

AUDIENCE INTERPRETATION ON KOREAN TV DRAMA SERIES IN JAKARTA

**Rizki Briandana
Intan Soliha Ibrahim**

Numerous Korean cultural products (K-Pop), comprising of television dramas, movies, and songs, gained wide fame from the East to the Southeast Asian region at the end of the 1990s. Furthermore, the Asian economic crisis in the 1990s has been affecting the behaviour of Asian buyers particularly regarding their selection of Korean cultural products including Korean drama series. In Indonesia, Korean drama series gained a promising reception from countless generations of fans. This snowballing number of Korean dramas flourished on various television stations in Indonesia. This study is constructed on the reception analysis's framework, specifically portraying audience as an active media text interpreter. This analysis explains a broader conception of what audiences might act with texts, in order to allow the ritual uses of communications among the transmission of media contents from producers to audiences. This study applied qualitative approach through textual analysis and focused group discussion. The findings discovered that social values of materialism, patriarchy, and class differences existed in the series, for instance, Princess Hours and Secret Garden. The leading male characters are portrayed as proud and selfish, resembling the typical characteristics of the soap opera genre. Most Korean dramas will finish in a constructive way, where the protagonists eventually change and adapt positive values. Respondents who were involved in this research watched Princess Hours and Secret Garden for the diversified ways of connecting to audiences' emotions by portraying attractive protagonists, compelling theme songs, and dramatic storylines.

Keywords: Korean Drama, reception analysis, melodramatic realism, and audiences.

Introduction

Without a doubt, televisions, radios, newspapers, magazines and films play a virtuous role towards the society. All of the mediums function as socialisation agents, which is not only to inform and to entertain society, but also to educate them. It transmits the values and social norms in life. McQuail (1989:37) believed that television is able to influence audiences effectively, particularly as a development tool. He saw that television acts as a tool that follows the development of culture. Not only has it showed development in art forms and symbols, it has also showed development in terms of ordinances, atmosphere, lifestyle, and behavioural norms. Generally, audiences use media in a lot of

different ways and according to their own needs. Furthermore, how the audience interprets what they watch on television is totally subjective, (meaning-construction) to their understanding of the phenomenon. According to Aryani (2006:7), media exists not as an institution that has the power to construct audiences' perspective through the messages it transmits, but vice versa. In other words, audiences' perspective is beyond powerful in creating meaning in response to what they see on television.

As a remarkable and effective medium, the television has become a ubiquitous medium. Moreover, the television is not a visionless medium compared to the radio. As an audio-visual medium, audiences are able to undergo a simulated experience (Sendjaja, 2003: 331). Studies regarding media reception should emphasise on audiences, specifically on the interpretative community. We are on the standpoint where people rely on television for the purpose of information and entertainment, which leads to structuring the way audiences think and respond. In other words, we are denying the perspective from the Hypodermic Needle Theory. We believe that television does not have the power to influence audiences directly since they have the authority to filter (selective retention) what they see on television. This research examines how audiences interpret social values from Korean drama series in their individual lives and reasons why they prefer Korean dramas compared to Indonesian *sinetrons*.

Overview of Korean Dramas

Audiences construct and interpret texts liberally; nevertheless, television programmes are provided and controlled by the gatekeeper. In other words, audiences do not have the liberty to select what they want to watch, since it is provided by the television station. This situation happens due to media concentration. Considering the fact, televisions are a product that generates profits for television stations and lead the gatekeeper to cherry-pick their television programmes in order to obtain advertisers. Foreign-made programmes employed by the television stations ensue to gain high ratings program as one of the television management strategies. From general observation, numerous television stations around the world import Korean dramas.

Numerous Korean cultural products (K-Pop), comprising of television dramas, movies, and songs, gained wide fame from the East to the Southeast Asian region at the end of the 1990s. *Winter Sonata* was an excellent hallmark; not only did it contributed to the flourish of K-Pop industries, it also helped increase the gross domestic products (GDP) of South Korea.

Winter Sonata excellently presented the food and culture through the drama, the diversity of attractiveness atmosphere on Nami Island (Naminara Republica), hence making Korea one of the most visited countries in Asia. This is the starting point where the K-Pop culture was recognised as an epidemic in mass media. This epidemic is known as *Hallyu* (Korean Wave). The Associated Press (March, 2001) reported that pop culture in Asia was once dominated by Tokyo and Hollywood, but it has since changed and diverted to *Hallyu*. Korean accessories, gastronomies, films, music, and even fashion have become a trend in Asia (Visser, 2002).

In China, the *Hallyu* emerged in 1997 through the television drama series "*What is Love All About*". It successfully aired on China Central Television Station (CCTV). The show was logged as the second highest watched series in China's television history (Heo, 2002). With that astonishing results in capturing the audiences' attention, Korean dramas began to conquer television stations in Taiwan, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Furthermore, the Asian economic crisis in the 1990s has been affecting the behaviour of Asian buyers particularly regarding their selection of Korean drama series due to the affordable price. The cost for Korean dramas is a fourth (1/4) of Japanese programmes and a tenth (1/10) of Hong Kong dramas (Lee, 2003). Thus, the Korean export revenue of television dramas increased dramatically from US \$12.7 million in 1999 to US \$150.950.000 in 2007 (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Indonesia, 2008).

Due to the great fame of Korean dramas, Korean songs and movies began to take a place in Asia. For example, the boy band called H.O.T turned out to be the highest ranking in pop charts in China and Taiwan in 1998. The popularity of the band resulted in their high selling album, which lasted for a long period. In 2002, the sensational debut of Korean adolescent pop singer, BoA, ranked number one on the Oricon Weekly Chart, a Japanese song chart (Visser, 2002). Songs and choreography from Korean female groups Wonder Girls and Girls Generation became such an epidemic in Thailand and Cambodia and as a result, local artistes began to copy the techniques in order to compete with *Hallyu*. At the end of the 1990s, *Hallyu* received praises and attracted many viewers in Asia (Shim Doobo, 2011).

Chon (2001), a film critic from Hong Kong, expressed that the success of Korean popular culture came from its ability to touch on Asia's sentimental issues such as family values. In other words, Korean dramas are capable of portraying Korean cultures and Asian values such as courtesy, respect for parents and elders, solidarity, and the holiness of love and marriage. These values are displayed through the unique way of life in a modern setting

Korean society that has gone through economically and technology advancements. Korean dramas creatively combine traditional elements with modern values. In Indonesia, Korean dramas are frequently watched by teenagers from the range of ages 15 to 24 years old. This has been proven by one of the most favourite drama, titled *Secret Garden*, that achieved a rating of 2.0 and a share of 14.1 (Research and Development Indosiar, 2011). The increasing number of Korean drama series airing on television stations in Indonesia indicated an increasing number of viewers. These findings have inspired us to know more about the current trend.

Framework of Study

Reception analysis or audiences' reception theory emphasised on audiences' reception or interpretation in creating meaning from a text. Stuart Hall was responsible in introducing this theory in 1973 and it was published later in 1980. In the early days, this theory derived from a product of social-political context, where the media text is encoded by television programmes and decoded by the audiences.

The research done by Hall intentionally examined the BBC television current affairs programme called *Nationwide*. The reason Hall conducted this study was due to (1) the programme reinforcing the status quo and (2) attract the audience from the middle and lower classes. Subsequently, David Morley (1983) was highly inspired by Hall and implemented "Focus Group Discussion" throughout the analysis. Morley formed 29 groups consisting of respondents from different backgrounds. Each respondent was provided with an episode from *Nationwide* and must respond to the clip whether they would construct dominant, oppositional or negotiated readings – the three categories of readings proposed by Hall (Latiffah Pawanteh, 2011:12).

This study is based on cultural studies, which utilises critical cultural theory proposed by Stuart Hall's 'encoding-decoding' model. Hall's thought embraced the issues of hegemony and cultural studies, which it is considered as post-Gramscian perspective. The concept of ideology, hegemony, and cultural are discussed with relation to the trend of Korean popular culture in Indonesia. The gist of reception analysis is grounded by the meaning generated through the interaction with the audience (viewer/reader) and the texts. In other words, the meanings are constructed through viewing or reading and the process of making sense of media texts.

Reception analysis argues how audiences read the media (film or television programme) and are influenced by the contextual factors. This refers to the audiences' identity, perception on the production of the programme, as well as the social, historical, and political background. In other words, reception theory positions the viewer/reader in the context with various factors influencing the process of constructing meanings of media texts.

This study suggests that the audience are the active media text interpreters. This theory explains a broader conception of what audiences might act with texts in order to allow the ritual uses of communication among the transmission of media content from the producers to the audience. Reception analysis is based on a subject's conscience in understanding the object and event prior to an individual's knowledge and experience. Reception analysis helps determine why the audience produces different interpretations, psychological, and social factors that affect the different interpretations and the social consequences arising from the process. It aims to verify that media texts are encoded by the producer and being decoded actively by the receiver/viewer while producing meaning that suits their social and cultural background. In short, the media messages are constructed subjectively by different individuals.

The rationale of this study is to account for the selective response of audience in the face of media access. The key concept here is the active audience, which also means that the viewers play an active role to determine what people do with the media. Audience reception in media studies takes into account the individual members of the audience. It realises the preferred meaning in the text and also places an emphasis on the audiences' process of constructing a meaning. Reception analysis also suggests that the meaning constructed by the audience is affected by various other factors, including socio-economic framework and past experiences, and how the media messages are accepted and interpreted by the audience.

Through reception analysis, we can determine how the social, educational, and cultural background of the viewers shape their readings of the values and ideologies in Korean television dramas. This emphasises on the active viewers/audience in tune with scholars such as Michel de Certeau and John Fiske. At the core of their work is the key insight that individuals negotiate and struggle against the opposition of cultural and media texts around them that often take materials and meanings from products of the dominant culture and integrating them into their everyday lives in unpredictable and subversive ways.

The encoding/decoding model of communication proposed by Stuart Hall asserted that: (a) the processes and tools to form a message (in social and political contexts) is called

encoding and (b) the process of deriving meaning from the message, or decoding, is fundamental in the communicative process. However, if the meaning cannot derive from the message, the audience will not be able to translate/consume the message which further prevents it from being reproduced. In short, reception analysis focuses on the decoding stage, where the viewers make sense of the media text by interpreting it with their individual preferences (Baran, 2003: 269-270).

Korean drama struggles through display of cultural hegemony and ideological opposition where various meanings are produced and begins with the audiences' perception on the programme. The themes, problems, values, and ideologies relating to gender and class contributed to the process of decoding and construction of meaning.

Methods and Procedures

This study applied the qualitative approach through textual analysis and focus group discussion (FGD) to obtain the data in a systematic way and reliable for the purpose of scientific proof (Nawawi, 1998:175).

Technically, this research applied reception analysis by examining the social background and culture among the viewers. Textual analysis examined the language in the text. Meanwhile, focus group discussion observed the issue in a group. FGD drove the group's participants to disclose opinions, questions, and share stories (Barbour & Kitzinger 1994:4). FGD helped the researchers dig deeper into the perception of a participant so that the motivation and explanation of one's opinion is revealed. The interaction between the participants became interesting points to examine, for instance the discussion of films, television programmes, commercials, and so on. This research also identified the ideological classes and values.

The FGD involved three groups of university students from Universitas Mercu Buana, Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta, and Universitas Persada Indonesia (YAI). Each group consisted of five teenage female students from the Faculty of Communication majoring in broadcasting. Respondents were divided into three groups based on their birth locations:

- Group 1 (from Jakarta)
- Group 2 (outside Jakarta)
- Group 3 (the suburbs)

This focused group discussion concentrated on the two extremely high-rated drama series in Indonesia:

1. *Princess Hours*
2. *Secret Garden*

Results and Discussion

David Morley agreed that audience claimed different views about a TV programme. The data analysis was divided into two main categories: data obtained from textual analysis and focus group discussions (FGD).

The textual analysis of the four main characters displayed in the *Princess Hours* and the two main characters from *Secret Garden* portrayed that the characters possess a variety of traits such as arrogance, egoism, haughtiness, friendliness, wisdom, and so on. For instance, Shin and Juu Won were portrayed as stereotypical rich and powerful men. Then, Chae Gyoung represented a young woman from a middle-class family and was married to a crown prince at a young age. Dissimilar to Gil Ra Im. She was presented as a working-class individual, from a middle-class family, yet preferred to work as a stuntwoman in order to earn a living, and eventually, was married to Juu Won. These led the researcher to conclude that each characteristic and personality of the characters in the series was moulded by the demands of the narrative to represent the character types that were featured in both *Princess Hours* and *Secret Garden*.

Apart from that, the patriarch ideology seen in the character of the male protagonists who were described as individualistic and selfish was clearly portrayed in the beginning of the drama. This was one of the stereotypes that were shown in the drama through the characters of the male protagonists. However, at the end of the story, the characters who were arrogant and selfish with their individualistic and materialistic personality shifted slowly due to his love for the female characters. The stereotype characteristics of the female protagonists in the drama series *Princess Hours* and *Secret Garden* were portrayed through their backgrounds, which came from an ordinary moderate family with polite manners and kindness.

The results from the focused group discussions showed that Korean dramas have become more popular than the local Indonesian Sinetron drama contributed by; (1) the

theme songs; (2) physical attractiveness of the actors; and (3) high quality of the production that led to the interesting and entertaining storylines, the positive social values embedded in Korean drama series, harmonious families, and the characters' attempt to maintain and defend their love.

The theme songs play an important role to capture audience emotions. Besides that, the theme songs were part of the cultural touchstones and audiences were inclined to memorise the songs. For example, the lyrics from *Princess Hours* – Perhaps Love/ 사랑인가요 sung by J and Howl became a knockout for that drama. The first paragraph of the theme song (as shown below) described the situation where both the prince and his partner were confused and their relationship were full of anger and jealousy.

언제였던걸지 기억나진 않아 (I don't know when all started)

자꾸 내 머리가 너로 어지럽던 시작 (When my head become dizzy with thought of you)

한 두번씩 떠오르던 생각 (these thoughts would often pop up in my mind)

자꾸 늘어가서 조금 당황스러운 아 마음 (I feel anxious as my heart expands towards you)

In other words, through a suitable theme song, not only does it tell the story, it is also to set the mood so that the audience can recognise the characters. The strategies of Korean drama before airing the drama is that they will promote the Original Sound Track (OST) first in order to hook the audience in with curiosity and interest to sell the drama.

Besides that, respondents stated that they enjoy watching Korean dramas because of the interesting narratives, along with the sacred love stories that stimulated their emotions. Respondents find pleasure in watching Korean dramas which contained the elements of comedy, romance, thriller, and action which were appealing.

The next factor is the physical attractiveness of the actors, particularly the male actors who drew female audience to watch the drama. Male Korean actors' features differ from Chinese and Japanese actors and due to this dissimilarity, Korean actors successfully captured audience to watch the dramas from the beginning to the end. Apart from that, it was discovered that Korean dramas also presented Korean values such as politeness, respect for one's elders, loyalty to the family, collectivism, as well as the sanctity of both love and marriage. However, these values were also portrayed in Asian dramas, specifically in *sinetrons*. Furthermore, how the production amalgamates the drama based on technology is extremely different from *sinetrons*.

Last but not least, the overall high quality of the productions, as well as the locations the dramas were set in contributed to the fruitful acceptance in Indonesia. The process of pre-production, production, and post-production led to high-end dramas. Generally, the minimum amount of time taken to shoot a Korean drama is averaged at four months. These four months represent the initial stages of preparation before a series is filmed. The production team has to do their research, examine each scene, reconnoitre the locations, select the suitable soundtrack, and so on. It is only after this preparatory stage that the series is shot and generally televised only a year later. In other words, Korean productions go for the quality and not the quantity of a drama within the timeframe of a year.

These findings supported Ien Ang's (1985) 'melodramatic realism' by looking at the position of explaining emotional realism of the feeling of tragic structure, which is represented in the dramas. It might translate through the rise and fall of the story with the depiction of excessive emotion and deep feelings. The individualistic, egoistic, patriarchal, and class-discriminatory attitudes presented in the lead characters led to conflicts, which contributed to the excitement, dramatic scenes and storylines. The respondents indicated that their emotions were swayed and touched during both happy and sad scenes while watching Korean drama series. From the findings, almost all of the respondents reported crying when watching the dramatic scenes.

A connection between FGD analysis and textual analysis showed the critique of social-economic perspectives among respondents on the debate of the gaps between the rich and the poor in both *Princess Hours* and *Secret Garden* that showed the changes in characters portrayed when their aims or needs were achieved. For example, how the drama portrayed the male characters as arrogant and individualistic with regards to their wealth at the beginning of the series' storyline suddenly shifted to a different character when they fell in love.

Conclusion

With the endorsement for the film and television industry from the local government, Korea is recognised as a country with influential cultural industry that enables them to export popular cultural products to the world. As a conclusion, university students are extremely attracted to watching Korean dramas. Audience interpretation in Korean dramas among university students completely loomed over the *sinetron* drama in Indonesia.

References

- Ang, I. 1985. *Watching Dallas, Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. Methuen: London and New York.
- Baran, S.J., & Davis, D.K. 2003. *Mass communication theory: Foundations, ferment, and future* (3rd ed.). Canada: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Barbour, R. S., & Kitzinger, J. (Eds.). 1999. *Developing focus group research*. London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Berger, A A. 2000. *Tanda – Tanda dalam Kebudayaan Kontemporer* dalam Terj. M. Dwi Marianto dan Sunarto. PT. Tiara Wacan
- Chon, G. 2001. *Golden Summer*. Asia week, 26 Oktober 46 – 49.
- Departemen Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata. 2008. *Industri budaya kertas putih* Seoul : Departemen Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata.
- Eriyanto. 2001. *Analisis Wacana, Pengantar Analisis Teks Media*. Yogyakarta : LKiS Yogyakarta.
- Fiske, J. 1990. *Cultural and Communication Studies dalam Sebuah Pengantar Paling Komprehensif* (1990) Terj. Yosol Iriantara dan Idi Subandy Ibrahim.
- Hall, S. 1996. *Critical dialogues in cultural studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Heo, J. 2002. 'The "Hanryu" Phenomenon and the acceptability of Korean TV dramas in China', *Korean Journal of Broadcasting* 16 (1) : 496 – 529.
- Kementerian Kebudayaan Olahraga dan Pariwisata. (2008). *Fakta-fakta Tentang Korea*. Trans. Bayu Kristianto. Seoul: Pelayanan Kebudayaan dan Informasi Korea.
- Latiffah Pawanteh et. al. (2011). *Media Consumption Among Young Adults: A Look At Labels Norms In Everyday Life*. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 25, 21-31.
- Lee, M, C. H. Cho. (2003). *Women watching together: an ethnographic study of Korean soap opera fans in the US* [electronic version]. *Cultural Studies*,4 (1), 30-44.
- McQuail, D. 1997. *Audience analysis*. London: Sage Publication.
- Morley, D. 1980. *Nationwide Audiences : Structure and Decoding*. BFI Television Monograph. British Film Institute.
- Morley, D. 1992. *Television, audience & cultural studies*. London: Routledge.
- Research and Development Indosiar. (2011). www.indosiar.shows.rating.com (dipetik pada <http://jkob.cseap.edu.my/index.php/journal/full/4-3.pdf>)

18 November 2011.

Sendjaja, S D., Dkk. 2003. *Pengantar Ilmu Komunikasi*. Jakarta : Pusat
Penerbitan Universitas Terbuka.

Shim, Doobo. (2011). *Hybridity and The Rise of Korean Popular Culture in Asia*. Journal
Media, Culture and Society. Vol. 29 No.1. 25-44

Visser, D. (2002). *What hip asians want: A little bit of seoul ; from films to fashion, korean
pop culture becomes "kim chic" across continent*. Washington post 10 Mac.
http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/national/56897_pac04.shtml. (from associated press)