

Trends in Korean TV

Where is the Love?:
Inside Korean Drama's Romantic Success



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1. Introduction



My Love From The Star

The recent addition of lots of Korean TV shows to Netflix has prompted a fresh wave of media coverage worldwide regarding the concept of “Hallyu”, or the “Korean Wave”. This peak has been building for many years, however, and one of its key drivers over the last decade has been Korea’s expertise at creating romantic programming.

In the west in particular, the absence of romance on television is notable. Romantic comedy is a popular genre, but only in cinema. Where there are romantic relationships on TV they are generally plot devices in other genres – sitcoms where later seasons are propped up by the overdue relationship between lead characters, for example. Soap operas, of course, are driven by relationships but even here the more heightened kind of romance that is so popular in film and literature is secondary to more realistic domestic drama. When it comes to programming in

which love and romance are the primary driver of the narrative, western TV audiences have been long starved.

It was younger audiences who first discovered that Korean drama offered shows with an unashamedly romantic theme. First online through grey market download websites and then through official - though at the time niche - streaming services such as Viki, these younger and more open-minded viewers were attracted to the cultural specifics of K-drama. Already being lured away from traditional broadcast media by online video, Korean dramas not only offered these early fans pop culture that they could call their own, but didn't shrink from the sort of tumultuous emotions that teen viewers were not getting from a media landscape still designed with their parents in mind.

A key early crossover hit was 2013's ***My Love from the Star*** (SBS, *pictured above*) about the romance between Do Min-joon, an alien stranded on Earth for 400 years, and a spoiled actress, Cheon Song-yi. Across 21 episodes and a one-off special, the show tracked their relationship and while the storylines made frequent use of Joon's alien powers and Song-yi's fame, the core of the show was summed up in its title: this was a love story.

My Love from the Star was a huge hit in Korea, but also China, where its popularity led to government intervention. This in turn was picked up by the western media, especially in the US, and this drove curious viewers to seek out copies of episodes online.

Before long, websites dedicated to serving this growing overseas fanbase of K-drama were appearing and it was romantic shows that tended to dominate their charts. 2017 hit, ***Goblin*** (tvN) added a supernatural twist that helped to hook fans weaned on US shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as a cursed immortal wrestles with the notion that only his true love can end his purgatorial life.

Yet, Korean romance shows also allowed for exploration of themes and stories that were closer to reality.

2016's ***Descendants of the Sun*** (KBS) (*pictured right*) tracked the troubled affair between a Special Forces soldier and a field doctor, one whose job is to kill, the other who must save lives. Tackling modern politics even more directly was 2019 smash ***Crash Landing on You*** (tvN)



in which a corporate heiress from South Korea accidentally lands in the North Korea-controlled area of the demilitarised zone between the North and South, where she is rescued and protected by an officer of the Korean People's Army.

Most, if not all, of these hit Korean romances have now found their way to mainstream audiences worldwide via Netflix and other content-hungry SVODs. Just as Korean pop music



has gained a foothold in the traditionally homogenous US culture, so too have these shows – precisely because they provide a swooning, sweeping focus on romance at a time when domestic drama remains fixated on conflict and crime. As an illustration of how accepted this style of Korean drama has become on the global stage, tvN's ***It's Okay To Not Be Okay*** (pictured left), about a young man whose older brother is autistic and his relationship with a female author with anti-social personality disorder, was recently nominated for an Emmy for Best TV Movie or Miniseries, and was named one of the best international TV shows of 2020 by the New York Times. No longer limited to a devoted online audience, but critically

acclaimed as international mainstream hits, Korea's unique take on romantic drama is now a desirable format in itself.

In this report we talk to Ga-ram Kim, the director of JTBC's ***Nevertheless***, one of Korea's most recent romantic hits, and also break down the key Korean romances that buyers should be familiar with.

2. JTBC Interview: *Ga-ram Kim, Director of drama **Nevertheless***

*K7 spoke to Ga-ram Kim, director of JTBC's **Nevertheless**. She provided insights into the show; what the changing landscape of the Korean market signals for romantic K-dramas; and the elements that make up a successful romantic K-drama.*



Ga-ram Kim
Director of
Nevertheless (JTBC)

K7: How has the domestic Korean market for romantic drama/comedy changed over the last five years? Has streaming changed the demographics, or do you find that you have had to come up with new angles to compete?

GK: I think that the market is ever-changing and the way audiences choose to consume content has diversified rapidly over the last five years. Traditionally, the Korean audience were accustomed to watching romance dramas and rom-coms at a fixed time on their TVs, in their homes, with family members. There definitely has, especially during this unusual era of COVID, been a lot of change in consumers' watching habits. The audience now has more control than ever before over when, where, how, and how much they

want to consume a piece of content—and it goes without saying that, therefore, the usage of streaming (both global and local) platforms has significantly increased. That said, because the demand and market is

constantly evolving, I think that creators of all genres must educate themselves of these trends and come up with different angles of storytelling to reflect and adapt to the pace of the expanding market and consumers' needs.

K7: Casting is obviously a key part of making a romantic story work - and Korea is very good at developing new talent. Do you have up-and-coming stars in mind when you begin developing a new show around them, or do you write first and then find actors who suit the roles?

GK: That's a great point. There are so many ways to go about casting. Some producers choose to develop a series with certain talent in mind while some do not. It's the combination of all the creatives' opinions that ultimately make up the cast of a show. Typically, the writing comes first and the cast members are attached afterward. But there are also cases in which a specific talent comes onboard the project as the scripts and other talent are being attached. I would say that this differs from show to show, but that for romance genres in particular, finding talent with chemistry is key.

K7: Korean audiences seem much more open to cross genre shows - i.e. romantic series with a science fiction or fantasy basis. When developing shows like this, how do you ensure the balance between plot elements is right? And what do you consider to be the essential ingredients for a successful romance TV show?

GK: It is certainly true that Korean dramas are very multi-genre and that the audience crave these types of cross-genre shows. I think that there are pros and cons to this as there is to everything. If a show is purely romance, the Korean audience tend to lose interest quickly, casting it off as "boring" or that "there is no exciting plot to carry me through". If there are added elements of crime, mystery, politics, etc. to the show, it tends to attract and maintain a steady viewership. In my opinion, Korean audiences desire such additional elements to fill the voids of a series that only digs deep into one specific genre.

Let's compare this phenomenon to food, for example. Koreans in general are highly interested in fusion cuisines. We value creative twists, spins, and original takes of pre-existing dishes, and the growing number of fusion restaurants in Korea can testify to that. Let's imagine that there's a baguette. It's good and filling, but tastes better with butter. Okay, so how about we add slices of butter in between a halved baguette? That attracts a wider population of bread consumers. Well, what if we add another ingredient and make this new bread taste even better? So now there's a halved baguette containing slices of butter with red-bean paste spread inside. This attracts an even larger pool of bread consumers. By continuing to add different ingredients to the baguette, the product becomes more desirable and sought-after.

My point here is that as long as the amount of ingredients in the bread is well-balanced and the product tastes good, there will be a demand for it. I believe it's the same with a TV series. A lot



JTBC's *Nevertheless* is available to stream on Netflix.

of Korean consumers have an appetite for cross-genre shows (as they do for novel bread concoctions), because it's creative, captivating, and entertaining. What I have personally noticed is that it's necessary to create shows that aren't multi-genre hybrids because there are also individuals who enjoy a good, honest pure love story: a simple but delicious plain baguette.

K7: Romance stories (i.e. shows in which the love story is the primary plot) seem to have vanished from western TV, but there's a new generation that has flocked to Korean drama online - our impression is that it is the romance storylines that are hooking young western viewers. Is that something you've seen, and do you now develop shows with these wider international audiences in mind?

GK: I personally love stories about love. The stories in which love is the main theme (whether that be about love between lovers, friends, families, or acquaintances) reminds us that we are alive in the present and able to feel. On-screen love stories, in my opinion, don't have to be provocative or overtly sexual to be good, because "love" is a difficult but delicate, genuine, human and universally understood emotion. I don't necessarily have to remind myself to build a story to attract a global audience, for love has no real barriers. If the story is honest and realistic, the audience will (no matter their native language) be able to find a bit of themselves in it.

K7: Korean dramas have been historically known for not showing or talking much about sexual desire in relationships but your recent 2021 drama, *Nevertheless*, has made headlines for addressing this topic and seems to perform very well with international viewers. Can you talk more about it? Do you think it will become a trend of Korean dramas changing towards reflecting a more realistic aspect of modern relationships in the future?



GK: I definitely believe that the Korean audience wants and enjoys seeing realistic depictions of romance and sexual desire, and could not be happier that *Nevertheless* (pictured left) has been so well-received for what I imagined would be a step towards more progressive programming. Especially among younger generations who are generally more open to concepts of freedom of sexual

expression and less conservative about sex, sexual tension, and casual hook-ups, the desire to see these natural human instincts on-screen has become necessary. While I genuinely wish that all shows could tell realistic stories that represent all individuals, the fact is that a large population of Korea is reluctant to accept things like nudity and sex being depicted on TV. This is totally understandable, but I truly believe that over time, the generally conservative Korean society will naturally accept these changes and begin to open up to showing more realistic stories. It is my hope that the Korean audience will be able to feel less embarrassed or

uncomfortable when realistic, explicit scenes are shown on screen and that the trend of Korean dramas will move towards reflecting the more realistic aspects of modern relationships in the near future.



K7: How is Korean TV handling LGBT storylines now? We've seen these becoming more overt in web series and hangul online comics, is TV in danger of falling behind and losing a potential audience?

GK: I think that there is a growing appetite in Korean TV to be as inclusive and reflective of all individuals. I hoped that through *Nevertheless* I would be able to include a storyline about the LGBTQ+ population, for I think that all types of love is love. While it is true that some are still reluctant to accept those who are “different,” I don’t think that establishing a concept of “normality” and comparing others to that “norm” is fair. I did expect backlash—that socially conservative Korean audiences would criticise the show for being too “out there”—but to my surprise, so many individuals and communities reached out to thank us for including the storyline of Sol and Ji-wan. I can never forget the time when a mother called our production team, thanking us for telling a story in which she could understand her daughter a bit better. So, to your question about losing a potential audience, my answer would have to be: no. In fact, I think it’s our responsibilities as creatives to tell stories about the underrepresented and silenced populations, for small steps in the right direction will lead to causing bigger, more important changes in the world.

3. Notable 2021 Romance Dramas from South Korea



Blue Birthday

Distributed by PLAYLIST

First Tx. 23 July 2021 on Naver TV

Synopsis:

The 16x20' series tells the story of a female protagonist who passes between the present and past, via a mysterious picture left by her first love who decided to take his life 10 years ago on her birthday.

Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha

Distributed by CJ ENM

First Tx. 28 August 2021 on tvN, Netflix

Synopsis:

This 16x70' series is a remake of the South Korean 2004 movie Mr. Handy, depicting the romance between a neighbourhood handyman and a pragmatic female dentist, set in a seaside village.



Mad For Each Other

Distributed by Kakao Entertainment

First Tx. 24 May 2021 on Kakao TV

Synopsis:

The 13x30' series is about the love story of two people with psychological issues. They live in the same neighbourhood and go to the same psychiatrist. The man is unable to control his anger while the woman is caught up in her own delusions and compulsions. They are healed after falling in love with each other.



Run On**Distributed by** JTBC Studios**First Tx.** 16 December 2020 on JTBC Studios**Synopsis:**

The 16x60' series follows the romance between Ki Seon-Gyeom, a former sprinter who is working to become a JTBC sports agent and Oh Mi-Joo, a subtitle translator. Growing up in a privileged background, Seon-Gyeom is quiet but views the world as friendly, whereas Mi-joo is an orphan who holds a harsh view of the world.

**True Beauty****Distributed by** CJ ENM**First Tx.** 9 December 2020 on tvN**Synopsis:**

The 16x70' series is adapted from the popular webtoon (online comic) of the same name. Insecure high-school student Im Ju-geong transforms her appearance thanks to YouTube make-up tutorials. Romance blossoms between her and Lee Su-ho, a classmate with a dark past, who is the only boy to see her without make-up.

Youth Of May**Distributed by** KBS Media**First Tx.** 3 May 2021 on KBS**Synopsis:**

Set during the Gwangju Uprising of 1980, the 12x70' series follows the love story between a medical student and a nurse. Kim Myeong-hee is a nurse who wants to study in Germany but doesn't have enough money to buy the flight ticket. In exchange for the airfare, she replaces her best friend on a blind date where she meets Lee Soo-ryeon, a light-hearted medical student with a mischievous side.





Yumi's Cell

Distributed by CJ ENM

First Tx. 17 September 2021 on tvN, TVING

Synopsis:

The 14x70' series depicts the daily life of an ordinary office lady named Yumi and how she navigates love and relationships through the eyes of her brain cells that control her thoughts and emotions. After a painful breakup three years ago, Yumi's love cells have been in coma. One day Yumi meets the nerdy game developer Goo Woong whose own love cells unexpectedly bring her love cells back to life.

You Raise Me Up

Distributed by SBS Content Hub

First Tx. 31 August 2021 on Wavve

Synopsis:

The 8x42' series follows Do Yong-sik, a man in his 30s suffering with self doubt and erectile dysfunction, who reunites with his first love Luda, a urologist. Luda meanwhile dates the cocky Do Ji-Hyeok. To lower Ji-Hyeok's overconfidence she brags about the time she spent with Yong-sik. She starts a mission to help raise Yong-sik's self-esteem in order to save her face. A sexy and lively comedy drama with lots of twists and turns.



Credits

† Special thanks to Ga-ram Kim, director of JTBC Studios's drama **Nevertheless**, and Claudia Choi (JTBC Studios) for conduction and translation of this interview.

About **KOCCA**

† As the umbrella government agency for Korea content industry promotion, Korea Creative Content Agency supports the production of content by genre in the areas of broadcasting, games, music, fashion, animation, characters, cartoons, and immersive contents. KOCCA engages in planning, creative production, distribution, overseas expansion, fostering companies, talent training, research and development of culture technology, financial support and policy research for these contents. For the sustainable advancement of our contents, KOCCA supports the companies with innovative contents by providing policy financing and plans to lead the future content market by laying the foundation for innovative growth as we promote leading immersive content. Moreover, to make our contents take place in the daily lives of people around the world beyond Korea, KOCCA will actively support overseas expansion and lead the new Korean Wave.

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About **K7 Media**

† Founded in 1998, K7 Media is a global independent organisation providing media intelligence to broadcasters, streaming platforms, distributors and production companies across the world. Drawing on the team's extensive knowledge of the international TV and digital sector to produce personalised research, showreels and reports, K7 Media is retained as a trusted source of industry insight for clients across the world.

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