



Webtoons and Their Impact on the Korean Wave: *An Accessible, if Simple, Introduction*

Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture: Transmedia Storytelling, Digital Platforms, and Genres. By Dal Yong Jin. Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2023. 252 pages. ISBN: 9780674291317.

Thomas BAUDINETTE

In his new book, seminal theorist of the Korean Wave Dal Yong Jin turns his attention to webtoon culture to explore this important form of media from South Korea (hereafter, Korea) and how its emergence relates to transformations in the global digital media landscape. For the uninitiated, webtoons represent “*manhwa*-style” (an aesthetic ultimately deriving from the *manga* comics of Japan) graphic narratives published online in serial episodes designed to be primarily read on smartphones via dedicated applications managed by Korean tech giants such as Daum, Kakao, and Naver (p. 3). At the outset, Jin rightly highlights the rising popularity of webtoons as a powerful youth culture in Korea and positions them as central to recent shifts in the Korean Wave. Over eight short, accessibly written chapters, Jin unpacks the history of webtoon production and consumption in Korea, theorizes the embeddedness of webtoons within the context of digital platformization around the globe, and considers the role of webtoons in representing social issues in Korean society. Throughout these explorations, Jin connects his recent research into webtoons with his prior scholarship on the significance of “transmedia storytelling” to the Korean media landscape specifically and the globalization of Korean media more

Thomas BAUDINETTE is a senior lecturer in Japanese Studies and International Studies in the Department of Media, Communications, Creative Arts, Languages, and Literature at Macquarie University. E-mail: tom.baudinette@mq.edu.au.

broadly. The book thus represents a descriptive introduction to webtoons and their global circulation aimed at an audience unfamiliar with comics studies or Korean media studies. While broadly successful as an introductory text—one with clear applications in media studies classrooms—certain elements of the theoretical analysis do, however, fall somewhat flat due to their simplicity.

After a brief introduction outlining *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture's* major argument, the first three chapters historicize webtoons with particular attention to the role of digital platformization in their production and reception. Chapter 1 presents a simple narrative history of Korean comic culture, locating their development within the context of the transformations brought to Korea's media landscape due to the advent of the internet, while also briefly relating this to previous trends in Korean print publishing. Chapter 2 introduces the role of platform digitalization in the advent of webtoon culture, highlighting how the popularization of smartphone use among youth and the strategic investment into dedicated smartphone applications by large tech companies initiated Korean webtoon culture. From a historical perspective, both of these chapters identify the key moments in webtoon development identified in other literature, anchoring Jin's discussion to seminal works and auteurs as well as broader shifts in Korean society (significantly, the globalization strategies adopted by media producers in the 1990s after the Asian Financial Crisis and the beginning of the Korean Wave at the turn of the century). The distinctive features of webtoons are subsequently unpacked in chapter 3, where Jin reveals how webtoons' typical vertically oriented layouts emerged from the platform history elucidated in the previous chapters, tying webtoons to smartphone use. Jin then argues that the entanglement of webtoon production with smartphone use has developed both a "snack culture" focused on the quick reading of webtoons while on the move as well as facilitated "binge-reading" where consumers read dozens of webtoon episodes at a time over long periods. Both of these terms are interesting, although Jin does not develop them empirically through social scientific observation of webtoon readers, but instead draws them from impressionistic journalistic sources, limiting

their theoretical validity. Future scholars will likely find ample opportunity to develop (or challenge) Jin's conceptualizations of snack culture and binge-reading in their own work.

Chapters 4 and 5 build upon the book's previous historical discussions to consider how webtoons have become central to the production of other forms of Korean media, allowing Jin to connect his work on webtoons to his prior investigations of "transmedia storytelling." By transmedia storytelling, Jin refers to when a "story is told through multiple media" (p. 11), especially through digital media platforms (p. 12), leading consumers to engage a story across many platforms and via several iterations as part of new media's contemporary "convergence culture" (p. 15). In chapter 4, through a number of case studies of recent Korean television dramas based on webtoons, Jin highlights how the contemporary Korean media landscape is increasingly structured through production systems which intimately tie the worlds of webtoons and television together. Importantly, Jin reveals that this entanglement represents more than simple adaptation of comics to the screen, as has been typical in previous markets such as the US (contrasting webtoons with the case study of DC Comics' *Superman*, for instance) but instead emerges from synergistic, simultaneous production of webtoons and dramas/films by major media corporations such as Daum, Kakao, and Naver. While chapter 4 explores this phenomenon in the Korean context, chapter 5 switches attention to the transnational spread of Korean popular culture with Jin arguing that recent successes in the Korean Wave emerge from collaborations between multinational media production companies and streaming services (notably Netflix) and the Korean webtoon industry. Both of these chapters are highly successful, building upon Jin's significant prior work on the role of transmedia in the Korean Wave. That said, there is a tendency for Jin to over-simplify these processes to make a case for the supposed uniqueness of webtoons as transmedia products, a point to which I return at the end of this review.

The final two chapters seek to unpack the role of webtoons in exploring social issues in Korean society. Some of this discussion was already descriptively presented in chapter 2, where Jin discusses shifts in webtoon

genre from primarily “slice-of-life” (*ilsang*) works to more complicated genres, including homoerotic Boys Love works, action thrillers focusing on social issues and political scandals, as well as genre fiction such as horror or action exploring the experiences of marginalized populations. To better understand what Jin positions as a recent “social turn” in webtoon production, chapter 6 presents an interview with noted webtoon creator Yoon Tae-ho, a figure Jin argues throughout the book was seminal to the historical development of webtoon culture, and who is known for his engagement with social justice issues in his works. While this interview is interesting, I personally found that it was poorly integrated into the book’s broader argument and did feel like it was somewhat shoe-horned in. The final concluding chapter, while summarizing the book’s major contributions, also operates as a space for Jin to predict how the social turn he identifies in recent webtoons may influence the future of the Korean Wave. I found these predictions satisfying, especially since Jin links his predictions to the recent well-documented popularity of Korean media with strong social justice messaging, such as Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* (*Gisaengchung*) and Netflix’s original series *Squid Game* (*Ojingeo Geim*), among international audiences.

As should be clear, I found the book to be a welcome scholarly introduction to webtoon culture. I did, however, identify a concerning trend within Jin’s writing which I also believe is symptomatic of a larger issue in the literature on Korean media and its global reception. Previously, I highlighted that I was dissatisfied by Jin’s simplistic argument that the transmedia storytelling central to webtoon culture is somehow unique to the Korean context. In fact, throughout *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture*, Jin demonstrates a frustrating tendency to classify all facets of Korean webtoon production and consumption as unique, producing an argument that lacks nuance at best and reads as a form of chauvinistic Korean nationalism at worst. For instance, in discussing the distinctive features of webtoons and how these features have produced both snack culture and binge-reading, Jin fails to acknowledge that similar phenomena had emerged within Japan’s late-twentieth-century media landscape, prior to the advent of Korean webtoon culture. Indeed, Jin often draws upon under-

researched arguments and stereotypes concerning Japanese comic culture when seeking to emphasize the supposed uniqueness of Korean webtoons. A more theoretically generous and sophisticated discussion of webtoons would acknowledge how Japanese and Korean comic cultures have mutually developed, as would an approach sensitive to similar trends within digital comic culture in the US (something Jin often strategically downplays in his analysis without empirical evidence to justify why he has adopted such an approach). Readers who lack awareness of the considerable prior research conducted on the digitalization of comics in the US and Japan may uncritically accept the supposed uniqueness of Korean webtoons since this research is not drawn upon throughout Jin's argumentation.

While I do not deny that Korean webtoons possess distinctive features in terms of their content and layouts, to insist on labeling these features as uniquely Korean hurts the broader arguments concerning transnationalization that Jin seeks to make within this work. This ultimately mars what is an otherwise excellent introduction to this important new genre of Korean media.