



# **TCS LOUPE**

# **POP CULTURES**

# **OF CHINA,**

# **JAPAN AND**

# **KOREA**

## **LECTURE**

## **TWO**

### **Reflection of**

### **CJK**

### **Societies on**

### **Dramas**

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Delivered by  
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## LECTURE SUMMARY

# Reflection of CJK Societies on Dramas: Focus on *Boys over Flowers*

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### Introduction

*Boys over Flowers* is a representative media work produced in East Asia. The original comic series by KAMIO Yoko had been published for 12 years from 1992 to 2004 in Japan. In 1993, the series was made into a drama CD with an acoustic performance by the voice actors, and the movie appeared in 1995. Interestingly, the drama series came out first not in Japan but in Taiwan, 2001 under the title *Meteor Garden*. Japanese drama appeared in 2005 followed by the production of the Korean version in 2009. During the same year when Korean drama was released, Chinese drama *Let's Go and Watch Meteor Shower* was also produced.

All the dramas made a great hit in each society; many were fond of F4, the four handsome princes charming as well as its Cinderella story with complex love relationships.

Table1. *Boys over Flowers* (Drama) of Taiwan, Japan, Korea and China

Taiwan (2001)	Japan (2005)
	
Korea (2009)	China (2009)
	

\*Order according to the timing of the drama release

### Reason for Popularity: Balance of Linearity and Liquidity

How did *Boys over Flowers* gain popularity in the region? For cultural contents to be successful, apposite combination of 'linearity' and 'liquidity' is instrumental. 'Linearity' refers to popular, banal aspects in cultural contents that exploit the common understanding to arouse viewer's empathy. On the other hand, 'liquidity' indicates the originality of cultural contents that distinguishes one content from the others. If 'linearity' is too strong compared to 'liquidity', the outcome turns

out to be obvious and boring. When there is too much emphasis on ‘liquidity’, the story becomes incomprehensible, losing its appeal to the viewers.

*Boys over Flowers*, in this sense, well balanced ‘linearity’ and ‘liquidity’. Its story encompasses every possible episode that happens between the two lovers from different socio-economic backgrounds; Cinderella story, triangular love relationship, mother-in-law & daughter-in-law confrontation, to name a few. The success and popularity of the remakes in part are attributed to such collection of typical stories already proven to be popular.

On the other hand, it is the four princes charming that make *Boys over Flowers* distinguished from other Cinderella stories. Before it came out, there had been few case where four male characters appear in one story. F4 increased viewers’ freedom to choose characters other than the main hero with whom they can emotionally identify with. The four charming characters have now become a cliché in East Asian romance dramas as in *You’re Beautiful*, *Sungkyunkwan Scandal* and *Rooftop Prince*.

Table 2. Liquidity of *Boys over Flowers*: Four Male Characters

<b><i>Boys over Flowers</i></b>	<b><i>You’re Beautiful</i></b>
 <p>Original Sound track &lt;KBS&gt;</p>	 <p>&lt;SBS&gt;</p>

<i>Sungkyunkwan Scandal</i>	<i>Rooftop Prince</i>
 <p data-bbox="706 598 763 619">&lt;KBS&gt;</p>	 <p data-bbox="1339 588 1396 609">&lt;SBS&gt;</p>

### Reason for Popularity: Successful Localization Strategy

Remaking a popular original story into a drama can often be a double edged sword. Fans of the original story often support the drama. On the other hand, the remake is destined to be in the constant comparison with the original; if it does not satisfy the viewers with its distinctiveness, it easily fails.

*Boys over Flowers* made a great hit in each society thanks to the successful localization strategy. That is, the content reflected each society realistically to gain viewers' empathy. One may question whether the unusual Cinderella story of *Boys over Flowers* is realistic. Realistic description in fact does not necessarily mean that a cultural content reflects the society 'as it is'. Rather, it means that the content elaborates some parts of the society to a degree that is believed to be realistic. In the perspective of 'emotional realism', *Boys over Flowers* is quite realistic.

### Reflection of the Ordinary in *Boys over Flowers*

If so, which part of the society does *Boys over Flowers* reflect? The story starts from the point where an ordinary girl goes to a prominent school because of her parents' desire to brag their children to neighbors. The story thus constantly contrasts the life of the ordinary to that of the rich.

In *Boys over Flowers*, one can find different definitions of the ordinary among the four societies. It is notable that Korean heroine's family runs cleaner's shop while both Taiwanese and Japanese heroine's father are salary men. In Taiwan and Japan, the proportions of small and medium sized business are comparatively large and, salary man is defined as the ordinary. Yet the Korean case is different in a sense that it is comprised of large number of big and small sized business and small proportion of medium sized business. Salary man in Korean context thus refers to a worker of a big enterprise, who is relatively better-off than the ordinary. It is why Korean heroine's father runs a small business which is defined as the ordinary in the Korean society. On the other hand, Chinese heroine's mother runs a milk tea café, which describes the life of the 'urban ordinary' reflecting China's situation with big discrepancy among the urban and rural area.

Picture 1. Proportion of Enterprises according to Size

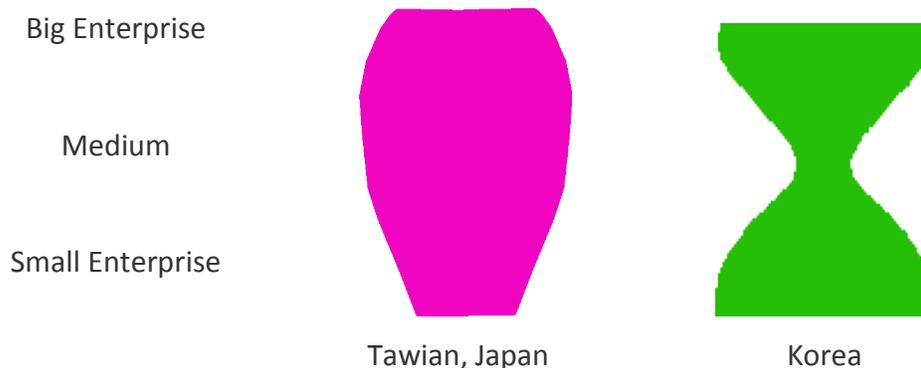


Table 3. Reflection of CJK Societies: Heroine’s Family Background

Taiwan	Japan	Korea	China
Salary man	Salary man	Cleaner’s	Milk Tea Café
Large proportion of small and medium sized business → Salary man defined as the ordinary		Small proportion of medium sized business, large proportion of big & small sized business → Salary man defined as the rich	Big discrepancy among urban & rural area → Depiction of the life of ‘urban ordinary’

\*Order according to the timing of the drama release

### Reflection of the Rich in *Boys over Flowers*

In addition, different versions of *Boys over Flowers* also portray different categories of the rich according to the socio-historical contexts of the four societies. Whereas there is a long narration of F4’s different family backgrounds in Japanese and Korean version, there is no such a description in Taiwanese version. Japan and Korea have terms to indicate large conglomerates with distinctive business structure and practice, called ‘Zaibatsu’ and ‘Chaebol’. On the other hand, Taiwan’s large conglomerates are comprised of different kinds of medium sized family business, and there is no special term to indicate such conglomerates. Therefore, the description on Taiwanese F4’s background can be hardly seen from the drama.

There are three common categories of the rich in Japanese and Korean F4, which are large conglomerates (Zaibatsu/ Chaebol), politician, and gangster. Yet there is one distinctive category; whereas Japan’s Sojiro represents traditional art family,

Korea's So Yi Jeong is the descendant of a well-off independence movement activist who contributed to the preservation of the Korean tradition. In Japan, there exists a decent family transmitting traditional arts such as tea ceremony, flower arrangement and kabuki. However, Korea does not have such category of the rich due to the colonization and war. Thus, So Yi Jeong's family background was modified according to the Korean situation, referring to the actual case of Jeong Hyeong Pil, an activist who preserved traditional arts. On the other hand, Chinese F4's backgrounds are categorized as the families in real estate business, government supported enterprise, IT business, or overseas graduates, reflecting the common definition of the rich in the Chinese society.

Table 4. Reflection of CJK Societies: F4's Family Background

	Taiwan	Japan	Korea	China
Main Hero	No description	Zaibatsu	Chaebol	Real Estate
Sub Hero		Politician	Politician	Overseas graduate
Sub 1		Gangster	Gangster	Government related business
Sub 2		Traditional Art Family	Independence Movement Activist	IT business

Features	Conglomerates combining different kinds of medium sized family business	Existence of decent family transmitting traditional arts	Absence of historic family due to the colonization and war	Representative categories of the rich in Chinese society
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\*Order according to the timing of the drama release

### **Economic Recession and *Boys over Flowers***

If one examines the timing when four *Boys over Flowers* were released, interesting patterns are observed. The comic book was first published in Japan in 1992 when Japan's bubble economy was collapsing. Taiwanese drama in 2001 was released after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, and before the release of Korean and Chinese drama in 2009, global financial crisis swept all over the world in 2008.

During the time of economic recession, Cinderella stories tend to be a fad due to people's desire for vicarious satisfaction. In this sense, it is not a coincidence that different versions of *Boys over Flowers* were appeared amongst the economic hardships of the four societies in a timing with growing needs for Cinderella stories.

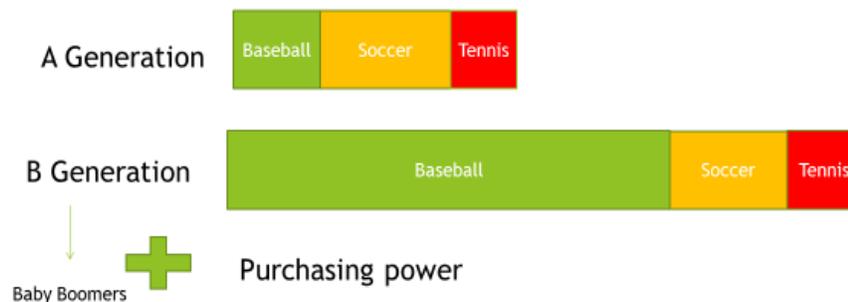
Economic recession also exerted an influence on the image of F4. That is, the recession has changed the traditional gender role, as men lost the position of the bread winner and more women began to work to support the family. This brought about the popularity of 'Metrosexual', a man meticulous about his grooming and

appearance. The four pretty boys in *Boys over Flowers* are typical metrosexuals who are the outcomes of the economic recession.

### Generational Features Reflected on *Boys over Flowers*

Lastly, *Boys over Flowers* of the four societies feature different school backgrounds reflecting the taste of the generation that leads social boom. For a cultural phenomenon to be a social boom, it has to be supported by the generation with the largest number and economic affluence. Japan's *Boys over Flowers* contents have changed its backgrounds reflecting the taste of the 2<sup>nd</sup> baby boom generation who now leads social trends in Japanese Popular Culture.

Diagram 1. Conditions for Social Boom



In a society where A and B Generation live, it is likely that baseball boom will occur. That is, a cultural phenomenon supported by the generation with large number and big purchasing power engenders social boom.

The story of the original comic takes place in a high school. It was because its main readers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> baby boom generation were mostly in high school or

started to enroll the college in the early 1990s. Its drama CD also casted the icon of this generation, KIMURA Takuya as the popular sub-hero HANAZAWA Rui. In the mid-1990s, the generation was reaching their 20s, and the movie changed the background to a college accordingly. It also casted representative icons of the generation including FUJIKI Naohito. The setting of the drama in the mid-2000s was changed to a high school, and casted MATSUMOTO Jun, the icon of the ‘younger male’ as the main hero, DOMYOJI Tsukasa. In fact, ‘younger male’ is a concept that can only be defined with the certain reference age, and in Japan, ‘younger male’ in media often refers to the ones who are younger than the 2<sup>nd</sup> baby boom generation.

Table5. History of *Boys over Flowers* in Japan

<b>Year</b>	1992	1993	1995	2005
<b>Genre</b>	Comic Book	Drama CD	Movie	Drama
<b>Situation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Baby Boom Generation</b>	in high school & college	in college	in their 20s	in their 30s
<b>Background/ Feature of <i>Boys over Flowers</i></b>	High school	High school/ casting KIMURA Takuya	College/ casting FUJIKI Naohito	High school/ casting MATSUMOTO Jun

Korean *Boys over Flowers* also casted the icons of ‘younger male’. It also illustrates that the drama reflected the taste of the Korean 2<sup>nd</sup> baby boom generation who are in their late 20s and 30s. On the other hand, the background

of Chinese *Boys over Flowers* is a unique mixture of high school and college. That is, the drama overtly claims that the story takes place in a college yet students live high school-like campus life in school uniforms. It works as a clever tactic to diverge from the socialist norm that considers luxurious and disorderly conducts of high school students undesirable, yet maintaining the similar storyline with other overseas versions.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding of media texts including *Boys over Flowers* serves as an essential and intriguing gateway to get to know the society and culture of one country. It should be noted that media does not portray the society as it is. Thus people must not buy into the media representation but need to understand social, historical and cultural background on why such image has been produced. This media literacy will enhance the understanding of the societies and cultures of China, Japan and Korea, which will work as the fundamental basis for the trilateral cooperation.

## Q&A

**1. Japanese drama is different from Korean drama in many ways. There are descriptions of politicians' controversial behaviors which seldom appear in Korean drama. Whereas Korean drama provides explanation by dialogues and narration of the characters, Japanese drama sometimes inserts narration of a third person. What are the reasons behind such differences?**

Such differences occur mainly due to the different conventions of drama watching in Korea and Japan. Korean viewers tend to find the links between drama's stories with that of the actual reality. When the story seems to be distant from the reality, they criticize drama's setting as 'unrealistic'.

On the other hand, Japanese viewers employ clear distinction between the reality and fiction in watching dramas. Rather than buying into drama's stories as the reflection of the true reality, Japanese viewers perceive them as an imaginary setting necessary for the story development.

These different perceptions are often reflected in the dramas of Korea and Japan. Korean drama puts more efforts on making its background realistic by shooting scenes at actual places, while Japanese drama often uses artificial stages. On the other hand, Korean historical dramas are divided into two distinctive categories of 'authentic historical drama' that refers to historical facts and 'fusion historical drama' that incorporates more historical imagination. No such distinction exists in Japanese historical drama with less emphasis on rigid connection between the reality and fiction.

**2. Japan and China well utilize their tradition in producing cultural contents as seen from the examples of Japan's *Naruto* about ninja and China's Kungfu movies. Why does Korea lag behind in utilizing its tradition in Popular Culture?**

It is related to the three countries' different processes of inventing tradition. Tradition according to the British historian Eric Hobsbawm refers to the elements of the past that are intentionally selected and invented reflecting the needs of the present. Nation states are the main agents of the invention of tradition, and they manipulate tradition to justify the history of one's nation and to mobilize people for the country's development.

Japan and China have a long history of inventing their tradition to set up a national identity distinguished by that of the West. In order to do so, they actively manipulated their legacies of the past that were well received by the Westerners, including geisha and kungfu, especially during the occasion of international exhibitions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus the two countries successfully established such iconic images of their tradition which are easily remembered by foreigners and often utilize such images into their cultural contents.

Korea's invention of tradition started in earnest only after the 1970s due to the historical upheavals of colonization and war. Yet the country is now making endeavors to establish its iconic images of Korean tradition through utilizing the momentum of the Korean Wave.

### **3. Why do we need to be equipped with media literacy?**

Media literacy enables balanced and thoughtful understanding of the media products, rather than taking their message as it is. When watching overseas dramas, there are many points that we find difficult to understand. It is because we are accustomed to the convention of drama watching of one's own country and if we look at overseas dramas with our own convention, we tend to have prejudice (e.g. Settings of Japanese drama are too artificial and unrealistic). If we learn the social backgrounds of the drama production and different conventions of watching dramas in different countries, our understanding on overseas media product can be further enhanced.

## LECTURE TWO AT A GLANCE

### Similarities and Differences:

#### *Boys over Flowers* in Taiwan, Japan, Korea and China

Similarities	Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Effective localization strategy that contributed to the popularity of the drama</li><li>- Timing of the release after economic recession when Cinderella story gains popularity</li><li>- F4 as the metrosexuals reflecting the changing gender roles</li><li>- Adjustment of the story background with the consideration of the generation that leads social trends</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Definition of the ordinary reflecting the business structure of the societies</li><li>- Definition of the rich reflecting the prevalent categories of the rich in each society</li></ul>



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