

Special Feature

Old Texts, New Desires:  
How the Korean Television Drama  
*Daejanggeum* Evokes Reflexivity,  
Renewal and Resistance among  
Japanese Women

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## Introduction

When *Daejanggeum*<sup>1</sup> was first broadcast in Japan by *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai* (henceforth ‘NHK’) on 7, October 2004 on its satellite channel BS2, the national broadcaster had by then broadcast another Korean television drama *Winter Sonata*,<sup>2</sup> which has turned actor Bae Yong-joon into one of the most popular culture idols in Japan today. Together with several other Korean dramas, *Daejanggeum*’s popularity in Japan and elsewhere in Asia later triggered a surge in the popularity of many things Korean – from television dramas and popular music, to the Korean language and Korean culture – in Japan and elsewhere across Asia that the phenomenon later became known as the Korean Wave.

Unlike many popular Korean dramas, which are mostly about the romantic love of young couples being caught in complex webs of social relations, *Daejanggeum* depicts the trials and tribulations of a peasant girl named Seo Jang-geum,<sup>3</sup> as she seeks to redress the wrongful deaths of her parents by entering the palace to work in the Royal Kitchen and later in the Royal Medical Academy during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1879). The 54-episode drama certainly captivated its audience with how good characters suffer and overcome the repetitive schemes of wicked and corrupt characters. It also made the leading actress Lee Young-ae popular, so much so that when the *Daejanggeum* Festival was held at the Tokyo Dome on 11 August 2007 to present the leading casts of the drama to fans in Japan, all 50,000 tickets were

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I am indebted to David Gellner, Roger Goodman, Kim Hyun Mee, David Slater, Ueno Chizuko and Ann Waswo for their valuable comments. I am also grateful to Sophia University, the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Oxford and the Japan Foundation for funding my fieldwork in Japan, and to the Korea Foundation for supporting my fieldwork in South Korea.

1. *Daejanggeum*, which literally means ‘The Great Jang-geum’ in Korean, is known in English as ‘Jewel in the Palace.’ This 54-episode historical drama, which was produced by the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation and broadcast in South Korea between 15 September 2003 and 30 March 2004, was later renamed *Kyūtei Chan-gumu no Chikai* (‘The Vows of Court Lady Chan-gumu’) by NHK in Japan.
2. This drama, known in Korean as *Gyeoul Yeonga*, which literally means ‘Winter Love Song,’ was first aired in South Korea by the Korean Broadcasting System in 2002, and in Japan by NHK in April 2003.
3. This is a fictionalized, historical character who lived during the reigns of King Seongjong (1457-1494), King Yeonsan-gun (1494-1506) and King Jungjong (1506-1544). For more information, see URL: <http://www.imbc.com/broad/tv/drama/daejanggeum/index.html>

completely sold out, despite costing 10,000-15,000 Japanese yen (120-180 US dollars) each. While Lee did not become as popular an idol in Japan as many Korean male actors did, due to the obvious fact that she is female, and is hence not the likely object of desire for many fans of the Korean Wave in Japan who are mostly women, she did become an iconic figure for her role in *Daejanggeum* as a woman with unfettered determination, limitless inspiration, and indestructible quest for justice.

However, *Daejanggeum* did not always generate favorable reactions from Japanese women. Its themes and portrayals of women have also drawn mixed and enigmatic responses, as this study will demonstrate. Drawing on ethnographic data gathered from over 50 months of fieldwork in Japan and South Korea, this paper examines the responses of 78 Japanese women<sup>4</sup> who have watched the drama at least once. Many of the women do not consider themselves as fans of *Daejanggeum*, or of Lee or any other character in the drama in particular, since they have not watched, and probably will also not watch, the drama repeatedly, or as often as ardent fans of popular culture idols would. While the drama speaks directly to their social conditions in a patriarchal society that oppresses them, by celebrating women's ability to resist, challenge and even transform prevailing perceptions and practices, many are also uncomfortable with the intricate details of how women's subordination, struggles, strategies, survival and successes that are ultimately circumscribed by a male-dominated system, which evaluates women's action and compels them to safeguard the continuity and perpetuity of men's social statuses and positions. Moreover, many feel compelled by the drama to feel sympathy and compassion for women's structural position in society and the social conditions they are in, and even consider the drama's rather didactic messages to be promoting an 'old-fashioned' and hence inhibitive moral code for women that reinforces male dominance and women's subordination.

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4. The fieldwork is based on interviews with 78 Japanese women aged 27-69 years in Japan and South Korea in 2004-11, and participation-observations of many fan activities and promotional events. All the informants are women, of whom 43 are married, 22 divorced, 9 unmarried and four widowed. Fourteen of those who are married are full-time housewives, while 21 hold part-time jobs, and eight are in full-time employment. Seventeen of those who are divorced are single mothers in full-time employment, while the others hold at least one part-time job. Of the nine who have never married, six have professional careers, while three are part-time workers.

## Interpreting *Daejanggeum*

The popularity of contemporary Korean television dramas such as *Daejanggeum* and *Winter Sonata* has drawn indeed considerable scholarly attention in recent years, though few studies have dealt with how audiences interpret these programs as cultural texts with which they could relate to their lives. Some scholars agreed that the co-hosting of the 2002 FIFA World Cup by Japan and South Korea was a ‘crucial turning point’ in the cultural exchanges between the two countries (Kim 2005; Mori 2008), and that the low costs of Korean television dramas relative to those produced in Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong helped the penetration of South Korean programs into many parts of Asia (Kim 2005; Shim 2008). Others cited the ‘foreignness’ of Korean historical attire, customs and practices as ‘a source of viewing pleasure’ for Asian audiences (Chua 2008:78), which some other scholars suggested that the pervasive depictions of family relations in Korean television dramas evoked in viewers ‘a sense of nostalgia’ for the ‘vigor’ of society that was perceived as having been lost (Mori 2008:137). Studies on the Korean Wave in Japan attributed the popularity of Korean television dramas to the desire to learn about the country’s colonial past (Iwabuchi 2008:249), which is said to account for the increase in cultural tourism to South Korea (Hirata 2008; Mitsuya 2004).

While the above reasons could indeed have contributed to the popularity of *Daejanggeum* in Japan and elsewhere in Asia, it is also not difficult to draw any audience’s attention to a drama which devotes as many as 40 of its 54 episodes to cooking and an endless display of colorful dishes. At the same time, the story itself is rather compelling. The drama begins with Jang-geum’s mother, who works in the Royal Kitchen and is forced to take poison by the elderly Court Lady Choe for uncovering a plot by the latter to worsen the King’s health, and to install a new King who would favor the Choe family. She survives thanks to the antidote given by her friend – who is to later become Court Lady Han – and is nursed to health by an imperial guard, who has escaped from the palace after executing an edict by high-ranking officials to poison the King’s mother. She later settles down with him in a remote village where she later gives birth to Jang-geum. Jang-geum’s parents died when she is still a child. After finding shelter in the home of an alcohol-distributor and his wife, Jang-geum later beseeches a Court Lady to be allowed to enter the palace to work in the Royal Kitchen, where she grows up under the guardianship of

her mother's friend, the kind Court Lady Han. However, the younger Court Lady Choe soon discovers Jang-geum's identity, and sets out to kill both Jang-geum and Court Lady Han, for fear that her family's plot may be exposed. Court Lady Han is later framed for poisoning the King's food. She is tortured, imprisoned and dies, while Jang-geum, who by then is a teenager and who has also impressed the King with her culinary skills and knowledge while serving in the Royal Kitchen, goes into exile alone and makes good of her time by learning herbal medicine and acupuncture from a female physician.

When she re-enters the palace upon passing the imperial medical examination, Court Lady Choe, now head of the Royal Kitchen, once again plots against Jang-geum with the help of her niece, another generation of the Choe family, and several corrupt officials. Jang-geum survives and thrives, thanks to the assistance and support of several high-ranking male officials and the Queen. She moves on to uncover new ways of healing various illnesses that save the masses, the Crown Prince and the King, who not only confers upon her the title *Daejanggeum*, but he also falls in love with her. After exposing the evil plots of the Choe family and their accomplices, and obtained the King's acknowledgement of her parents' innocence, Jang-geum leaves the palace with Min Jeong-ho, a young court official, in order to avoid being made a concubine by the King, and to avoid the wrath of the Queen. The couple is later summoned to the palace, that is, several years after the enthronement of the Crown Prince, though only for a brief visit, when they turn down the Queen's offer of official positions in the palace. The final scene in the drama shows Jang-geum attempting to deliver the baby of a woman in labor using Caesarean section procedures, but is prevented by her husband, who comments that Korean society is not yet ready for such a progressive surgical method.

*Daejanggeum* is indeed appealing to many Japanese women, who regard it as a rare program that gives voice to women's heartlessness, hardships and heroism, which are seldom depicted on an epic scale in popular culture. Many Japanese women I spoke to explained that they have not had the kind of experiences they derived from watching *Daejanggeum* for as long as 20 years, not since the broadcast of the immensely popular Japanese television drama *O-shin*<sup>5</sup> in 1983. Unlike *O-shin*, which traces the rags-to-riches story of an

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5. This serialized drama, which was aired on NHK from between 4 April 1983 and 31 March

orphaned girl in Japan before and after the Second World War to become a successful proprietress of the country's first department store, the female protagonist in *Daejanggeum* devotes herself to learning, caring for others, and saving lives, and rejects fame, official title and material wealth. Such altruistic qualities do not require a deep understanding of the historical context of the drama for anyone to appreciate, and why *Daejanggeum* is particularly appealing to many Japanese women also lies in their selecting, reading and interpreting scenes in the drama in ways that help frame the women's experiences meaningfully.

While *Daejanggeum* appears to make a stark distinction between individuals who are good and those who are evil, it also portrays the latter rather sympathetically and calls for the audience to refrain from passing hasty judgments on them. Seemingly 'bad characters' in the drama are mostly women who devote their lives to serving in the palace. Regardless of whether they are from the peasant or aristocratic class, all the women are treated alike, as servants to the royal family and high-ranking officials. While there exists the opportunity for these women to gain recognition for their capabilities and to enhance their status, only one woman is able to become head. One might be attempted to describe the competition among the women in the Royal Kitchen as displaying the *Queen Bee Effect* (Ellemers et al. 2004; Staines et al. 1974), that is, the situation when women view one another as rivals, and those in positions of power suppress others who are weak and subordinate to them. Yet, the three generations of women from the Choe family who are unscrupulous and heartless in conspiring with corrupt officials to cheat, steal and even murder other characters – such as Jang-geum, her mother, Court Lady Han and other women in the palace – are also depicted as selfless and self-sacrificing in being unquestioningly loyal to their family and dutifully bound to serve only the interests of their family's fortune and reputation. They are thus as filial to their own kind as Jang-geum is to her parents. They resort to doing what they do because of women's subordinate position in Korean society, and also because they are able to wield and expand their influence only

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1984, is a rags-to-riches story of a girl who struggles from the Meiji period (1868-1910) to the early 1980s. This 297-episode drama received audience ratings of 52-63 percent in Japan, and was also immensely popular elsewhere in Asia.

within a very limited sphere of influence: the realm of cooking.

The motivations and behavior of the characters are thus intricately enmeshed into a rather blurred, and enigmatic, boundary between good and evil, or between right and wrong. As such, many Japanese women find this ambivalence rather disturbing, since they are unable to freely take side only with those characters who are 'good,' but are also compelled to sympathize with those who are 'bad.' Furthermore, they are also confronted with the dilemma of assessing whether Jang-geum's accomplishments are to be regarded as remarkable and worth celebrating. The drama offers a glimpse of two of the very few opportunities that were available to women during the Joseon dynasty to lead a life of status and recognition: by working in the Royal Kitchen and as assistants to male physicians. Even though the peasant orphan Jang-geum remarkably overcomes a diversity of obstacles and gains unprecedented recognition in both fields that surpasses even the ability of most men, these are made possible only by the willingness of a few men and members of the royal family to recognize her abilities. Moreover, the drama also interprets Jang-geum's main motivation as stemming not from the desire to attain success, fame or fortune, but driven by the pledge she has made to her dying mother that she would establish her deceased parents' innocence.

As many Japanese women immerse themselves in reading and interpreting the cultural texts in the drama, some are drawn to the novelty of women's struggles and accomplishments, but others conflicted by what they deem as 'moralistic' and 'old-fashioned' representations of women, which contradict their desire to establish themselves as contemporary subjects in the information-based, knowledge-driven society in which they live in today. As Lila Abu-Lughod (1997:112) has argued, television messages are deflected by the way people frame their television experiences and by the way powerful everyday realities inflect and offset those messages. Her study shows that while most Egyptian television melodramas 'do not seem to be trying to offer profound insights into the human condition, or even into the social, cultural, and political dynamics of particular communities,' they are nonetheless important to the 'lives and imaginaries' of people, especially to women who seek to frame certain images in ways that project the social usefulness of women's activities.

As Lisa Rofel (1994:703) also contends, in her study of the political ways in which people in China watched and interpreted a particular television soap opera in 1991, the 'moments of immersion' in cultural programs are 'necessarily

enmeshed within other social fields of meaning and power' in such a way that they intersect with people's conceptions of themselves and their world.' That many Japanese women have dissimilar backgrounds and desires naturally means their responses to the drama can vary widely. As the women reflect on their own past experiences in relation to the particular social, economic and political conditions in Japan that have shaped their lives, their understandings of the gendered self, and the meaning of their gendered experiences, incongruities can emerge between women's desires and the cultural texts they interpret. As this paper will demonstrate, some of the incongruities stem from some women's inability to relate the drama to their desired identities. This thus limits their ability to utilize it as a means of re-constituting their self-identities, and of offering possibilities for enhancing their sense of self-worth. As Marie Gillespie (1995:14) aptly remarks, identities are not 'somehow self-selected, freely chosen through consumption activities,' but that unequal social positions such as gender, class and ethnicity are critical factors that actually shape people's consumption of the popular media, as well as frame the limits of their creative freedom.

### **Relief and Renewal in Contemporizing *Daejanggeum***

Nonetheless, most of my informants concur that their initial reactions to watching *Daejanggeum* were generally positive. Cooking and eating occupy more than half of the total of 54 episodes of the drama, presenting food as important not only to the physical well-being of individuals, but also their mental and spiritual health. The appeal of *Daejanggeum* lies precisely in its depiction of food in this manner. Among those who find the cooking scenes entertaining, educational and inspiring are Atsuta Kaori from Osaka and Kameyama Chisato from Kawasaki, who began taking a renewed interest in cooking after watching *Daejanggeum*, and even formed their own social circles to explore various Korean restaurants across Japan, and to learn how to cook Korean food. What seem to have drawn their attention the most are scenes that project women not as mere cooks who prepare food simply to feed others, but as knowledgeable and caring individuals who devote themselves to understanding the importance of a diversity of ingredients and their relevance to the health conditions of recipients. These are said to be edifying, as the cook



is elevated to a symbolic figure that provides for the complete well-being of individuals: the body, mind and heart. Those Japanese women who frame the importance of cooking in this way derive both relief and the enhancement of their own self-image from watching Jang-geum's role as a contemporary subject: knowledgeable, politically-correct and unconventional.

Shimizu Hiromi from Akita prefecture recalls how proud she felt to watch scene after scene of women giving elaborate explanations for the dishes they prepare, and the display of the copious amount of food throughout the drama. Given that a woman's cooking in the private realm of the home is usually under-appreciated, if not unappreciated, Shimizu therefore finds it particularly comforting and inspiring to see Jang-geum raise the status of those who are kitchen-bound, especially through the laborious efforts she makes at seeking out new ingredients, experimenting on herself to explore new tastes and test the safety of ingredients for human consumption, investing a vast amount of creative energy in learning about the medicinal value of ingredients, and incorporating what she has been told by a variety of people whom she loves and respects, and who are her benefactors. The 58-year old housewife adds

Television programs and movies usually show men as professional chefs, but not women. *Daejanggeum* makes me feel proud to see women's hard work being presented in such a glamorous way. I think it helps many people understand and hopefully also appreciate the amount of time and effort we spend on thinking, planning, organizing and cooking what often look like simple dishes.

The image of women as intelligent cooks, as subjects who are knowledgeable about nutrition and a variety of cooking techniques, finds favor among many. They also view that Jang-geum's ability to be a physician as a natural progression of the character's role from a cook. As a cook, the character is portrayed as diligently devoting herself for the physical well-being of individuals, as well as their spiritual and moral health, and that of the broader society. Later, as a physician, Jang-geum extends these capabilities by becoming someone who is not only knowledgeable about herbal medicine, or skilful in diagnosing and curing illnesses, but also a physician who heals with humility, compassion and a clear sense of justice, fairness and equality, both the good

and wicked, as well as those from the privileged class and peasants. This is said to be empowering, as it raises the profile of women, even if they labor at the lower rungs of society.

Inada Ayame, for example, interprets Jang-geum's ability to cook as stemming 'from the heart,' and this gives voice to her feelings of frustrations and neglect. She also views Jang-geum's becoming a physician as a natural extension of the character's culinary capabilities. As she explains to me, 'a person who cooks healthy food for others eases their hunger and heals them, and this is the same for a physician who treats others, nurses them to health and enables them to do good for others.' At the same time, the 52-year old housewife from Osaka describes Jang-geum's sense of justice and impartiality – by treating even those who have plotted against her and against other 'good' characters in the dramas – as Jang-geum's spiritual healing power. Inada thus considers Jang-geum as a 'role model' for those who cook and those who heal others.

Nakamae Fumiyo also reflected much upon her own life as she watched the drama, finding it assuring to watch the protagonist persevere in her pursuit to become a physician. The 46-year old accountant from Kyoto became a divorced single mother after only three years of marriage, and was severely criticized by her parents and peers for insisting on her own ways and jeopardizing her child's happiness, even though it was her former husband's infidelity that prompted her to initiate a divorce. Nakamae and her child had moved from one shelter home to another, while she kept several low-paid jobs to make ends meet. She later managed to rebuild her life, establish a decent career, and educate her child properly, all because she had believed in herself and persevered despite the myriads of difficulties she faced.

To women with similar experiences as Nakamae, the portrayal of Jang-geum as a filial daughter, and other women's devotion to their roles as dutiful subjects, also draw particular allure. Given that the drama is renamed in Japanese as *The Vows of Court Lady Chan-gumu*, which refers to the pledges the heroine makes to vindicate her parents, Jang-geum's role as daughter is thus projected as the basis upon which all her endeavors and accomplishments, both in cooking and healing, are meaningfully framed. Many Japanese women are certainly moved by Jang-geum's determination and courage in overcoming various obstacles in order to fulfill her promise to her dying mother, as they are to the intimate bonds among the female characters shown in the drama.

Mukai Eriko, for example, ponders over how to improve the estranged relationship she has with her daughter, whom Mukai has communicated with since the younger woman left home several years ago to marry a man that Mukai and her husband disapproved of. The 49-year old school teacher says she only hopes to be reconciled with her only child, and does not expect her daughter to end the marriage and become a filial daughter in the way that her husband would like the latter to be. Deguchi Itsumi also regrets not having daughters who are willing to heed her advice, as Jang-geum does her mother's. The 53-year old widow's two daughters may be economically independent, but they are still unmarried and live far away from her home in Nagano. Like Mukai, Deguchi also regrets not having as close a bond with her daughters as Jang-geum is portrayed as having with her mother, but she is equally motivated by the drama to find ways to develop closer bonds with her children.

The above discourses reveal there is a strong tendency among many women to project their needs and desires onto the television programs they watch, and to actively seek in them for means to alleviate their frustrations and turn their inadequacies into strengths. It has been widely noted that many housewives often suffer from rather low self-esteem, given the low status of domestic work in the society and elsewhere (Anderson 2000; Ehrenreich 2002). Japanese housewives, in particular, have experienced a diminution in their social status and hence self-esteem due to significant changes to the social, economic and political environments in Japan in the past few decades. As several women have remarked, women's status as housewife was still highly regarded several decades ago, pointing to the 1970s and 1980s, when the male breadwinner family model was heralded by the state as the ideal that would transform Japan into a middle-class society, with *senryō shufui* ('full-time housewife') replacing the Meiji promulgation of the *ryōsai kenbo*<sup>6</sup> ('Good Wives Wise Mothers') as the postwar ideal for women (Uno 1993:298). However, the impending collapse of the country's bubble

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6. This gender ideal was promulgated by the Meiji government through the introduction of the Civil Code 1898 and the related Family Registration Code, as part of the state's effort to modernize and westernize Japan following the demise of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868. The gender ideal was a significant part of the ideology of *kazuko-kokka* (the family state'), which promoted the family as the foundation of the state, with the Meiji Emperor as the head of the nation (Steiner 1950; Uno 1993).

economy from the early 1990s later prompted many women to return to the labor market to supplement the household income. As educational and employment opportunities continue to improve for women, and as securing economic independence gradually becomes more important than marriage, fewer women in Japan are willing to be *senjyō shufu*, preferring instead to pursue both marriage and career, or not to marry at all. For those women who have dutifully performed their expected roles in conformity with the socio-historical construction of gender in Japan as wives, mothers and caretakers, the changes to Japan's social and economic environments have led many to feel unappreciated and undervalued.

Some have also noted that middle-aged and older women as a category have until the early 2000s been neglected by the commercial sector in Japan in its marketing of a wide array of things *kawaii* ('cute') and 'cool,' which had catered mostly to the needs of a younger market (Aoyagi 2000; Miller 2006). That this category of women has played a significant role in triggering the Korean Wave later awakened many commercial enterprises to the realization that this category of the population is not merely interested in the consumption of food, household goods and fashion items, but also of popular culture. As many of these women utilize popular culture to, borrowing Rita Felsky's (1995:19) words, 'enter modernity,' by emerging from the private realm of domesticity to become active consumers of contemporary popular culture in the public arena, hence repositioning themselves structurally from the margins of society as alienated, nonmodern entities, to the center of a capitalist economy, they also look for ways to re-align some of the existing biases in conventional perceptions of femininity in Japan. And while many are able to derive experiences of relief, renewal and even self-edification from watching a program such as *Daejanggeum*, there are many who find the representations of women and the narratives in the drama rather disagreeable, because they are unable to either frame these representations and themes meaningfully in their lives, or match them to their desired identities and idealized worlds.

## Conflicting Desires and Contradictory Identities

The cooking scenes may have led many Japanese women to derive relief, comfort and pride, but several among them also experience feelings of

nostalgic, especially when watching how several elderly female characters painstakingly and patiently instruct and guide the younger ones. These scenes are said to spark fond memories of the women's younger days when they used to watch and help their grandmother, aunt and mother cook. Honma Arisa misses those moments of affection and intimacy, and laments having a daughter and a daughter-in-law who can neither cook nor have the time to do so. The 51-year old widow says the younger women in her family are too busy with their full-time jobs to even eat well, let alone learn to prepare a proper meal. This therefore saddens her that she has no one to pass on her knowledge or with whom she could share her experiences.

Some other women, however, regret the loss in the continuity and bonds between generations of women, and attribute the lack of interest in cooking among younger women in Japan today to the perception that cooking is a menial task and of low status. As Morita Masayo says, cooking is hardly perceived as an art or an important skill, since one can easily eat at restaurants, and buy a wide variety of ready meals from supermarkets, department stores and even convenient stores. While the 55-year old housewife Fukuoka was moved initially by the close, affectionate bonds among many characters in the drama, she was also saddened by the thought that such bonds are lacking in Japanese society today. As she reflected further on just how little recognition and appreciation she has received from her family for the efforts she has put into preparing three meals a day after more than 25 years, Morita's feelings of nostalgia soon gave way to those of abandonment, neglect and worthlessness. As she explains,

I know the drama is about Korean society many hundred years ago, but women's culinary skills were still considered to be important and respected when I was younger. All these seemed to change quickly after my children were born. The more I watch the drama, the more it makes me think about my life, and the more useless I feel...

This sense of helplessness evoked by the drama appears to have been induced by the many Japanese women's perceptions of the banality of women fighting over cooking. To these women, the pleasure they derive from watching many female characters diligently learn, think, explain, plan, prepare and cook does not lead to an enhancement of self-pride, because the ordinariness of women

competing with one another over what women are expected to do anyway is too stark a reminder of women's inescapability from the oppressive social reality they live in, and not a means of escaping from it. Housewife Maeda Nahoko and business manager Kitano Mizuki firmly empathize with why many characters often argue, fight and compete with one another in the Royal Kitchen, but they view all these as portraying women in an unfavorable light. Tokyo housewife Maeda finds it depressing to watch women fight with one another over matters as trivial as choosing ingredients for a dish, and plot against one another over petty issues only to gain some recognition from their oppressors. As for Kitano from Nagoya, she considers it demeaning to watch the female characters constantly and desperately seek to obtain the approval of others with what they cook. As Maeda says to me,

The drama was entertaining, but I was disturbed by the endless fighting among the women over cooking. The drama makes women look really petty. The characters have to be good at cooking because they are forced to do so, since they are trapped at the bottom of society.

Indeed, many women find it exasperating to be compelled by the drama to reflect upon the missed opportunities they had had, to admit their current limitations, and to re-evaluate if they have each led a 'wasted life.' Yoshinaga Hoshimi from Sapporo rushed into marriage when she was 25 years of age, so that she could move away from home and not live with a temperamental and occasionally abusive father, who was irate with her having pursued a degree in pharmaceutical studies despite his disapproval. As she also could not persuade her husband to advance her studies in order to fulfill her dream of becoming a pharmacist, Yoshinaga began working instead at a local pharmacy as an assistant. Since she works only on a part-time basis, to supplement the household income, the 43-year old describes her position at work as a lowly ranked one that is superior only to that of a cashier, and hence is hardly a fulfilling one. She enjoys watching programs that depict the struggles and successes of women, and finds *Daejanggeum* refreshing and uplifting. At the same time, Yoshinaga also envies the kind of support and mentorship that Jang-geum receives from several male characters, who help improve her knowledge and establish her as a capable physician. As she continued watching the drama, Yoshinaga began regretting not having achieved much in her life,

and wished she could have had a similar kind of support and encouragement as Jang-geum. As she explains

The opportunities that Jang-geum has are indeed rare in reality. They only exist in fiction. It makes me feel sad when I think about my own situation. My life may not have been meaningless, but I could have done something more meaningful with my life. I could also have done more good deeds for others. It is too late to change my life now.

Other women, however, are less pessimistic than Yoshinaga even as they ponder over the missed opportunities in their lives, though their awareness of, and desire to transcend, the inhibitive and restrictive environment for women in a male-dominated society such as Japan today prompt them to shun away from what they describe as ‘moralistic’ messages in the drama. Komiya Kayoko appreciates the fact that cooks ought to prepare food by considering the health of recipients and that medical practitioners ought also to regard saving lives as the most important objective. However, the 43-year old marketing manager from Tokyo finds the repetitive emphasis made in the drama tedious and the tone didactic. That it is mostly women who are taught to uphold these values, makes Komiya feel the drama is promoting a value system for women that is more stringent than that set for men.

While sharing a similar view, Hamamoto Makiko is particularly uncomfortable with the episode that shows how Jang-geum puts her own life at risk by isolating herself along with several children suffering from small pox in order to treat them. The 39-year old divorced single mother from Tokyo recalls how the heroine is later praised for her courage and compassion for the children as a mother is willing to sacrifice and love her own children, which Hamamoto sees as devaluing Jang-geum’s stature as a physician. Having struggled to establish a career in a male-dominated environment, the accountant has encountered many moments when her professional capabilities are overlooked by her superiors, who perceive and evaluate her based on her gender. To Hamamoto, references that compare women’s abilities to their expected gender roles only suggest and reinforce the low status of women in society, and not raise it. Though she regards *Daejanggeum* as a good program, and understands that it is ultimately a historical drama, Komiya regrets that its script is similar to many other contemporary Korean programs, which are written in such a way

that advocates old values and traditional gender roles, hence preventing many modern women from appreciating this drama fully. As she says,

Even if *Daejanggeum* is a historical drama, and it shows quite realistically how difficult it is for a woman to succeed in a patriarchal society, the script could have been written to not emphasize so much on what is proper for women, and what they should do for their family and country. After watching several episodes of the drama, I could not help feeling as though I was attending a class on traditional morality. This style seems to be quite typical of Korean dramas...

These women's comments indicate that many Japanese women watch and interpret *Daejanggeum* with an acute, reflective awareness of the various forms of inequalities that exist in reality, with which they use to frame the drama's themes and narratives. Gillespie once remarked that television audiences are drawn to a particular program, or to a particular theme, because they perceive it to offer a 'complex metaphor for their own social world,' and are encouraged to redefine their conceptions of their social conditions (1995:207). In the case of some Japanese women, watching *Daejanggeum* becomes an uncomfortable or unpleasant experience when certain metaphors – such as the theme of cooking, or healing, or both – simplify – or worse, oversimplify – rather than advance their social conditions, hence crippling their ability to experience any 'escape' into an alternative and more communicative social space, or to actively redefine and meaningfully improve their existing conditions.

The above narratives also demonstrate that there exists a commingling of time and space, as the women conflate the historicity of the drama and the contemporariness of their social reality, necessitating a coeval existence of their desires and the cultural images in the drama. In doing so, certain themes and representations in the drama – especially the portrayal of women as unconditionally performing the roles of filial daughters and dutiful to their families – are construed as objectionable and problematic, since they cannot fit into some of the women's desired or idealized world. Many Japanese women do not deny they are moved both by Jang-geum's determination to vindicate her parents and Court Lady Choe's unwavering devotion to protect her family's interest and reputation, but these are also deemed as representations that are biased towards promoting women's 'traditional roles.' Their discomfort, or even



annoyance, stems from having themselves performed women's expected roles in society without deriving appreciation or recognition. Iwagami Manako from Saitama acknowledges that it would be nice to have an obedient child and filial daughter like Jang-geum, but she is at the same time relieved to have two sons, and hence little need to worry about their having to shoulder the kind of burden that she herself has borne, and is still bearing. As the eldest daughter, Iwagami had to look after her younger siblings and an ailing grandmother from a very young age until she got married at 27 years of age. Today, the 47-year old housewife not only takes care of her widowed father-in-law, who is suffering from Parkinson's disease and refuses to live in a home for the elderly, but also her own father, who is also a widower and insists on eating only home-cooked meals. Like many women who find little pleasure in watching the female characters in the drama fight over trivial matters, Iwagami too regards the drama's emphasis on filial piety rather unpleasant, especially when she has been a dutiful daughter, sister, mother and daughter-in-law all these years, and derived neither appreciation nor recognition for fulfilling her expected roles. Iwagami has this to say,

Jang-geum was supposed to be a character who lived a long time ago in South Korea, when women like her were regarded as 'good women.' Maybe Korean society is still like this today. A 'good woman' is not always someone who is dutiful, obedient or filial. I am not against these values, but I am tired of hearing people say what women should or should not do. I really hope that people realize these values only turn women into slaves, as I have been one myself. It makes me shudder to watch in the drama how destructive it can be for many women.

Iwagami's reaction highlights the frustrations of many Japanese women who are to shoulder the burden of caring for the elderly, a responsibility that is mostly borne by individual families, and one that typically falls on women, but not on men. It is understandable why few women would appreciate being reminded of their expected role in society, at least not by programs that are supposed to provide leisure. What seems to upset some women – as they explain – is the way in which *Daejanggeum* aggrandizes this role and proclaims it defining one as a 'good woman.'

The strongest response to this perhaps comes from Okazaki Nishiko from Nagasaki, who has for years performed her expected roles in serving

demanding parents and difficult parents-in-law, as well as cooking, nursing and caring for her husband's family members. Having married into a big family, which owns a small business, Okazaki had prepared herself to perform all these tasks and also help manage its operations. Over the years, however, she gradually became disillusioned about the merit of fulfilling her obligations, especially when all the years of hard work has taken a toll on her health. Not only does she feel demoralized for receiving little appreciation from her family members, but Okazaki is also rather resentful about their being unsympathetic towards her. Today, the 62-year old widow still cooks three meals each day for 11 people. Watching a drama pervaded with moral messages that advocate 'good women' as those who follow the old Confucian ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* thus deeply disturbs her. As Okazaki remarks,

Being a *ryōsai kenbo* is a thankless job, and not a role model for women. The character Jang-geum can be successful in the drama only because there are men who believe in her and support her. It is fiction, as there are very few such men in real life. I like the drama only for the parts that I think are interesting, but because it is about traditional morality for women, I will definitely not watch it again.

Women such as Komiya, Hamamoto, Iwagami and Okazaki do not appear to be against filial piety or loyalty to one's family as they are confused by, and disappointed with, some of the incongruities presented by the drama. To these Japanese women, they view *Daejanggeum*, on the one hand, as celebrating the unprecedented achievements of women in a male-dominated, class-differentiated society. Yet, on the other hand, the drama is also seen as promoting the female ideal that is steeply entrenched in that very patriarchal, hierarchical society. That this gender ideal portrays women within the restrictive confines parameters of domesticity, and not as liberated, contemporary subjects, is problematic.

## Concluding Remarks

That *Daejanggeum* has drawn such mixed and contradictory responses from many Japanese women confirms Abu-Lughod's (1997:120) remarks that

television 'makes obvious the fact that the same cultural texts have different imports in different contexts.' Some women experience a sense of relief and renewal as the drama positively frames the work that women do in the interiority of the home by giving it social usefulness that is perceived to be lacking or nonexistent in reality, which helps alleviate their experiences of forlornness, and enhance their sense of self-worth. Moreover, *Daejanggeum* is different from most Korean television dramas, in which female characters are portrayed as enviable objects of the undivided devotion of one or more male characters, but also as weak, dependent on, and subservient to their male counterparts. In depicting women as possessing intellect, skills and capabilities that surpass those of men's, and in portraying their abilities and devotion as critical to enhancing the fortune and status of their family and country, *Daejanggeum* speaks to some Japanese women's desire to view themselves as contemporary subjects who are emancipated, knowledgeable and different. Yet, the very same themes and representations are regarded as disturbing and conflicting with many other women's perceptions of the desired or idealized contemporary subjects. Regardless of the responses, what these reflect are the women's coeval desires to read and interpret the imaginary as real, and the historical as reflecting the contemporary.

The above narratives thus indicate that neither the historicity of *Daejanggeum* nor the Korean cultural context of the drama seems to matter as much to many Japanese women as their expectations of the program, and its relevance to their desired identities and idealized sense of self. Indeed, watching television is far from a passive activity, but an active one in which the viewers are constantly interpreting and re-interpreting its cultural texts, constructing and re-constructing their meanings, and analyzing their relevance to their individual experiences, in order to transcend their existing social conditions and gain a greater control of their lives. Despite being a rare program that provides detailed insights into the struggles and accomplishments of women, *Daejanggeum* is received with ambivalent and ambiguous responses not because the drama is a 'bad production' but because it encourages self-reflexivity and self-introspection that generate varying responses from different women, who relate the cultural texts in diverse ways to their own individual experiences, desires and aspirations. While offering pleasure, relief and even opportunities to experience self-edification for some with the unprecedented accomplishments of women, *Daejanggeum* also limits the imagination of others, and debilitates

their ability to meaningfully redefine their existing social conditions, with its moral messages and portrayals of what some describe as a ‘traditional morality’ for women. As Abu-Lughod (1997:122-3) also aptly remarks, television is interesting because of ‘the way it provides material which is then inserted into, interpreted with, and mixed up with local but themselves socially differentiated knowledges, discourses, and meaning systems.’

Yet, despite the varying responses *Daejanggeum* has drawn from many Japanese women, it has nonetheless brought to the surface and addressed a variety of women’s issues that are often neglected, as well as providing a platform for many Japanese women to reflect upon their own individual conditions, express their frustrations and discontentment, exercise their imagination about gender ideals, and develop reactions to meaningfully interpret their conditions. What matters ultimately is not whether the women’s respond favorably or unfavorably to the drama, but how the women could – despite their differences – develop ‘shared webs of meaning’ (Ibid.:123), and gain a greater awareness of the challenges they face, and seek through popular culture to find new possibilities to transform social reality, however limited this may be. Gillespie (1995:208) once pointed out that real constraints can often exist to limit media consumers’ resourcefulness in constructing their own identities, but consumers are also ‘productive’ subjects constantly seeking to maintain, strengthen or create new boundaries, new ‘shared spaces’ and new identities. While this paper may also be read as having confirmed this, it has also established that the pleasure of watching television dramas lies not in what programs offer, but in how viewers make of their media consumption and mediate their social realities with the expectations and experiences they bring.

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines how many Japanese women interpret the historical and cultural texts in Korean television drama *Daejanggeum* by relating them to their contemporary desires, expectations and aspirations. Based on ethnographic data gathered from more than 50 months of fieldwork in Japan and South Korea, this study contends that the specific historicity and cultural contexts of popular television programs do not matter as much as what Japanese women make of their transnational media consumption, and how it can evoke self-reflexivity and offer new possibilities for viewers to transcend and transform their social realities in ways that project them as contemporary subjects. This study extends existing scholarship on the Korean Wave by exploring the specific and diverse the ways in which Japanese women watch television in an active, engaged and critical manner with the aim of constructing their self-identities as contemporary subjects.

**Keywords:** gender, identity, Japan, South Korea, popular culture