 50 episodes for the latter. Broadcasters continue broadcasting them during their evening hours, often glamming up those drama series aimed at giving lessons, such as rediscovering the importance of family values and finding the true value of life, and so on. Also, screenwriters such as Kim Soon-ok and Moon Young-nam, who were initially criticized for their makjang scripts, blended characteristics of other genres like thriller and crime with their new television series, thereby attracting new audiences—as demonstrated by Kim’s The Penthouse series (Penteuhauseu, 2020–2021, SBS) and Moon’s Revolutionary Sisters (Okei Gwangjamae, 2021, KBS). In the meantime, Im Sung-han returned with Love (ft. Marriage and Divorce) (Gyeolhonjaksa Ihonjakgok, TV Chosun, 2021–2022), which became the first Netflix Original series labelled as makjang drama. Furthermore, expecting to take advantage of the popularity of The Penthouse, tvN, a cable television channel, broadcasted a reality show titled Not Hurt You (Haechiji Ana, 2021) with cast members from the series. All these developments demonstrate that the genre is still competitive in the market.

Having said that, it is worth asking what incentivises broadcasters to continue to produce and distribute makjang drama. In search of possible explanations, this study examines the changes and continuities of makjang dramas in the Korean broadcasting industry. Based on an analysis of news articles and documents published by broadcasters, it explores both historical contexts and the latest trends of the makjang drama in conjunction with changes in the television industry. The findings of this study will shed light on the persistence of makjang drama in Korean television as part of terrestrial broadcasters’ strategies to secure their main audiences from new competitors who enjoy financial and technological advantages in the broadcasting market.

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A taxonomy of makjang drama as a sub-genre of Korean television soap opera

Many Korean television drama series are often categorized as melodramatic soap operas that cover the lives of families while including gentle romantic stories (Lin and Tong 2007;
Kang and Kim 2011; Kim 2014). In general, a television soap opera is a narrative television programme in which plot and synopsis often deal with domestic situations. To attract female audiences, romance or domestic drama became the central themes of soap operas while reinforcing existing social practices surrounding women (Brown 1987). Narratives and themes of soap operas were sensationalized to evoke exaggerated emotions through their characters and events (Mittell 2015). While employing several forms of melodrama—such as the confrontation between good and evil characters and the dialectic between action and pathos—soap operas developed their distinctive genre characteristics by emphasizing conversations between characters, employing synopses appealing to female audiences by highlighting the endurance and sacrifice of female characters, as well as their consumption lifestyles (Gledhill 1994; Singer 2001). According to Brown (1987: 4), a soap opera is often characterized as follows:

1. Serial form which resists narrative closure; 2. multiple characters and plots; 3. use of time which parallels actual time and implies that the action continues to take place whether we watch it or not; 4. abrupt segmentation between parts; 5. emphasis on dialogue, problem solving, and intimate conversation; 6. many of the male characters portrayed as ‘sensitive men’; 7. female characters often professional or otherwise powerful in the world outside the home; 8. the home, or some other place which functions as a home, is the setting for the show.

Despite widespread criticisms regarding the genre as cheap and banal, the genre of soap opera remains a major television genre (Brooks 1976; Gledhill 1994; Williams 2018), that has been enjoyed by audiences in Korea and elsewhere. Throughout decades, Korean broadcasters have produced soap operas, combined with longstanding legacies of shinpa (新派)—a genre of play popular in the Japanese colonial era wherein plots were based on the everyday lives of ordinary people and the poor, as well as love affairs of male and female characters that advocate conservative virtues with exaggerated emotions (Cho 2013; Lee 2017; Choi 2018). In this regard, alongside heterosexual romance plotlines, many producers employed a series of clichés such as affairs, Cinderella stories, conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, the secret of birth, and the virtues of traditional patriarchy as major codes of the nation’s soap operas. Based on the codes of shinpa and a few other traditional virtues like Confucianism and patriarchy, soap operas have become a major genre in Korean television and remain strongly popular with female audiences, even influencing other genres of television series such as thrillers, medical dramas, and sitcoms (Park, Yun and Lee 2011; Yi 2018).

Based on this background, the makjang drama can be understood as a modern sub-genre of Korean soap operas. In Korean, makjang is a noun referring to a dead-end at a mine gallery and it is often used as a metaphor describing an extreme situation that brings a person’s life to a severe crisis. In this regard, a soap opera can be labelled as a makjang drama if its narratives are highly exaggerated and improbable, and feature plot conflicts are often sadistic in nature. At the same time, many of the characters exhibit bizarre and aggressive actions (Lim and Oh 2009). Compared to other Korean soap operas, makjang drama series are often characterized by their impractical plots, predictable clichés employed in other drama series, and wild and strange behaviours of characters (Park 2017). In relation to this, Oh (2009, cited from Yun 2016) characterizes makjang drama with five elements: extremeness of the plot, deviated character development, sadistic narrative development, depravity, and aggressive behaviours of characters.
Unlike many Korean television series, which became popular overseas and are known as the K-Drama in the global market, most makjang drama series target domestic audiences. It is worth noting that the term makjang drama was coined by the press and the public and is not an academic term. Legacy media and critics publicly accused some soap operas as makjang dramas that highlight characters performing bizarre and abnormal behaviour and feature plots that are convoluted at best. For instance, there is a scene in Everybody Say Kimchi (Modu Da Gimchi, 2014, MBC), a morning drama series in which a mother-in-law character slaps her ex-son-in-law’s face with kimchi after his insulting remarks towards her and her daughter. Despite public criticism, this setting became a cliché and has since been used in several series, such as Love of Eve (Ibeui Sarang, 2015, MBC), another morning drama series where a second wife character puts soybean paste on her husband’s face because he had recalled his ex-wife’s soybean paste stew during a previous conversation. Such unnecessary and abnormal characters’ behaviours became a distinctive characteristic in defining a soap opera as a makjang drama.

Granted, much of the way the press and critics labelled those soap operas as makjang dramas has been highly subjective, depending on one’s own ethical and moral standards (Yun, Jeong and Park 2016). In this regard, it is best to conceptualize the genre by focusing on and analysing the works of a handful of television screenwriters who have been commonly labelled as makjang drama writers—notably Im Sung-han, Kim Soon-ok, and Moon Young-nam, who have become icons in developing the aforementioned characteristics of this sub-genre. First of all, as is reflected in numerous television series, including Wang’s Family and Revolutionary Sisters, Moon is well known for emphasizing traditional patriarchal values in her plots and chooses names for characters that reflect each one’s role in the storyline, such as female characters enduring their husbands’ affairs and patrilocality. Secondly, Im is famous for naming characters inspired by Taoism and Buddhism, and many devices she employs in developing the storyline are connected to shamanism, as seen in Opposite Attract (Ahyeondong Manim, 2007–2008, MBC), Assorted Gems (Boseokbibimbap, 2009–2010, MBC), and New Tales of Gisaeng (Singisaengdyeon, 2011, SBS). Finally, many of Kim’s television series, including Jang Bo-Ri Is Here (2014), My Daughter Geum Sa-wol (Nae Ttal Geumsawol, 2015–2016), and The Penthouse (2020–2021), have invincible characters who survive tragic accidents and villains who often commit serious crimes such as murder, gambling, and kidnapping. Table 1 is a list of drama series written by the troika that have been labelled as makjang dramas by critics.

Despite the minor differences between the ways that the three screenwriters develop plot scenarios, however, the troika and their works have played pivotal roles in conceptualizing makjang drama by similarly exaggerating and sensationalizing clichés that had been used in Korean soap operas. Each screenwriter has employed unique narrative devices to heighten the dramatic effect of the plot and characters, allowing their series to correspond to the elements of this sub-genre. In line with her self-identification as ‘a hide-bound conservative who believes in patriarchy’ (Kim 2001, para 1), Moon has often used outdated patriarchal values and broken families as major narrative devices. For instance, Wang’s Family (2013–2014, KBS2) was accused of having out-of-fashion patriarchal standards in its narrative and characters, such as a heroine who is forced to forgive her flirtatious husband, her stiff-necked mother-in-law, and her patriarchal father. Additionally, her
scripts have been accused of having unrealistic plots that bear no relation to everyday life and that often stick to old customs. For instance, the last episode of Wang’s Family faced serious backlash from the media as she included a 30-year time-leap out of the blue to conclude the plot.

Meanwhile, Kim puts emphasis on the conflict between good and evil characters by developing more uncanny and vicious villains to better reveal the primitive desires of humanity. Many drama series written by Kim have been flagged by the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC)—the nation’s main regulatory body for broadcasting review. For instance, the Commission took disciplinary action against the producers of The Penthouse as its second episode included scenes where teenagers bully and kidnap their peers. The KCSC also sanctioned My Daughter Geum Sa-wol (2015) after broadcasting an episode where a female character returns alive from a falling accident, a car explosion, and amnesia.

Finally, Im often uses ideas of shamanism and folk beliefs as narrative tools to contribute to constructing the writer’s universe. Despite criticisms, many of their clichés have become popular and were adopted by other screenwriters (Nam 2014). Apart from their success in ratings, many of her drama series were criticized for their unreal and improbable plots and hyper-sensational characters. For instance, in Princess Aurora (MBC, 2013), the writer named characters reflecting folk beliefs and dropped eleven of them during the broadcast—including the main male character (who died from a car accident), both the parents of the main female character (also dying from a car accident and a sudden death, respectively) and so on. After the media ridiculed the series as a ‘death
’ (evoking the popular Japanese manga *Death Note* in the phrase)—where the writer continuously killed off characters regardless of the storyline—the broadcaster demanded that the writer stop cutting characters needlessly.

In sum, media and critics have criticized *makjang* drama for their absurd and hyper-sensational genre characteristics and labelled it as an ‘unfavourable’ genre. However, they remain popular among and strongly supported by female audiences as they identify with the characters and hardships they experience in real life (Nam 2010; Yun, Jeong, and Park 2016). Often called ‘drama series that people enjoy watching while yelling at the characters’, many *makjang* drama series recorded higher viewer ratings than other genres. Unsurprisingly, their popularity has led to broadcasters continuing to schedule them in their catalogues. Based on the documents and press releases issued by broadcasters, the following section investigates broader industrial contexts that influence the continued production and distribution of *makjang* drama series.

**Prioritizing the ratings: the strong presence of *makjang* drama in Korean television**

After the nation’s political democratization in 1987, the government lessened censorship and restrictions on the broadcasting industry. In 1991, it allowed Taeyoung Construction, a construction company, to launch limited terrestrial broadcasting in Seoul and its neighbouring cities, resulting in the now well-established Seoul Broadcasting System, SBS, followed by the establishment of a handful of other regional commercial terrestrial broadcasters in the mid-1990s. In addition to these channels, cable and satellite television were introduced in 1995 and 2000, respectively. However, most pay-per-view television broadcasters had their specialized field in their programming and were managed by small companies that could not afford to produce drama series.

Unlike US television companies that purchase the broadcasting rights or distribution rights of television content from producers, Korean terrestrial broadcasters have their own divisions dedicated to producing television series. Furthermore, until the late 2000s, each of them directly recruited new actors and actresses who would appear in their drama series exclusively, called talent. Needless to say, terrestrial broadcasters have played pivotal roles in establishing both the forms and genres of Korean drama series up until now. Regardless of drama formats and themes—a courtroom drama, revenge play, thriller, historical drama, and medical drama—producers set up a romance between male and female characters, as well as the love triangles surrounding them, as the central storyline. Indeed, incumbent players have repeatedly produced drama series in which plots involve love stories between a rich hero and a poor heroine while emphasizing traditional values of paternalism and gender roles.

This monotonous production of romance series has provoked criticism (Nam 2016). Against this backdrop, the birth of *makjang* drama in the mid-2000s began, led by the troika and several writers, and can be considered the broadcasters’ way of differentiating content from other television series to make their series more attractive compared to that of competitors. For instance, before writing *First Wives’ Club* (2007–2008), Moon had already written several daily drama series, including *Even if the Wind Blows* (*Barami Bureodo*, 1995–1996, KBS), which had landed her the best screenwriter award in many award ceremonies, and another daily drama series *Just Attached* (*Jeong Ttaemune*,
Likewise, Im also established her reputation from the success of a daily series *See and See Again* (*Bogo Tto Bogo*, 1998–1999, MBC). Indeed, during a press interview, the writer recalled that the introduction of absurd characters and unnatural plots to her drama scripts was a response to the chief producer’s request for higher viewer ratings.

Television ratings are the top priority for a drama series. Hundreds of staff depend on making it. If the viewership declines by a few per cent, they become nervous. They also lose money. As long as the broadcaster is not a charity, we must at least recoup the production costs. Of course, it might be best to make the drama fun and touching, but I am not good enough to catch both (Kim 2018).

Indeed, early *makjang* works—like Kim’s *Temptation of Wife*, Moon’s *First Wives’ Club*, and Im’s *Dear Heaven*, which are recognized as the genre base of each writer’s *makjang* universe—recorded the highest ratings ever at 40 percent of the total viewing audience. In spite of criticism, their successes saw other television screenwriters develop their scripts with similarly sensational and provocative storylines and characters. For instance, Seo Young-myeong, a well-known television screenwriter, wrote a morning soap opera *What’s for Dinner?* (*Babjwo*, 2009, MBC). Many of the series’ plot threads have evoked public indignation, including the violent husband character who refuses to divorce despite his adultery, the heroine’s mother’s murder-for-hire request to kill the mistress, and the spirit of the dead mother-in-law causing a car accident involving the mistress. While this made MBC apologise to viewers publicly—resulting in one of the Commission’s heaviest sanctions on broadcasters—the series simultaneously became number one in the ratings among morning television drama series, recording the highest rate of 20.5 percent in 2009 (Yoon 2009). The success of such series in the late 2000s has made television networks programme drama series utilize and repeat the genre codes of *makjang* dramas despite criticisms.

Although television networks denied labelling some of their drama series as *makjang* dramas, they continued signing contracts with several screenwriters, including the troika, with guaranteed top-notch salaries, expecting high television ratings (Ahn 2017). Indeed, the success of *makjang* dramas has often been quoted by broadcasters as representative of their major business achievements. According to its annual review, MBC promoted the high ratings of *Jang Bo-Ri Is Here* as an indicator of the broadcaster’s overall strength in television drama production. The company praised the series for ‘achieving the broadcaster’s goal 100 per cent in terms of ratings’ (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation 2015: 95), calling it ‘the national drama … [which] gained favour among the public thanks to its unique narrative settings and heartwarming family stories’ (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation 2015: 126). Furthermore, in contrast to the many controversies that the various misdeeds of the main villain character had provoked, its review department—which is mandated to review its contents according to ethics and public feeling—dubbed the series the best programme of the year. In the following year, MBC once again highlighted the success of *My Daughter, Geum Sa Wol* (2015)—another *makjang* drama written by Kim Soon-ok—saying it raised the broadcaster’s competitiveness in weekend programmes, while receiving favourable comments from the audience (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation 2016).
Likewise, KBS also evaluated Wang’s Family as ‘a television drama that helped audiences of all generations to relax by providing joy and laughter and moving their hearts’ (Korean Broadcasting System 2014: 162). Such evaluations of makjang dramas demonstrate the broadcaster’s internal logic of prioritizing television ratings in producing and distributing television drama. Reflecting this, in a newspaper interview, Im Sung-han recalled that she decided to add a scene in the script of New Tales of Gisaeng (2011, SBS), in which a male character shoots lasers from his eyes at his family unexpectedly when his family employed a shaman to cure his disease, solely because a senior executive of the broadcaster asked her to ‘reach 25 percent of the viewing rate’. She added that the scene ‘reached 29.5 percent’ (Nam 2018).

Following SBS and MBC’s success with broadcasting daily television dramas on weekday evenings—such as Temptation of Wife (2009) and others that had been criticized as a makjang drama—KBS began to broadcast drama series at the same time slot on KBS2 in 2013, an ad-supported free-to-air television channel. While many television series that KBS aired in this timeslot were criticized for employing typical clichés of makjang drama series, they continued to record high viewer ratings. Figure 1 shows the ratings of KBS2’s television series from August 2013—when the broadcaster began to air Ruby Ring (Lubi Banji) to 2021—illustrating the overall strength of the daily television series.

Korean terrestrial broadcasters have a long tradition of broadcasting primetime weekend drama series, each consisting of 50 episodes on average. At the same time, broadcasters have programmed two 16-episode primetime miniseries on weekdays, alongside weekday daily soap operas that are 120 episodes in length on average. As shown in Figure 1, viewer ratings of weekday daily television drama series have been higher than those of primetime television miniseries that feature different genres, including historical dramas, medical dramas, romantic comedies, thrillers, etc. Given that many makjang drama series are also found in the weekend primetime slot—which has recorded

Figure 1. Television ratings of drama series broadcast by KBS2 (Source: AGB Nielsen).
the highest viewer rating among four time slots—Figure 1 clearly shows a preference on the part of the main audiences of this television channel towards makjang dramas. Considering that there were only four times when weekday primetime miniseries got higher viewer ratings than weekday daily television dramas—Descendants of the Sun (Taeyangui Huye, 2016), Love in the Moonlight (Gureumi Geurin Dalbit, 2016), Liver or Die (Waegeurae Pungsangssi, 2019), and When the Camellia Blooms (Dongbaekkkot Pil Muryeop, 2019)—the graph explains the overall competitiveness of the makjang drama, and the broadcasters’ preference for them, in comparison to primetime miniseries.

Alongside their high ratings, major structural changes that brought about the segmentation of the domestic market also influenced incumbent networks to continue programming makjang drama series. Firstly, the entry of new broadcasters into Korean television in the early-2010s challenged the longstanding hegemony of terrestrial broadcasters in the industry. Among cable broadcasters, tvN, a pay-television network specializing in entertainment programmes that is owned by CJ ENM, began producing high-profile drama series in the early 2010s, including the hit romantic comedy Reply series (Eungdapara, 2012, 2014, 2015–2016) and Nine-Times Time Travel (Nain: Ahop Beonui Siganyeohaeng, 2013). Furthermore, JTBC—one of four generalist cable television networks established in 2011—also began releasing drama series, including How Long I’ve Kissed (Anaeui Jagyeok, 2012) and Secret Love Affair (Milhoe, 2014). These second movers implemented more aggressive strategies by headhunting more than thirty well-known producers from incumbent players (Ahn 2019). Thanks to the strong financial power of their mother companies, both JTBC and tvN invested more money in producing drama series with blended genres, including apocalyptic thrillers and fantasy epics, many of which received favourable reviews from critics and attracted audiences. By doing so, they became the new powerhouses of television drama production, challenging the dominance of terrestrial networks (Kwak 2018).

In addition to this phenomenon, the growing presence of web-based media fostered the fragmentation of the television market (Kim 2019). In the late 2010s, several companies such as Playlist and Whynot Media released serialized dramas consisting of 8–16 episodes, each of which was 15–30 min on average. Known as web-dramas, this new format was targeted at teenagers and young adults who were used to ‘snack culture’—which refers to a ‘convenient culture that is indulged within a short duration of time’ (Jin 2020: 57). Alongside the penetration of smart devices that attracted young audiences to enjoy audiovisual content through social media, the entry of online video content companies into the production and distribution of drama series became another challenge to traditional media outlets (Kang 2017).

Meanwhile, the growing presence of over-the-top (OTT) services—as well as their dramas, many of which became tentpole series that incumbent players could not afford to produce—became popular among audiences, contributing to market fragmentation. Such changes in traditional media structures compelled terrestrial broadcasters to recoup the production costs of primetime miniseries, many of which were popular among young audiences, by selling them to OTT platforms and other online venues even if it might lead to a decrease in their revenues (KBS 2020; 2021; Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation 2020). In relation to this, MBC explains:

There are concerns that signing contracts with Netflix and other global OTTs might bring cannibalisation that may cause negative impact on [the broadcaster’s] performance of selling
content to both domestic and international markets. … It is clear that the distribution of our content through Netflix would reduce the revenue coming from the domestic video-on-demand market. Despite all this, we should be aware that selling the distribution rights of our content overseas to Netflix can recoup much of the production cost—which could balance different sources of revenues [by compensating our loss from the domestic market] (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation 2020: 251).

Amid such changes, while still relying on advertising revenue from drama series—the main revenue source of broadcasters—terrestrial broadcasters attempted to secure an audience among older generations, who continue to enjoy content through television. For instance, KBS produced a series of television programmes in 2020 targeting middle-aged audiences over forty and prefer to consume television content via television rather than social media or other platforms, such as Rise Again, Korea: Na Hoon-a (Daehan-minguk Eogein, Nahuna) and Trot Festival (Teuroteu Daechukje). These shows saw ratings reach 29 and 19 percent, respectively, while simultaneously reducing the number of prime-time miniseries (Korean Broadcasting System 2021). The public broadcaster considered such strategies as a way of ‘strengthening its competitiveness as well as publicness [as the public broadcaster]’ (Korean Broadcasting System 2021: 44).

In a similar context, the nation’s public broadcaster, KBS, suspended the production of several weekday miniseries due to ‘the decline of the advertising market of terrestrial broadcasters despite intensified competition between OTT and pay television networks, and the implementation of the 52-hour workweek policy [that brought about a rise in production costs]’ (Korean Broadcasting System 2021: 65), which saved 15 billion KRW (approximately 12.5 million USD). Despite its financial issues, the broadcaster continued programming daily and weekend soap operas, stipulating that the high ratings of these soap operas ‘demonstrate the increased competitiveness of KBS television dramas’ (Korean Broadcasting System 2021: 240). The case of KBS exemplifies how terrestrial broadcasters recognize middle-aged audiences as their main target and the production of content that might satisfy their taste as its key strategy for market segmentation. Considering that makjang drama series have gained popularity among middle-aged audiences who prefer watching content via television and often identify with characters in various series, it is no surprise that such structural changes in the broadcasting industry would be a major impetus for broadcasters to continue programming makjang dramas.

Following the structural changes in the broadcasting industry, a few screenwriters whose works have been labelled makjang dramas have written new series that reflect these changes. Im Sung-han came out of retirement in 2021 and began writing a new drama series called Love (ft. Marriage and Divorce). Registered under the pseudonym of Phoebe, the series was aired by TV Chosun, another generalist cable television network, and recorded the highest viewing rate of 9.65 percent in its first season and 15.18 percent in its second season. Considering that TV Chosun has been known for producing programmes aimed at audiences in their 50s and 60s—such as the trot singer contest shows Miss Trot (Naeireun Miseuteurot, 2019) and Mr. Trot (Naeireun Miseuteoteurot, 2020)—as its main management strategy, its decision to broadcast Im’s television drama aligns with both its business plans and target audience demographics (Chosun Broadcasting Corporation 2021a; 2021b). The high ratings of this show contributed to an increase in the company’s advertising revenues, resulting in the broadcaster’s business
profits becoming the highest among both terrestrial and generalist pay-television networks in 2020 (Choi S 2021). TV Chosun’s programming of Love (ft. Marriage and Divorce) exemplifies how makjang drama can still be popular and reveals that screenwriters are increasingly seeking opportunities outside terrestrial broadcasters.

Furthermore, several screenwriters have begun to write scripts in a new way to attract young audiences. For instance, Kim Soon-ok wrote The Last Empress (2019), a tale built in an alternative universe in which Korea did not abolish the royal rule. In this new setting, the plot deals with how the main female character (Oh Sunny, played by Jang Na-ra), an aspiring musical actress, became the empress and challenged palace politics that were rife with power struggles and violence. Despite controversies over the series’ over-sensational scenes and plot twists, such as torture, sexual assault, drug production, and murder, many of its plots and clichés were widely used in other genres such as murder mysteries and political satires and were intended to attract young audiences. Indeed, its television ratings of audiences aged 20–49 recorded a high of 7.8 percent, which was unusual given that young audiences prefer quality drama series with strong plots and distinctive genre characteristics like many US television series (Kang 2019).

This explanation also applies to The Penthouse: War in Life (2020–2021), Kim’s most recent television series. Like the writer’s previous works, which have been about revenge, the series also focused on the heroine (Shim Su-ryeon, performed by Lee Ji-ah)’s intricate revenge on Ju Dan-tae (Um Ki-joon) and Cheon Seo-jin (Kim So-yeon), who had murdered her ex-husband and child. Although the series was criticized for its sensational scenes, involving adultery, murder, illegal disposal of a dead body, abuse of a corpse, and domestic violence, as well as the improbable storylines that made much of the plot unreal, Kim embedded genre elements of black comedies in the series to satirize social issues, such as school violence and power imbalances, while also continuing to blend elements of other genres including thriller, mystery, and suspense. Moreover, the broadcaster spent 27 billion KRW (22.5 million USD) in producing the series to utilize a 42,700 square feet-size studio set and luxurious props (Yang 2021). As a result, the series successfully attracted both middle-aged and young audiences, as the total view count of the second season’s video clips on portal websites recorded 100 million views (Hwang 2021).

Producers and broadcasters who have made makjang drama series strive to diversify distribution channels to make profits and attract young audiences who do not watch television. For instance, alongside TV Chosun, Chorokbaem Media, the production studio of Love (ft. Marriage and Divorce), partnered with Netflix to make makjang drama available on its streaming platform. Despite concerns regarding unreal plot threads and scenes, including taboo relationships and nudity, the series ranked third among the most-watched series among Korean subscribers and became top 10 in many East Asian countries, including Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand (Choi B 2021; Flixpatrol n.d.). Such changes in both genre elements and efforts in diversifying their distribution channels demonstrate that the production of makjang drama also responds to the ongoing transformation in the broadcasting industry while targeting terrestrial broadcasters and their main audiences.

**Conclusion**

Based on the analysis of reports published by terrestrial broadcasters and the television ratings of their respective drama series, this research has examined the changes and
continuities in the production of *makjang* drama in relation to the structural transformation that Korean television has recently undergone. Due to a series of factors, such as the growing presence of new television networks in the market, the high use of social media and mobile devices, and the entry of streaming services, terrestrial broadcasters have experienced a marked decrease in young audiences as well as a financial crisis from decreasing advertising revenues. Against this backdrop, they have become the main distribution outlet for *makjang* drama series. In this regard, as long as *makjang* drama is likely to continuously attract more viewers than other genres, producing them proves to be both a cost-effective and viable strategy for terrestrial broadcasters. In other words, as the market becomes more fragmented and more competitive, terrestrial broadcasters have responded by producing and distributing *makjang* drama series to satisfy the taste of middle-aged audiences despite criticisms against the genre. Meanwhile, leading figures in *makjang* drama production have also been proactive in responding to the changes in the broadcasting industry by adopting and implementing settings and plot trends of other television drama genres into their series, actively seeking opportunities to diversify their distribution channels.

The findings of this research indicate that the development of a television drama series cannot be understood without considering broader industrial contexts. Even though *makjang* drama has been criticized for its improbable and unrealistic storylines, sensational settings, and highly exaggerated clichés, they continue to be a major genre in Korean television today. The genre’s persistence in Korean television explains that the production of a genre is an outcome of interactions between broadcasters, audiences, and several factors surrounding the broadcasting industry, alongside the aesthetic or artistic quality of the series. While it could be argued that *makjang* drama series are far from being considered quality dramas, the fate of the genre depends on the needs of broadcasters and the older audiences who continue to enjoy the genre in spite of the criticisms.

**Notes**

1. In general, terrestrial broadcasters program three types of dramas: the first are 50 min-long 16 episodes that run twice a week during weekday evenings, known as drama miniseries. Unlike miniseries that encompass a variety of genres including thrillers, romantic comedies, medical drama, and crime melodramas, everyday morning and evening dramas are often limited genre-wise to soap operas. These soap operas, broadcast every weekday morning and evening, are programmed as 30-minute 120-episode long series. Finally, what is called weekend dramas are 50-minute 50-episode series. In the aftermath of financial problems in the late 2010s, terrestrial broadcasters cancelled morning dramas.

2. Featuring melodramatic stories, a series of Japanese creators introduced *shinpa* as a new genre of theater promoting modern values and norms in contrast to traditional theaters to appeal to the Westernized middle class during its modernization period. During the Japanese colonial rule, many Korean screenwriters and directors introduced the genre by reinterpreting it as struggles between the modern and premodern worlds and emphasizing emotionalism in the colonial society. Codes of Korean *shinpa*, including low-class characters and narratives of their sufferings, and exaggerations of acting, have become major elements of Korean melodrama after its independence (Lee 2007).

3. There are criticisms against KCSC’s decision to reprimand producers and broadcasters that distribute *makjang* drama series. For instance, Yoon, Jeong and Park (2016) point out that the Commission’s review of a drama series only emphasises moral and ethical standards and overlooks aesthetic and artistic considerations, as television drama series are sub-
genres of the dramatic art. Combined with stricter standards on reviewing content broadcast by terrestrial television networks compared to cable and pay-television networks—arguing that land-based signals belong to the public—this often brings about concerns to censorship.

4. Yeon Min-jeong, the series’ main villain character performed by actress Lee Yu-ri, caused a sensation. Throughout the series, Yeon committed all kinds of morally questionable actions for her success: deserting her mother and child to overcome poverty and to be adopted to a rich family, putting the blame on good characters, disturbing Jang Bo-Ri (the main character) from finding her biological parents, blackmailing her birth mother, and trying to kill her ex-boyfriend who is the father of her daughter. Also, whenever her plot was leading to her downfall, she often saved herself through deceit and manipulation. In spite of criticisms against the series’ improbable storyline, many audiences enjoyed Yeon’s character as a villain who makes morally questionable decision to survive, and they praised Lee’s outstanding performance in making Yeon a notorious villain in the history of Korean television drama (Kang 2014; Lee 2014).

5. Inspired by the high television ratings of Na Hoon-a, a legendary trot singer, KBS continued producing and airing concerts of several singers who had popularity among the middle-aged audiences, like Bloom Korea, Shim Soo Bong (Pieonara Daehanminguk, Simsubong, 2021), We’re Hero, Im Young-woong (We’re Hero, Imyeongung, 2021), and Thank You Everybody, Song Hae (Yeoreobun Gomapseumnida, Songhae, 2022). Considering that the production costs of each concert would be approximately 1.5 billion KRW (1.24 million USD), such a strategy for attracting the middle-aged was cost-effective as all concerts recorded more than 10 per cent of ratings.

6. Between Our Gap-Soon and Revolutionary Sisters, Moon wrote the script for a weekday miniseries Liver or Die (2019, KBS). While Moon kept using some of her clichés like giving fancy and unusual names to the characters, the series avoided the stigma of being labelled a makjang as the storyline was praised for emphasizing the importance of family without ridiculous plots and characters (Park 2019).

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Appendix: List of Drama Series Mentioned in the Manuscript (Chronological Order)

Even If the Wind Blows (Barami Bureodo, KBS, 1995–1996)
Just Attached (Jeong Ttaemune, KBS, 1997–1998)
See and See Again (Bogo Tto Bogo, MBC, 1998–1999)
Miss Mermaid (Ineo Agassi, MBC, 2002–2003)
Lotus Flower Fairy (Wangkkot Seonnyeonim, MBC, 2004–2005)
Dear Heaven (Haneurisiyeo, SBS, 2005–2006)
Opposite Attract (Ahyeondong Manim, MBC, 2007)
First Wives’ Club (Jogangjicheokeulleop, SBS, 2007–2008)
Temptation of Wife (Anaeui Yuhok, SBS, 2008–2009)
What’s for Dinner? (Babjwo, MBC, 2009)
Assorted Gems (Boseokbibimbap, MBC, 2009–2010)
Temptation of an Angel (Cheonsaui Yuhok, SBS, 2009)
Three Brothers (Susanghan Samhyeongje, KBS, 2009–2010)
Smile, Mom (Useoyo Eomma, SBS, 2010–2011)
New Tales of Gisaeng (Singisaengbyeon, SBS, 2011)
Living in Style (Pomnage Salgeoya, SBS, 2011–2012)
How Long I’ve Kissed (Anaeei Jagyeok, JTBC, 2012)
Reply series (Eungdapa, tvN, 2012, 2014, 2015–2016)
Five Fingers (Daseot Songarak, SBS, 2012)
Nine-Times Time Travel (Nain: Ahop Beonui Siganyeohaeng, tvN, 2013)
Princess Aurora (Orora Gongju, MBC, 2013)
Ruby Ring (Lubi Banji, KBS, 2013–2014)
Wang’s Family (Wanggane Sikgudeul, KBS, 2013–2014)
Secret Love Affair (Mihoe, JTBC, 2014)
Jang Bo-Ri Is Here (Watda! Jangbore, MBC, 2014)
Everybody Say Kimchi (Modu Da Gimchi, MBC, 2014)
Love of Eve (Ibeuui Sarang, MBC, 2015)
Apgujeong Midnight Sun (Apgujeong Baegya, MBC, 2015)
My Daughter Geum Sa-wol (Nae Ttal Geumsawol, MBC, 2015–2016)
Descendants of the Sun (Taeyangui Huye, KBS, 2016)
Love in the Moonlight (Gureumi Geurin Dalbit, KBS, 2016)
Our Gap-Soon (Uri Gapsuni, SBS, 2016–2017)
Sister Is Alive! (Eonnineun Saraitda, SBS, 2017)
Happy Sisters (Haepisiseuteojeu, SBS, 2017–2018)
The Last Empress (Hwanghuui Pumgyeok, SBS, 2018–2019)
Liver or Die (Waegurerae Pungsangssi, KBS, 2019)
When the Camellia Blooms (Dongbaekkkot Pil Muryeop, KBS, 2019)
The Penthouse series (Penteuhauseu, SBS, 2020–2021)
Love (ft. Marriage and Divorce) series (Gyeolhonjaksa Ihonjakgok, TV Chosun, 2021–2022)
Revolutionary Sisters (Okei Gwangjamae, KBS, 2021)