

Article

Media Cultural Politics and the Politics
of Sympathy—*Queen Seondeok*:
Dramatized Conspiracy Theory
as “Power-Narrative”*

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The Politics of Sympathy: Media Cultural Politics Internalizing “The Political”

Shortly after the Second World War, the modern Japanese philosopher Maruyama Masao 丸山眞男 (1997, 413) noted that “politics and dirtiness seem to be fundamentally linked.” Citing comments such as “In politics, shaking hands with the devil is unavoidable” (Max Weber, 1864-1920) and “Politics ruins the character” (Bismarck, 1815-1898), he said that the root of his judgment was that, “Ultimately, the essential factor in politics is making people move and thus obtaining results; it is not so much that politics is dirty, but rather that, in reality, human beings are not born angels.” In this way, he defined the politicization of human beings and the humanization of the political: the notoriety of the political in terms of human limitations (“corruption,” “uncleanliness,” “dirtiness,” and so on).

As defined by Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) in his book *The Concept of the Political* (*Der Begriff des Politischen*), “the political” is an innate part of all human societies and defines our existential condition. The public’s negative view of “the political” stems from the way politics enters the micro dimensions of daily life, even as the public is excluded from the dominant power structures that make “the political” function. This creates a sense of alienation and deprivation. The public is subject to the rule and domination of the political, and therefore its members tend to make “political choices” to avoid becoming victims.

This phenomenon reflects the way the mentality and culture of a given era generates public behavioral motivations and sensibilities. Between public interpretation of the political and the actual political behavior they exhibit, there lies evidence of “interpretation of the world” portrayed not only in “intelligent” ways such as through knowledge, academic discourse or criticism, but also in “popular” ways, such as TV dramas, novels, non-fiction, and film.¹

Based on the principle of “the political” and by analyzing TV drama,

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1. As mentioned by Todd Sander and Harry G. West (2003, 2), in 1998, after the Asian financial crisis, conspiracy narratives were prevalent in the popular genres of TV drama and film, while much doubt was shown towards the political and economic logic of the U.S.

a representative medium of popular culture research in the 21st century, this paper aims to explain the “drama-reality-history” interaction. Journalistic media, including television, influence the field of cultural production (Bourdieu [1994] 1998, 120), and in this regard TV drama has twin dimensions: it is a fictional genre and also a form of cultural reality; it maintains a certain distance from reality, yet it is also a sympathetic representation.²



The drama’s viewers are performers, recognizing the dramatic fiction in their own lives. If it can be defined as the socializing effect of media (Williams [1973] 1996, 189), and also as something that erases “the difference” between reality and fiction, then the point at which the audience develops empathy with the drama, and thus identifies with the fictional world in thought and judgment, is a political moment, one that precedes further moral, cultural, or political judgments (Pamuk 2012, 70; 139). By categorizing

this as “the politics of sympathy” it becomes easier to understand the “cyclical interaction” whereby individuals watch a drama, empathize with the attitude and/or personality and behavior of an on-screen character, as well as the world depicted in the drama, and thus fine-tune their own world view, determining their own behavior in accordance with the dramatized logic on the screen. The drama is thus a cultural political medium, one that helps the audience to understand reality and internalize it as their own.³ Repeatedly watching TV

2. As mentioned by Orhan Pamuk (2012, 41), the novel as a fictionalized genre has power because there exists no complete agreement between reader and writer. Likewise, the drama cannot be perfectly discerned as being either complete fiction or complete reality. A sympathetic bond surrounding the fictional genre is formed in the overlapping points between fiction and reality, and at those points it begins to work “the political” on the audience in an affective context.

3. The audience is apt to think they positively obtain usable knowledge during their viewing of the drama, but in fact this is merely the effect of cultural politics. This paper defines this mechanism as “dramatized historical imagination” and analyzes it by focusing on the dramatic narrative. These proposals are based on the ideas that the interpretation of “the political” is an essential topic in *Queen Seondeok* and that the sympathy of the audience locates an overlapping realm between fiction and

dramas that adopt a patterned format, the audience takes on the experience in the form of symbolic socialization (Gerbner and Gross 1976, 173).

This paper analyzes both the worldview promoted by certain dramatic techniques and the genre of TV drama as entertainment media, and through this explains how that worldview becomes an operating mechanism of cultural power. It explains the cultural power of TV drama and the effect it has on the audience.⁴

According to affect theory, sympathy through emotions and feelings represents the interaction of *inbetween-ness* amongst forces (Gregg and Gregory 2010). The audience members perceive the dramatic narrative based on their historical/contemporary experience, and also come to revise their view of life and history based on the experience of watching the drama.⁵ This is the function of “affective politics” through media. To verify the validity of this research methodology, this paper will analyze the historical TV drama *Queen Seondeok* (MBC 2009.5.25-12.22),⁶ a representative K-drama set in the Silla Kingdom, a forerunner of today’s North and South Korea. As mentioned by Kim Su-Jeong (2010), Yun Seok-Jin, Yi Da-Un, and Park Sang-Wan (2013), and Park Myeong-Jin (2013), *Queen Seondeok* is a political drama based on real

reality. Also, the moment of the audience’s response is the point at which they unconsciously sense “the political” hinging between history and reality, their on-line statements finally becoming internalized as their own political choice. About the relationship between history and drama, see Park 2013, 390-400. Park (2013, 393) suggests two phrases: “History as a fact,” and “histories as a fiction.”

4. As Raymond Williams ([1965] 2007, 91) points out, cultural theory constitutes research into the inter-relationship of various items that exist in ways of life, and analysis of culture constitutes an attempt to discover the essence of social organizations as the relationship between these items. The pre-research on historical dramas was broadcast on TV: see Ju 2007; Kim 2010; Sin 2012, and about the effect of the television in everyday life, see Lee 1999.
5. According to Ju Chang-Yun (1998), there are four interpretative positions that viewers can take: the escapist, the ludic, the ironic, and the critical. These are not mutually exclusive. I focus on the general cognition of the viewership as an interpretative community with this in mind.
6. *Queen Seondeok* aired between May 25th and December 22nd, 2009; 62 parts in total. The program generated average viewing rates of about 35.1%, an extraordinary figure (statistics by TNS Media Korea). The highest viewing rate was recorded on November 9th, 2009 (EP 49). About this information, see the website: http://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/섣덕여왕_%28드라마%29#.EC.8B.9C.EC.B2.AD.EB.A5.A0.s. The drama was produced by Time Box Production and MBC, directed by Park Hong-Gyun and Kim Keun-Bong, and written by Kim Yeong-Hyeon and Park Sang-Hyeun. By October 2010, the drama had been exported to 16 nations including Japan, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Turkey, and in doing so had become a global representative of the Korean Wave. In this paper I look at the reasons behind these high viewing figures in terms of both popular sympathy and emotion, focusing on two main points: 1) What is the historical cognitive frame created in the drama? 2) What effect does this cognitive frame have on the daily lives of the audience?

history. It deals with a political power struggle involving ideological, economic, military, and political elements, those things which Michael Mann (1986) calls the origins of social power.⁷ “The political” in the drama is the main topic, not the background (Kim 2010, 90). An imaginative understanding of the political and power is inherent in its narrative.

To deal with these issues, I first analyze the practical reasons why the “conspiracy theory” that forms the core of the *Queen Seondeok* narrative drew such sympathy from Korean and global audiences. *Queen Seondeok* differs distinctly from other historical K-dramas in that its political structure consists of power games based on conspiracy theory. Combining historical imagination with conspiracy theory allowed the audience to enjoy as entertainment the sense of political disillusionment that prevailed in the wake of neo-liberalism worldwide. I judge this façade, along with the show’s subversive female viewpoint and gender perspectives between characters caught in a power struggle, to play the decisive role in the increase of *Queen Seondeok*’s viewer ratings in East Asia and the West.

Then, based on this analysis, I explain the triangular relationship between reality, fiction (drama), and history in terms of the sympathetic bond formed with the audience. Thereafter I explain how cultural background is a source of appeal for the audience, who take a certain moral stance toward the political power struggle between the two main female characters: Misil and Teokman (later Queen Seondeok). Next I analyze the “paradoxical attitude” of the same audience, which embraces a political realm that they themselves would ordinarily criticize for its immorality and ego-centrism. Finally, I explain the principle of cultural politics through media as well as the “affective effect” that empowers the audience.

My research methodology is twofold. First, I use a literary approach to analyze the drama narrative, characters, and structure. Second, I analyze the responses of the audience upon watching the drama, considering their emotional and cognitive responses via the framework of affect theory and media study.

Through this research, I explain the paradoxical attitude of the audience,

7. On the sociological theory of IEMP (Ideological·Economic·Military·Political) of Michael Mann, see Hall and Schroeder (2006, 1-16). As Mann points out, these four elements (IEMP) shift according to historical context, and in *Queen Seondeok* the four are mixed in complicated and interactive ways.

which, in the course of viewing the drama, empathizes with that very “political” of which they are in reality so wary and critical, and how the audience goes on to “internalize” this as a way of understanding their world and their history. With these results, this paper opens up for consideration the principles of cultural politics as carried out through media performance.

Cultural Politics of the “Conspiracy Theory”: Dramatized Historical Imagination

First, this section reviews the historical and cultural background of the drama so as to explain how the audience develops sympathy for the conspiracy in the narrative. It mainly considers the twin façades of global universality and Korean locality. Second, it analyzes the dramatic devices (narrative structure and characters) used to guide the audience’s moral orientation and affective response to the main character’s “conspiracy fabrication.” Third, based on this analysis, it explains the audience’s “cognitive circulation process,” a pendulum movement between “drama-history-reality” as they watch, feeling sympathy for the drama as they consider dramatized reality as an undisputed and reliable dramatic reality.

Global Diffusion of the Concept of “Conspiracy Theory” and Background of Korean Reception

In *Queen Seondeok*, a conventionalized sense of “the political” links to the concept of power. This paper defines this sense as a “conspiracy theory.” A “conspiracy theory” is defined as a narrative theory that is supported widely, an imagined belief that there exists another truth beneath the spoken word; it is found in a wide array of cultural forms and discourses, ranging from classical narrative to contemporary popular genres.⁸ As for what cultural and

8. In general terms, “the conspiracy theory” became widely known to the public when William Safire wrote a column in *The New York Times Magazine* (Nov. 1995) entitled “Conspiracy Theory,” which dealt with a worldwide situation. According to his argument, since the Asian Financial Crisis the principle of transparency came to prevail worldwide in economic and political fields. Nevertheless, the

social factors may lie behind the formation and diffusion of such “conspiracy theories,” there have been many suggestions, including: suspicion that the value of reason may have been overestimated in modern times; mistrust of power; prevailing recognition of horror; and the anxiety of contemporary society.⁹

It must be noted that the popular formation and diffusion of “conspiracy theories” is to be found not only in Anglo-American cultural and literary texts, but also in Korean society, where conspiracies attain great popular recognition. For example, the Korean public, through its experience of modern and contemporary history, harbors a critical perspective vis-à-vis the “truths” espoused by “politicians” and those in power, as well as toward pertinent, but obscured, historical truths. Also, Korean historians seem to consider political events of the past to be subject to historical interpretation. This phenomenon has grown especially noticeable since the 1990’s, since when historians have not seen “history” as a specific *episteme* agreed upon by scholars, but rather as an incomplete puzzle-solving problem in which the historian’s discernment and choices may intervene. Furthermore there has been a tendency to employ debate in order to turn “history” back into “controversy” and thus to revise it.¹⁰

public came to feel that power still worked opaquely. This conspiracy theory was much in vogue, replacing the conceptual words that conveyed trust, openness, and fairness with concepts of suspicion, concealment, and treachery (Todd and West 2003, 12). Representative examples are the death of Princess Diana, the bombing of TWA flight 800, September 11th, 2001, etc. (Fenster 1999; Melley 1999; Knight 2002).

9. Definitions of conspiracy theory are fourfold, as follows. First, in the classical meaning, the “conspiracy narrative” designates a series of narrative structures which deal with the story of a person or a group regarded as obtaining political power through illegal clandestine methods. The conspiracy narrative is based on the interpretation that contemporary corrupt society is raised upon a gigantic conspiracy (Fenster [1999] 2008). Second, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the “New World Order” demanded by American president George Bush, Sr. in 1990 prevailed worldwide despite a public that considered it nothing but a conspiracy to enforce American sovereignty in an elite-centric way (Todd and West 2003, 3). Third, in his novel *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988), Umberto Eco notes that literary imagination with regard to conspiracy theory is redoubling at an alarming rate. These opinions penetrate narratives as political logic in TV dramas and films like *The X-Files*, *Total Recall*, *JFK*, *Wag the Dog*, *Conspiracy Theory*, and *Enemy of State*, in America and globally (Todd and West 2003, 5; 11). Fourth, the conspiracy theory prevails globally based on widespread recognition of danger, anxiety, and fear in contemporary society (Beck [1992] 2006, 70; Furedi, [2006] 2011, 248-51).
10. For example, see Son 1976; O 2009; Kim 2011, etc. As mentioned by Hayden White ([1973] 2011), this phenomenon is linked to the following ideas: history is not a unique truth, but an interpreted discourse and an imagined narrative, and also this nature of history opens up the possibility that historical information which was widely known can be revised through discovery of new historical records or applications of a new perspective on history. With this process, this tendency raised the possibility of combining history and imagination. This academic tendency is linked with the new

This has given rise to the popular recognition that people should critically interpret “knowledge-power” and “politics-power,” or the positions held by those who control and provide information, because the “interpretation,” “position,” and “judgment” of the “recorder/speaker” cannot be relied upon not to intervene in the process of creating political discourse, or historicizing the past. This fact has been reflected in the conspiracy narratives in popular genres like novels, TV drama, film, and popular discourse on the Internet. There are films like *King and The Clown* (*Wang ui namja*) (2005, directed by Yi Chun-Ik); and TV dramas like *White Tower* (*Hayan geotap*) (MBC 2007), *Wife’s Temptation* (*Anaeui yuhok*) (SBS 2008-2009), etc.¹¹

Some representative popular “conspiracy theories” based upon reality include the KAL Flight 858 (Korean Air) bombing by Kim Hyeon-Hi in 1987, the recent Cheonan sinking in 2010, the Nonghyup hacking incident of 2012, etc. In the context of reality, conspiracy theories can exist only as a plausible view of the physiology of power that cannot be verified, as a sort of “guessing discourse.” Conspiracy narratives reflect the dark side of Korean modern and contemporary history: disillusionment at political reality, disappointment or negative perception of politicians, and strong suspicion of the media, all of which exist due to prevailing historical-social contexts.

It was this influential historical backdrop that led *Queen Seondeok* to such high viewing figures.¹² The audience supported and responded to the

possibility of the public; the public can possess the imaginative and interpretative right to the historical information and government’s announcements through journals at any time. Of course, apart from the arguments of the historians, the discourse which is formed and spread on the internet amongst the public is formed through guesswork and imagination, not as academic argument. So this can’t be valued as knowledge. However, public discourses prevailing on the Internet can be valued meaningfully in cultural contexts with psychological and sympathetic support from the public.

11. Hong Kong drama *War and Beauty* 金枝慾孽 (Hong Kong TVB 2004.8.23-2004.10.2) and mainland China’s *Empresses in the Palace* 後宮甄嬛傳 (BTV 2011.12.06-2011.12.25) are comparable with *Queen Seondeok* in terms of dealing with political conspiracy. In the case of the U.K., the TV series *Hustle* (BBC One 2010.1.4-) also deals with a conspiracy narrative regarding the economy. It is possible to do comparative research into conspiracy narratives amongst East Asian nations or between the East and the West through TV drama.
12. Beyond this, it may be said that the core reasons for *Queen Seondeok*’s popularity include its underdog motif, sensibility of good triumphing over evil, revenge narrative, development of dramatic scenes, portrayal of sympathetic archetypes, etc. This paper concentrates on the viewpoint of conspiracy theory and the entertaining element of power games as narrative structure, so it does not analyze in detail the other elements mentioned above.

dramatic logic focused on conspiracy theory in the dramatic narrative, not only as entertainment but also as a plausible and reliable interpretation of the nature of the political. The audience also saw the premise of conspiracy as a useful framework through which to understand reality and history, not only as a creative product. Conspiracy theories appear regularly throughout *Queen Seondeok* and dominate all the characters' behaviors.

Similar conspiracy narratives, especially in the Western cultural context, are usually found in spy novel genres dealing with political issues and in science fiction narratives of paranoia, and are unusual events.¹³ However, in Korean popular genres, conspiracy narratives are reproduced repeatedly and prevail very strongly in various sub-genres, including medical drama (*White Tower*), domestic melodrama (*Wife's Temptation*) and historical drama such as *World of Women (Yeoincheonha)* (SBS 2001-2002) and *Tears of Dragon (Yong ui nunmul)* (KBS 1996-1998), all of which are based on real-life contexts. As a result, such dramatic narratives dealing with conspiracy theories can be considered representative typical Korean narratives. They reflect the perspective of the Korean public when it comes to modern political history, and indicate that Koreans have internalized disillusionment and suspicion, forming an empathetic bond with one another on that very basis.

UFO narratives and sci-fi stories address world issues by imagining other planets or time shifts. In contrast, the Korean public consumes “the political” through conspiracy narratives that reflect reality and history, whilst sharing a sense of deprivation borne of their underprivileged position.¹⁴ At the same time, the audience recognizes that they can enjoy the values of everyday life which political leaders can never possess (these political leaders are depicted as individuals who have given up on love, choosing to become powerful politicians rather than share or express their emotions), and this common recognition offers the audience a sort of psychological and mental consolation.

13. Todd Sander and Harry G. West (2003, 12) used the word “conspiranoia,” and Melley (1999) used the term “paranoia.” By this token, it is apparent that in Western society there are plenty of cases in which conspiracy theory is used in science fiction and thrillers.

14. In the Joseon era, the Korean pre-modern period, we often find the perspective of the political as a lens of conspiracy theory. For example, in *Memories of Lady Hyegyong (Hanjungnok)*, the narrator draws out complicated psychological and political voices with a multi-layered narrative style; one of the voices reflects the possibility of the victimization of Prince *Sado* by political conspiracy (Choe 1999). The recent Korean film *Sado* (2014, directed by Lee Jun-Ik) represents such complicated façades of political conspiracy and psychological conflicts between characters.

This phenomenon strongly indicates that there are cultural politics at work in the public's appreciation of conspiracy narratives. This is the affective empowerment of TV drama.

Affective Empowerment of “Conspiracy Theory”: Reality-Drama-History

This section analyzes how the “conspiracy theory” framework empowers the audience that receives it not only as imagined entertainment, but also as practical knowledge of reality and history. The analysis will explicate the TV drama on the level of the cultural politics of public media.

The conspiracy narrative as a leitmotif in *Queen Seondeok* operates on the following three levels. First, the conspiracy theory is enacted in every nook and cranny of the world, meaning that spatial danger is always at hand and most roads are potentially hazardous due to hidden assassins. These are meaningful signs that the world is dangerous because it is full of conspiracies not merely at the political, but also the spatial, level. These spatial settings cause the characters to believe that disguising their identity is rational because they have to protect themselves from the harmful world.

Second, the main characters (political leaders) utilize conspiracy theories as political strategies to pursue their goals and to hide their inner minds and disguise their identities. These characters are imagined, even if they are based on actual historical persons. However, the viewers perceive them not only as historical or fictional entities, but also as “plausible people” whom they might encounter in their daily lives. The viewers' attitudes can be seen in the responses left on websites. These responses contain the impression that the characters' behavioral patterns are actually very similar to those of politicians in modern and contemporary Korean history.¹⁵

Third, the characters in the drama perform in a communicative system

15. For example, the confrontation between Misil (aristocratic power) and Teokman (royal authority) evokes Korean contemporary conflicts between political parties. While the Hwarang (the chivalrous system of the Silla military class) claims that its most important principles are “Hwarang spirit” and meritocracy, the contradictory reality emphasizes regionalism, school relations, and kinship, a custom of bureaucracy synonymous with cronyism and favor. This reflects the corrupt, dark side of “the political.”

that works on the assumption that the conspiracy theory exists, and they exchange vital information with others who accept the conspiracy theory as fact. For this reason, those characters who do not understand the idea of conspiracy (e.g., Misaeng) or who cannot accept the premise and orientation of conspiracy (e.g., Hajong) end up as losers in the power struggle.

In the power game that takes place within the system, victory goes to whoever has superior information gathering skills, i.e., the person who amasses the most information first. In this way, the drama is structured like a game. The more the drama emphasizes the elements of a competitive game, the more the dramatic entertainment is amplified. The competitive power struggle game plays itself out repeatedly between characters like a tournament. Viewers enjoy the characters' dynamic relationships and position changes as they would a game, and thus experience organically the dramatic framework oriented towards conspiracy theory. As a result, they perceive the framework as a cognitive lens to help them read the principles of the world and of history. This process is a route by which viewers attain the sensibilities of real-life experience through the drama. This results in the affective empowerment of the audience in their ordinary lives.

As soon as the drama aired, viewers started participating in on-line communities such as Internet drama homepages, virtual cafés, and personal blogs. They began discussing the fiction, reality, drama, and history in the show.¹⁶ Through this process, viewers came to see life as a “winning or losing game” and learned that to survive in such a competitive world it is essential to have the “know-how” of disguising one’s identity to “gesticulate” a certain political posture, and to refrain from sharing emotions and sincerity with others. The world of the drama topicalized the idea that life is driven by the will to survive, and the desire to attain the summit of power is its maximizing form. It is assumed that the strongest impetus behind life is the desire for power, and this is heralded as an undisputed fact.

The reasons why audience members enthused over this world of the conspiracy theory are clear. First, the entertaining elements are amplified when the relationships between characters are characterized by “game-like competition,” when the game rules of the power struggle form the dramatic

16. For example, there are Internet sites such as “dcinside *Queen Seondeok* gallery”: <http://gall.dcinside.com/list.php?id=seonduk>.

structure. Second, viewers obtain some psychological consolation and vicarious satisfaction through the drama because they attain information and worldly knowledge through it and its conspiracy theory framework. The conspiracy narrative in the drama makes viewers think that the world is harmful and dangerous, replete as it is with invisible conspiracies, and causes them to take the “precautionary measure” of avoiding behavior that might lead to a moment of transparency or honesty and expose their persons.

The dramatic framework of conspiracy substitutes the “rules of the world” for “political power games” and allows ambivalent emotions such as mistrust and trust, disgust and favor, horror and sympathy to stack up.¹⁷ As a result, the audience begins to advocate the tricks and conspiracies of the drama characters as useful self-defense mechanisms in their own dangerous and risky lives. Just as “the present” comes to us through a fictional process (Derrida and Stiegler [1996] 2002, 90), so historicity can be produced through the media as well. This effect is obtained by watching the drama. Thus, this can be called the affecting of cultural politics through media, or the affective empowerment of the drama in the world of the viewer.

Dramatic Devices that Support the Imagined “Conspiracy Theory”

In the previous section I noted that by providing opportunities to predict the next episode in the drama through the characters’ repeated use of “conspiracy narratives,” *Queen Seondeok* granted viewers an active position. The reason viewers were able to make dramatic predictions was that they already possessed a key piece of historical knowledge: that Silla unified the three kingdoms by virtue of its focus on sovereign authority. Because the character whose logic most accurately centers on sovereign authority is Teokman, the viewer presumes that Teokman will emerge victorious from the struggle between Misil and Teokman, and (sub)consciously begins to support her. Here, the judgment is that supporting Teokman is in accordance with the flow of history. Thus, the historical knowledge that the viewer already possesses has an effect on his or

17. In episode 23 the ambivalent emotion of the audience is structured most clearly.

her affective response to the drama.

Thus, viewers use their prior historical understanding to foreshadow the drama's unfolding narrative arc and are apt to make a cognitive "mistake"; mistaking themselves for a positive/imaginative audience. The viewers conflate the entirely plausible narrative development of the drama with historical legitimacy and come to sympathize with the main character, Teokman.

However, this does not mean that viewers with little or no historical knowledge of the Silla period (foreign viewers living in Korea, for example, or viewers in other countries) are unable to predict the drama's unfolding direction. From the very beginning, the drama emphasizes that the purpose of a king must be to realize "the impossibly ambitious dream of Silla," and the drama is sprinkled with repeated hints at this; puzzle games of a sort that imply that the ultimate "dream" is the "unification of the three kingdoms." Also, by having Teokman talk repeatedly of "unifying the three kingdoms = authority of Silla = sovereign authority," the drama gives viewers without the pertinent historical background a sense of direction and point of empathy. In other words, viewers are "conditioned" to appreciate the drama according to the affective structure that it projects.

In the affective response that results, the viewer comes to support Teokman, who wants to unify the three kingdoms, and harbor antipathy to Misil, who wants to weaken the royal authority of Silla. Misil and Teokman are both fabricators of conspiracies, yet the viewer, sucked deep into the mediated dramatic project, only sympathizes emotionally with Teokman.¹⁸

The drama asserts that all the conspiracies invented by Misil stem from her private desire to seize power. Contrarily, it implies that the conspiracies created by Teokman can be rationalized in the name of the protection of Silla and her people. Her behavior targets the maintenance of public legitimacy. Teokman is a wise strategist who oversees conspiracies in the service of the public. Like many melodramas on TV, there is an obvious contrast between good and evil, right and wrong. This narrative setting inspires a sensitive and emotional audience response to concepts of public and private: i.e., "public = something national = legitimate = something that should be supported"; while "private = personal desire = negative and greedy = something that should

18. Hwang Hye-Jin (2006, 11; 57-59) mentions that the public used common sense about past facts and was apt to apply it to the ideological vision of nationalism reflected in the cinematic imagination.

be attacked.” This dichotomy naturally legitimizes the Silla power structure characterized by royal authority and status. Accordingly, the drama works to buttress the post-facto legitimacy of Silla royal authority.

This situation replaces sympathy for the drama with support for history, with a focus on the perspective of the royal family. Thus, although the historical drama purportedly veers toward fiction and imagination, in reality it produces a sort of enlightening effect of supporting and advocating institutions and ideologies as historical facts. This is an essential and general effect of mass media, as Marshall McLuhan (1997, 25) noted, rather than a subordinate or secondary effect of the mediated, imagined genre of drama.¹⁹

The Making of Drama Characters as in Game Rules

In this section, I analyze the actors/actresses’ performance rules, which support the conspiracy theory, as imagined historical narrative. Thereafter I analyze the main characters’ maturation and aging in accordance with game rules. These analytic points establishes itself based on the contemporary “culture of feeling,”²⁰ and dramatic narrative, as well as actors/actresses’ performances, back up these emotional rules.

This emotional structure, by entering into a reciprocal relationship with the game narrative, reveals the systemic relevance of “society-drama-game.” Furthermore, this operates as a cultural rule, fine-tuning the imaginative structure of viewers. The perspective from which the drama *Queen Seondeok* views human beings is entirely dominated by game rules, and this provides various recreational codes through the endowment of various specific rules, such as “stasis/transformation/evolution/maturity.”

19. For more on this topic see the passage “media is message” by Marshall McLuhan (1997, 25). His research was criticized for not considering the perspective of the political in the media (Enzensberger [1970] 1997, 194). In this paper, I analyze the interaction between the two aspects; how the audience obtains a lens by which to experience the world and history through the drama, and how, after watching the drama, the audience is apt to read their real life experiences through the same lens. I refer to this process as the sympathetic interaction between reality and fictional drama, an affective empowerment.

20. As mentioned by Raymond Williams ([1965] 2007, 93-94), “the structure of feeling” depends on the culture of a certain period and results from living specifically for the elements in the social organization as a whole. The communication of all practical communities is based on this affective structure.

Performance Rule for the “Conspiracy Theory”: Emotional Disguise

There are more than 75 central characters in *Queen Seondeok*, with rules governing each and every one of their relations. This relates to the fact that conspiracy is a core narrative feature of the drama.

First, most main characters hide and/or disguise their identities, and they never reveal important information, their emotions, or their true intentions. This can be defined as the poker face rule. The frequency and degree to which this occurs is directly proportional to the character’s importance in the drama. The less they reveal their inner thoughts, the higher in the political sphere they are, and the more important the character is.

The best example is Misil. She smiles proudly, and nobody can decipher the meaning of her demeanor. Her facial expression is a political mask designed to confuse others. There is also the case of Teokman. When she is young, her emotional expression is dynamic and free. However, as she obtains more and more political power, her facial expression grows more serious.

Then there is the case of Princess Cheonmyeong. Her facial expression follows a pattern; when she is with a close acquaintance in the private sphere, she reveals her emotions and feelings in a natural way. However, whenever she appears as an official subject, a political entity, she covers her face with a veil so others cannot learn anything from her expression. In these ways, the poker face is used to publicize and symbolize political power in the drama.

Second is the face-off game rule. The disguising of the characters works as a sort of psychological game. Misil and Teokman conspire against their opponents, Princess Cheonmyeong hides her pregnancy (she escapes the palace by camouflaging herself as a Buddhist nun: EP 8),²¹ the intelligent and mature Chunchu behaves like a foolish boy (Chunchu, pretending to be stupid, abruptly changes his personality and attitude to those of a smart and politically astute individual, and this astonishes the viewers: EP 38).²² The disguising of

21. For more on this subject see the blog “Seondeokyeowangui sumeun gongsoja, cheonmyeonggongj-uneun hullyunhaetta!” (The “hidden woman” ability of *Queen Seondeok* and Princess Cheonmyeong was great!) (in All the Reviews of the World, June 18, 2009)

22. The Internet newspaper *NEWSN* printed the article “Was the odd problem child, Chunchu Kim of *Queen Seondeok*, a genius?” (Sep. 20, 2009). The article dealt with the identity disguise of young Chunchu Kim.

identity is a condition of “survival.” This situation has an amusing effect on the internal world of the drama, as characters deceive and are deceived in turn, amplifying the recreational effect.

Third is the dramatic reversal rule. The characters deceive and are deceived, and also play tricks on one another by pretending to be deceived by the would-be deceiver, again amplifying the entertainment and recreational effect of the drama. This produces surprising and interesting reversals. For example, Yusin Kim, the leader of the Hwarang, pretends not to know of Teokman’s gender, and Misil pretends not to know Pida’s identity even though he is her son. This reversal rule increases the dramatic entertainment factor several times by jumbling viewer predictions about how the drama will unfold.

Fourth, there is the principle of emotional representation in the identity game. Politically, the higher ranked the character, the less he or she reveals emotions; the lower ranked, the more negatively oriented the personality, the more readily emotions are expressed and the more quickly this occurs. Supporting actors also help to reveal the main characters’ emotional representations in the identity game.

These rules increase the dramatic entertainment of the drama, but also generalize the idea that disguising one’s identity for the purpose of self-protection is inevitable, and even desirable, because the world is full of people who both wish to deceive and are being deceived.

Faces of Power/Non-human Being: Poker-faced Misil

From the beginning, Misil is a charismatic political leader with a fixed character.²³ As analyzed by Su-Jeong Kim (2010, 85-88), Misil exhibits an ambitious and outgoing personality and does not conceal political desire. The drama thoroughly shrouds the process by which she came to possess her

23. This is known as a “typical and flat character.” About the terms “flat character” and “typical character,” see Forster (1927) 1975. Also, King Jinpyeong (indecisive), Eulje (a political machine), and Misaeng (mean) also remain flat and typical. This paper selects Misil as one example of a typical character because she is the only character shrouded in mystery and forms a striking contrast to Teokman, whose identity changes in stages.

abilities. In short, the production does not deal with Misil's youth.

Misil's essentially unknown identity is not to be revealed; rather, it must be "continuously shrouded in mystery." As the drama develops, the viewer finds out about her desire for political power but never "grasps" her true identity. For example, she is a sexual partner to many of the "male politicians," but she is in fact the leader, the one who controls their thoughts and behaviors. She is the mother of Pidam, but in fact she is his psychological/political governor. She nominally worships God, but in fact only employs the image of God to manipulate the public. Her motivation is her desire for political power.

Despite the mystery veiling Misil's personality, her subtle variations in emotional expression and dynamic changes in action, such as her unfathomable political judgment, are dynamically enacted. Therefore, the drama reinforces its dramatic entertainment by utilizing Misil's charisma to the fullest. This "mystifying" Misil represents the public view of power; i.e., it reflects the notion that the public cannot know how power is grasped or the inner workings of that power. Misil's indecipherable expression and mystifying secret ways reflect the public perception that the physiology of power cannot really be known.

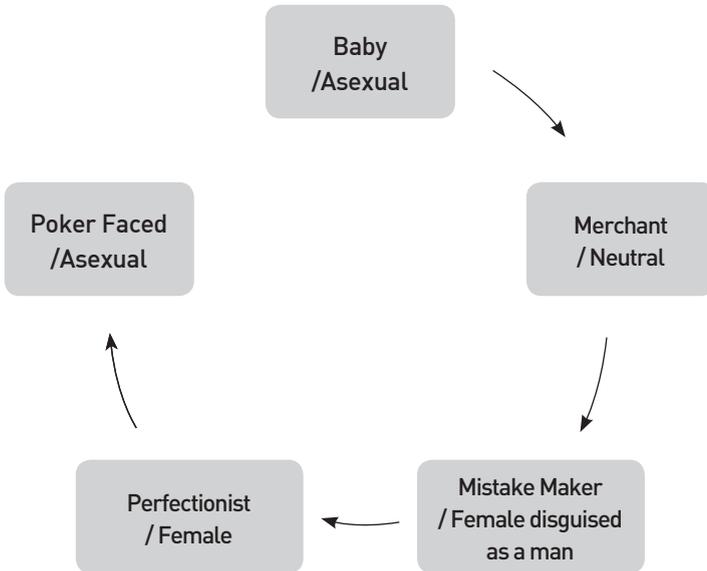
Becoming a Nation with a Human Face: Empowerment of Teokman

Unlike Misil, who maintains a fixed, flat personality to the very end, Teokman is a rounded, fleshed-out character (Foster [1929] 1975) whose identity changes most clearly, like a character in a computer game growing stronger with each increase in level.

In terms of the drama narrative, these identity shifts offer just cause for dramatic reversal, in that her own changes accompany changes in her relationships with other characters. When left out as a newborn, "baby Teokman" is asexual. But when she lives as a merchant in the Taklimakan Desert, she develops into an androgynous tomboy. She is smart and faithful and full of intellectual curiosity; however, she is uncontrolled. But later she becomes a member of Yusin Kim's Hwarang group, becoming a "woman disguised as a man." Here, Hyangdo-Teokman is a flunking student full of

mistakes, but one that maintains an upbeat, cheery “boyishness.”²⁴

But when Teokman regains her original position as a princess and enters the powerful political sphere, her character dons a poker face. If these identity transformations had been realized in the format of a computer game they would have been automated, but because in the drama such transformations must meet the demands of the narrative, acceptable reasons must be provided. Therefore, the drama justifies Teokman’s identity transformations by explaining why she returned to Silla or why she had to become queen. In this way she becomes a public figure, and her actions are justified. This is verified most clearly in Seondeok (Teokman’s final identity)’s proclamation: “I am Silla” and “The queen is the nation.”



Transforming and evolving character-Teokman

24. Kim Myeong-Hi (2012, 16) analyzed the drama *Queen Seondeok* using Jungian psychology as follows: Teokman was empowered by self-identifying as a man. For the difference between the characters Teokman and Misil in terms of political attitude, see Park 2013, 252-55.

The method by which Teokman becomes the nation's subject and a public figure is by mentoring Misil, her antagonist. She learns the rules and physiology of political power from Misil, and internalizes it all. As a result, she comes to hold absolute political power. However, she also loses her natural emotional expressiveness and “human” worries. She gives up on love and private desire, which Misil never felt nor desired, after becoming the highest political leader. Teokman as *Queen Seondeok* never weeps: even as she witnesses her beloved Pdam's death she proclaims the glory of Silla in a loud, dry voice, devoid of sadness for her love's demise. Such is the interpretation of political power in *Queen Seondeok*: political power can be possessed only when one gives up on the genuine identity of an emotional subject.

In this way, every time Teokman overcomes a crisis or solves a problem, she undergoes a multifaceted identity transformation of sexual identity, status, caste, and personality. Every time she solves a problem after encountering a crisis, she receives a reward, be it a higher rank, gender identity change, ally force, or capability increase: she undergoes processes similar to those of a character in a game, evolving with each increasing level.

The transformation process (“leveling up”) reflects the support and expectations of the audience. Teokman is an example of a character who sacrifices her private life (happiness, love, emotions) for the public good (the national goal of unification): she reflects the viewers' presumption of a moral politician.

Thus, by effectively applying game rules as principles, the drama converts the complex historical situation it draws upon into a much simpler recreational form. This is why the drama amassed popularity and achieved notoriety.

This section analyzes how the entertainment genre production *Queen Seondeok* provided a public sphere within which its audience was able to discuss the contradictions of history and contemporary reality through web sites such as the drama homepage, on-line communities, and personal blogs.

In watching *Queen Seondeok*, the audience was offered the opportunity to view reality and drama in tandem with history and fiction, viewing them analogously and adopting an appreciative attitude toward certain elements of the whole. This acceptance was clear in the way netizens discussed the topics explicated in this paper on the Internet (for example, see MBC's *Queen Seondeok* homepage). In these locations, the drama watchers restructured, reflected upon, and conversed about the direction and value of history,

then projected those thoughts and conversations onto their memories of contemporary Korean history. The interest in history that viewers showed was not limited to positivist considerations of whether the drama was based on accurate historical fact or not. Although the questions may have started off from issues of truth and falsehood in historical reality, this eventually detoured in the direction of the drama as “fiction” and “imagination.” In these instances, the debate gathered around “perspective” of history and “direction” of interpretation.

This revealed that viewers were thinking about the relationship between history and reality with the drama as a medium, and that the drama was playing the role of a sort of public sphere of debate, linking viewers’ conceptions of reality and history. Drama acted as a public medium in which, and through which, the cognitive osmosis of fiction and history occurred and spread.

If we define this as a “dialogue with history” mediated through drama, we soon find that the ways in which viewers experienced the relationship between “history-fiction-reality” consisted of a sort of cognitive cycle.²⁵ The viewers of *Queen Seondeok* projected their experiences of reality onto the drama, while on the other hand utilizing the perspectives internalized by watching it in their own interpretation of their reality and shared history. This process, in terms of drama narrative structure and audience reaction, was made real through the methods of “representation” and “satire.”

The first method is representation. *Queen Seondeok* uses the dramatic strategy of projecting contemporary political events onto Silla historical scenes.²⁶ For example, the leader of the Hwarang system is selected through a tournament competition called Pijae. After this decision, a panel asks some questions so as to judge the faultlessness of the Hwarang leader’s career (EP 35) in a manner reminiscent of a political hearing in a contemporary Korean

25. The public function of viewers arguing and conversing in on-line communities is not unique to *Queen Seondeok*, but rather such response is the prevailing phenomenon in this Internet-based society. Netizen-viewers focusing on historical dramas began to share their historical opinions and by doing so, they began to regard themselves as analytic critics of history. This points to one of the general roles of historical dramas.

26. Kim (2009, 18-24) analyzed the interactive parody between historical fact and cinematic imagination in films like *Once Upon a Time* (2008), *Radio Days* (2008), and *Tazzimawa Lee* (2008), the latter of which deals with the Korean independence movement during the colonial period.

candidate vetting process. Also, when Teokman announces tax reform laws and declares that she would levy higher profit taxes on aristocrats with excess land (EP 43), or when aristocratic attempts to regulate prices arbitrarily to cope with this new temporary law come under scrutiny (EP 43), there is a clear evocation of Korean economic policies since 1993. The scene in which emergency martial law is declared (EP 46) is strongly reminiscent of political events in the 1980s. In fact, the Korean netizenry, as the audience, willingly made issues of these resemblances.

Second, many scenes reflect contemporary Korean society as satire. For example, the scene of a tussle between political leaders at Hwabaek (EP 39) evokes the frequently occurring brawls in the Korean National Assembly. The audience responded to exactly that point on the drama website.²⁷

Through this process of representation and satire, the viewer associates drama with reality and drama with history, using the world of the drama as a lens through which to understand reality. In this regard, the cyclical mutual interaction of “reality-drama/fiction-history” presents itself as an enforcement medium of cultural politics, established and reinforced through the empathizing structure of the audience.

These analyses show the “paradoxical attitude” of the audience, which criticizes “the political/power” but shows sympathy for it, supports the dramatic logic of the political, and finally comes to internalize it as a lens through which to perceive the world. Such interaction defines that circulation process as the cultural politics of mass media and also as the affective empowerment of TV drama.

Conclusion

This paper sheds new light on “the political nature of sympathy” by analyzing the narrative of, and audience response to, *Queen Seondeok*. For this research,

27. The making of the film NT Live *Coriolanus* (2014, directed by Josie Rourke, starring Tom Hiddleston, National Theatre Live in Britain), which was recently released at the Korean National Theater (March 1, 2016) as a pre-release before opening more broadly, depicts brawls in each country’s National Assembly as common experiences in India, Taiwan, England, and Russia. This shows that physical brawls between politicians are not exceptional to Korean reality and fiction.

this paper considered the duality of global popular culture trends and local Korean modern and contemporary history.

As the phenomenon of globalization has accelerated in the 21st century and a new world order has spread, the public has “discovered” a real world order operating beneath the news in the media and revealed its contempt for politics and power by voicing concerns over, then creating and sharing “conspiracy narratives” about, the contemporary scene. This is their resistance discourse.

In the locality of Korea, conspiracy narratives have been reproduced in melodramas and historical narratives based on reality, not fantasy. *Queen Seondeok*, operating at this very level of global/local, garnered the sympathy of a global audience, utilizing “conspiracy theories” as a central medium of emotional dramatic design and “naturalizing” this interpretation of politics and power.

First, the main characters fabricate conspiracies to seize political power and control their situations ego-centrally. Second, the conspiracies plotted out in the drama are premises of the narrative itself, and the conflicts in the drama are developed through conspiracy narratives. Third, the viewers reflect the framework of conspiracy in the drama into their historical/contemporary context and use it as an affective and cognitive lens that makes it possible to understand and reconstruct the world around them.

The viewer exhibits a “contradiction,” supporting and empathizing with conspiracy theories they would otherwise criticize, internalizing the notion of conspiracy as a lens for viewing the world. By turning the “conspiracy theory” into a sort of “principle” that dominates both history and reality, the audience projects contemporaneous reality onto the drama and at the same time links it to history: the paradoxical mutual interaction of “drama-history-reality.”

The value of this research can be summarized as follows. First, this is a case study in investigating “the political nature” of a popular “basis for sympathy” when a drama plays the role of mediator. Second, it analyzes how media cultural politics using drama can control audience recognition of reality and affect behavior. Third, this analysis can be used as a gateway to understanding the sympathetic solidarity of East Asian and global viewers of K-drama as based on common political sensibilities. Fourth, it opens up the possibility of meta-criticism of the drama by explaining the dynamic interaction between the drama narrative and audience responses. This meta-critical approach publicizes

public argument by fostering debate regarding the interaction between history-drama (fiction)-reality and ultimately extends beyond the discussion of cultural politics mediated as drama.

By focusing on conspiracy narratives and analyzing the cultural politics of historical drama addressing negative recognition of the political and its moral appropriation, this study evokes the paradoxical attitude of “the politics of sympathy” and submits a new vision: the recovery of true reflection and critique.

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Abstract

In this paper I reveal the mutual interaction between drama, history, and reality, and analyze the cultural operating principle of “the political.” I achieve this by analyzing the narrative of, and viewer reactions to, the television drama *Queen Seondeok*, which serves as a prominent example of popular K-drama culture in 21st century Korea. First, I explain that conspiracy theory forms the core of the *Queen Seondeok* narrative arc, showing how it creates a shared bond of sympathy both with and among the audience in the context of popular disillusionment and resistance to “the political.” Viewing the drama with a critical eye focused on the conspiracies fabricated by the political persons that appear in the show, viewers come to support and sympathize with the conspiracy in the narrative, internalizing it as a lens through which to assess the world. In the process, a paradoxical interaction is revealed. To prove this, I analyze the paradoxical approach adopted by the viewers of the drama: by sympathizing with the narrative the audience recognizes “the political” as a “natural” lens. This stems from the way the drama satirizes and “reenacts” modern and contemporary Korean political history. Finally, I unveil specific mechanisms employed by the characters in *Queen Seondeok* to disguise their emotions and to win the competitive power game. All these elements together show both the operating principles of cultural politics in the medium of TV drama, and the empowerment inherent in the act of watching.

Keywords: TV drama, *Queen Seondeok*, conspiracy theory, historical drama, politics, media