

**SOUTH KOREAN TELEVISION POLICY  
AND PROGRAMMES:**

**A Question of Localism**

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**Introduction**

The thirty year history of South Korean television reveals that it has been characterised by centralism, authoritarianism and commercial populism. These concepts, combined with a question of localism, are key components for our understanding. The idea of political centralism, which informs the authoritarianism of broadcasting, and which must eventually result in the alienation of localism, stems from a political culture carried over from the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910). The commodification trends of television products on the basis of commercial populism also militate against local interest. Here, I begin by talking about the main traits of television policy, and then move to a case study of localism in a popular nationwide television drama. This latter represents an important pattern of localism in South Korean television.

### Television in South Korea

Since the first transmission by the state-owned KBS (Korea Broadcasting System) in 1961, television broadcasting in the South has experienced frequent institutional changes. The establishment of a commercial channel by TBC (Tongyang [Oriental] Broadcasting Company) in 1964 created a competitive state-owned versus commercial television system and replaced the original state monopoly. The government's willingness to launch a second commercial channel called MBC (Munhwa [Cultural] Broadcasting Company) in 1969 signalled the golden age of commercial television. The political shake-up of 1980 opened a new era, which might be called the age of public broadcasting. Following large-scale reforms throughout the entire mass media network, a new system of public television, comprising two broadcasting institutions (KBS and MBC) and four channels (KBS1, KBS2, KBS3 and MBC) was established. This system has continued for ten years. The history of television in South Korea, embracing these major institutional changes and policy reforms, can be outlined as follows.

- (1) 1961-1964: State-owned KBS monopoly
- (2) 1964-1969: KBS and TBC competition
- (3) 1969-1980: KBS, TBC and MBC competition
- (4) 1980- on: Public television monopoly

The first period (1961-1964) comprised a single channel monopoly system with one state-owned institution. KBS television was, like KBS radio, established and operated by a government body, under the Ministry of Culture and Information (MOCI). In 1962, the government

issued a Code for Financing Television which provided legal foundations for state-run television broadcasting. According to this code, KBS would be financially supported by licence fees for its major funding, and also by commercial advertising as a supplementary source.

The second period (1964-1969) was initiated by the launch of the commercial channel TBC, affiliated and owned by Chungang Mass Communications, part of the Samsung Group. The KBS and TBC duopoly showed an extremely adverse and competitive relationship between the two channels. The new TBC promptly encroached into commercial advertising markets which had previously been fully appropriated by KBS. South Korean television next moved to a new phase characterised by even more severe competition following the establishment in 1969 of a second commercial channel, MBC, owned by the 5.16 Foundation. Government guidelines of the time stopped KBS broadcasting advertisements, and the station was re-scheduled to supply mainly news, educational and informational programmes.

In 1980, South Korean television experienced its biggest shake-up. The highlight was the blitz ordered by a Code for the Integration of Mass Media (CIMM), accompanied by a series of measures for political and social reformation that began the 5th Republic and legally buttressed by a Basic Press Law. This law forced many fundamental reforms. First, TBC was completely merged with KBS. Second, substantial ownership of MBC was given to KBS. Third, KBS was given three public television channels, KBS2 from TBC, and KBS3 to serve as a new educational VHF channel. Finally, the authoritative function of supervising public television was given to the Korea Broadcasting Commission (KBC) and a new Korea Broadcasting Advertising Corporation (KOBACO). The

resulting public monopoly system, which has now existed for a decade, has recently become the subject of public discussion because of its overt and covert failings during the 5th Republic. Consequently, a Broadcasting Policy Research Commission was established in April 1990 to submit a report on the feasibility of running a mixed public and commercial system.

### **Television and Localism: What are the issues?**

It goes without saying that modern South Korean society has undergone a tremendous socio-cultural transformation since it began to move rapidly towards a highly industrialised nation in the 1960s. In that period, almost all valuable national resources have been concentrated in the geopolitical centre, Seoul. This has eventually alienated rural society. Images of rural life are distorted and presented as peripheral, inferior and relatively coarse by urban broadcasters. In fact, local culture is often considered peripheral by Koreans. Local broadcasting is consequently thought of as only a subordinate sub-system below central organisation. Notwithstanding, hardly any South Korean will deny the rapid growth of local broadcasting which followed the development of national stations. By the mid 1980s, the number of local television stations reached 23, 12 run by KBS and 11 by MBC. A further 12 KBS and 8 MBC transmission stations cover isolated areas. With the successive distribution of transmission technologies during the 1980s, local stations were able to cover nearly all the country: KBS1 96.6% and KBS2, KBS3 and MBC approximately 90%.

Issues which concern localism and television broadcasting suggest that three basic questions must be addressed. First, who makes the programmes? Is the main programme production national or local? Second, who are the programmes made for? This question concerns the target audience, and whether it is national or local. Third, what is actually represented in programme content? Local programmes, for example, can include news, drama and other entertainment produced by a central station for a nationwide audience, but focusing on local interests.

Recent short-term data concerning local broadcasting in the Taejŏn area pin-points some problems concerning the localism of South Korean television.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Taejŏn, the first question relates to the way that production and distribution is centrally concentrated. Less than 10% of the programmes were produced by the local KBS or MBC stations. Second, more than 90% of programmes remain targeted to a national audience, rather than the specific communities of Taejŏn. This relates to the definition of audience in local media policies and practices. Third, approximately 20% of programmes focus on local interests.

### **Political Centralism and Localism: Who makes programmes?**

Structural imbalance of the programme production system in terms of localism reflects an authoritative and Seoul-centred policy. Local stations in South Korea are not independent; they function only as regional networks or relay systems for central stations. This seems to stem from the tradition of political centralism, which itself has deep cultural and dynastic roots. The major philosophical

foundation can be attributed to Confucianism.<sup>2</sup> Confucianism taught a doctrine of inequality, claiming that the distinction between superior and inferior were natural for the good of society. Everyone and everything, therefore, should be under the control of someone. Responsibility and benevolence always emanate from above, from heaven to the king, from the king to the subjects, and from central to local governments. Obedience, loyalty and respect come from below. Seoul, therefore, was respected because the king and central government lived there. The carry over can be seen in the absence until very recently of local government in South Korea. City, town and provincial legislative bodies were established in the southern part of the peninsula in 1952, expanding to Seoul in 1956. Local government functioned fully between 1956 and 1961. Park Chung Hee [Pak Chŏnghŭi], with his coup in 1961, abolished local administrations. The contemporaneous launch of television broadcasting is quite suggestive for explaining the innately subordinate position of local stations.

The traits of centralism and authoritarianism in Korean television are reflected by the management of financing, man-power and by access to mechanical technologies. The first idiosyncrasy to note is the subordinate financial structure of local stations. The Basic Press Law of 1980 prescribed that 51% of the capital stock of local stations should be owned by paternalistic national stations, that is KBS and MBC in Seoul. In addition, over 80% of expenditure for production, distribution and management has since been spent in Seoul. The bias in man-power is also considerable. 60.9% of KBS and 71.2% of MBC staff work in Seoul. On the contrary the average percentages of man-power in each local station is 1.2% for KBS and 1.5% for MBC. Further, large quantities of technological equipment are concentrated in Seoul.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly salient for filming, editing and projection

activities. The concentration means that, according to KBS data, 49% of filming, 58.4% of editing, 65.9% of projection but only 22.9% of transmission equipment is held in Seoul. The averages for other local stations are, respectively, 2.0% for filming, 1.5% for editing, 1.2% for projection and 3.0% for transmission.<sup>4</sup> Such structural barriers restrict the functions of local stations to the distribution of programmes produced by KBS and MBC in Seoul. Only 7% of local television programmes were directly produced and distributed by the local stations in one recent year.

#### **Commercial Populism and Localism: for whom are the programmes made?**

The second question concerns the broadcaster's undoubted preference for a network audience. This is echoed in common expressions such as "Yŏūido Culture" and "Yŏūido Kingdom". No matter what the subject, most programmes are manufactured on the island of Yŏūido, southern Seoul, where KBS and MBC have their main stations. The programmes tend to express things which represent Seoul. Three findings emerge from recent research. First, the political and economic content of news broadcasts overwhelmingly stress central concerns. Second, most "interest" stories focus on Seoul or are based on assumptions held basically by Seoul's urban population. Third, variety shows express a popular culture prevalent basically in Seoul. All three findings relate to commercial populism or commodification.

Commercialism, as we find it in South Korean television, has its origins in 1960s American practice. Commercialism intensified with the indiscriminate

competition between KBS, MBC and TBC during the 1970s. Though the degree of commercialism in television contents appears to have lessened since the radical reforms of the 1980s, the commercial advertising market has continued to expand. Commercialism, combined with the notion of political populism in the early 1980s, has stimulated the production of mass-targeted and standardised broadcasts. The increasing intrusion of advertising means that programmes during this period emphasized popular and national interests, rather than the particular interests of minority or local groups. This led to a side effect in the homogenisation of programming and contents. Altogether, this was quite irreconcilable with the proposed media strategy of audience segmentation in terms of localization.

#### **Localism in Programme Contents: What is represented in programme contents?**

The third question more specifically addresses one aspect of localism. It is difficult to analyse systematically the contents of the 20% of programmes which concern local interests, so here I introduce an exemplary case. This is a local drama, centrally produced though targeted at a nationwide audience, called *Chunwŏn ilgi* ("Diary of country life"). This is an extremely successful television drama series broadcast by MBC whose nationwide popularity has continued for a decade. It is a fictional drama, the Korean equivalent to *The Archers* in Britain, and tells a different story every week in the life of a farmer.

The farmer, Kim, has a family typical of small countryside villages. He lives a few miles from the city of Suwŏn. At the start of the series, eight members of his

family lived in a traditional rural cottage: Kim (played by Ch'oe Pŏram), his wife (Kim Hyeja), two sons and their wives, a grand-daughter, and Kim's mother. The drama revolves around the Kims and their neighbours. Kim runs his own small farm, but is also in charge of the village farmers' union. He is considered generous and patient. We hear frequently of ordinary family affairs such as marriage, trouble with relatives or neighbours, conflict between the mother and her children, education and work concerns. Sometimes we hear about more current rural issues, like local feelings towards national policies for economic development and modernisation.<sup>5</sup> The Kims usually tell the story, and their decisions and positions tend to reflect the conservatism typical of Korean farmers and the elder generation generally. The two main characters are, however, occasionally sympathetic to liberal ideas about the family and social affairs. They may be thrown into the whirlpool of neighbour and family troubles. The rural family, neighbours, and the central position of husband and wife are principal symbols. Although made by MBC in Seoul, and then distributed through the MBC national network, to the majority of South Koreans *Chunwŏn* is a typical local drama. It has, through its popularity, articulated local voices nationwide.

A structuralist analysis starts with the drama's icon, genre and formulae.<sup>6</sup> To begin with, the icon of *Chunwŏn* raises the question why Kim and his family represent such sympathetic and familiar images of farmers. As a result of the Korean urban-centred economic development and the subsequent exodus of young people from the countryside, rural areas have large numbers of elderly households. They are thought of as undeveloped, with uneducated families sharing a low standard of living. Many programmes ranging from news to shows created the stereotype, marking absentee youth but also functioning as symbols of

economic and social inadequacy. The Kims' image—patient, loving, caring and quite rational, despite a low income and little education, responsible parents of three, and credible village opinion leaders—is the antithesis of the stereotype. Mr Kim shows unwavering understanding and is always perceptive in his advice to children and neighbours. His gloomy moments reflect as icon of the ordinary, typical farmer, yet appear to be simply transferred from images of typical ordinary and friendly Koreans common to other films and television dramas. The relationship to other dramas in the genre assured success, for in South Korea, drama has traditionally been one of the most popular genres of television. The genre allows *Chunwŏn* to gain ready access to Korean living rooms. The humanity in the series is again typical, based on Korean humour and grudging, positive fatalism and warm heartedness. This too evokes sympathy from the average Korean audience. Humanity is here rooted in problem solving by way of mutual understanding, the extension of compassionate help, and great patience. Hence, the drama can have no dramatic or revolutionary conclusion.

Let me look closer at the formulae used. Does the drama rely upon the practices of social conventions or does it invent behaviour? It stresses i) strong family units, ii) the value of country life, and iii) the value of money, education and jobs. This is distant from the text of the modern nuclear family. The parents have a strong union and are family centred; they frequently reminisce about their marriage and their family history. Their children are quite normal rural youths who play their own roles socially and at home satisfactorily. Everything is predictable. Whatever the exceptions, the role-playing is quite believable to the nationwide audience.

Although the emphasis is on country life, the drama includes a variety of representations of local towns and of the capital, Seoul. The family's eldest son works for the government office in Suwŏn, and a married daughter in Seoul sometimes visits. The Kims never intend to leave their country cottage, and the combination of rural and urban life in the drama always suggests an ideally harmonic, rather than fundamentally troublesome, juxtaposition of two different societies. For ten years, Kim has held his position as president of the village farmers' union. He has a deep pride in this unpaid job. He is deeply self-content as a farmer, though he occasionally feels some psychological inferiority to city folk. He covertly teaches his children his philosophy, but paradoxically hankers after the gaiety of the city. Money may not be everything to Kim, but he teaches his children the virtues of diligence and frugality. Similarly, personal achievement may not be so important, but he wants to push his children to the city for education and work. The paradoxes can become main themes.

My brief descriptions pose a further question: what is the ideological function of this sort of local drama? The codes reflect localism, but does the drama suppress or resolve the social contradictions it presents? The drama recodes the realities of local life around a traditional view of family life, the balance of old and new lifestyles, and humanity in family and neighbourly dealings. The combination of these codes emphasizes traditionalism, localism, and an evolutionary developmentism. There are some contradictions, however, between the old and the new, rural and urban life, evolutionary and revolutionary approaches to problem solving, though resolutions seem consistent. Does the drama mask and obscure problems through ideological manipulation, like Barthes' mythology's foremost function? Or does it, closer to Levi-Strauss' ideas,

initiate and reinforce a needed catharsis for resolution? The opposition is false, for *Chunwŏn* does both to some extent.

Tony Bennett suggests a Gramscian notion of hegemony which helps assess the interests of a dominant central Seoul over subordinate local issues.<sup>7</sup> On one side, rigid structuralism would argue popular culture is an ideological machine dictating people's thoughts. On the other side, populist culturalism romantically considers popular culture the authentic voice of subordinate groups. Bennett views popular culture neither as the site of a people's cultural demise nor as their cultural self-affirmation. Rather, it is a force in human relations shaped precisely by cultural contradictions. In *Chunwŏn*, then, we see resolutions to the problems of localism, forced by national authoritative politico-economic policies. But at the same time, suppression of localism exists, because the choice of programme material may be regarded as a reflection of political pressure on South Korean broadcasting.

### Conclusion

Localism is a serious problem in South Korean broadcasting in three respects. First, there is a structural imbalance that stems from the political culture. Second, there is difficulty defining local audiences in a media concerned primarily with commercial interests. Third, the programme contents themselves may either suppress or resolve local interests. Current and anticipated reforms are meant to resolve the first two, but the third has not yet been considered. The third is more intangible, reflecting individual interests and the production team which works

on a given programme. But if it is intangible, it is also driven by the norms and conditions of culture and society both inside and outside the mass media. In the case of South Korea, then, the primary stress on the gospel of westernization, modernization and efficiency plays an important role in creating the dominant atmosphere within which the mass media operates.

### EDITORIAL NOTE

Radio broadcasting in Korea started with the Japanese-controlled *Kyŏngsŏng* station in 1927. The first southern TV station was the state-run KORCAD, which operated from 1956 to 1959. KBS initially broadcast as Seoul TV in 1961.

Ma Dong-Hoon's paper was presented at the conference of the British Association for Korean Studies in March 1990. Since then, substantial changes have taken place in South Korean broadcasting, culminating on 9 December 1991 with Seoul Broadcasting System going on the air as a second quasi-private network. The bias towards Seoul is evident in the new name, just as it was in the initial name of the 1961 station; Ma's argument clearly remains valid.

### NOTES

1. The following table gives programme percentages in the case of Taejŏn broadcasting channels:

Station	Subject	Target	Content
National	90.5%	91.4%	80.1%
Local	9.5%	8.6%	19.9%

Data is based on my analysis of 339 programmes broadcast by KBS and MBC between 12-18 January 1989. Only simple frequencies were counted.

2. Among the Confucian principles the hierarchical relationship between sovereign and subject was emphasized. For a discussion of the virtues and principles, based on a political analysis, see S. K. Pae, *Testing Democratic Theories in Korea* (1986), pp.19-21.

3. Staff numbers:

Stations	KBS	MBC
Seoul	2924 (60.9%)	2574 (71.2%)
Local	1878 (39.1%)	1000 (28.2%)
Each local station (average)	(1.6%)	(1.5%)
Total	4802 (100%)	3574 (100%)

**Source:** *Yearbook of KBS* (1986).

4. Technological equipment at KBS (%):

Stations	Filming	Editing	Projection	Transmission
Seoul	49.6	58.4	65.4	22.9
Pusan	5.6	5.4	6.4	8.3
Taegu	4.8	4.6	3.8	7.1
Kwangju	4.1	4.3	3.8	6.9
18 Others (average)	35.9 (2.0)	27.3 (1.5)	20.6 (1.2)	54.8 (3.0)

**Source:** *Yearbook of KBS* (1984).

5. Contents of *Chunwōn ilgi* (analysis of 21 programmes broadcast from August 1988 to January 1989, counting simple frequencies), based on my observations:

Contents	Frequency
Conflicts with neighbours	7
Rural issues	5
Conflicts within the family	4
Conflicts with relatives	3
Rural rituals	2

6. In media structural analysis, "icons" mean the external expressions of internal convictions tied to a dominant cultural form, "genres" mean the codes framed by setting, characters, dress, plot, and so on and "formulae" describe the way that cultural patterns are expressed in the narrative form. See Michael R. Real, *Super Media: A Cultural Studies Approach* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1989), pp.109-114.

7. Tony Bennett, "Gramscian ideology and popular culture," in Tony Bennett, Coline Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Culture and Social Relations* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, pp.11-12).