

# Modernity and the Self

## Explorations of the (Non-) Self-determining Subject in South Korean TV Dramas

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<sup>1</sup>'Self-awareness' and the development of the autonomous subject (derived from Enlightenment and the Anglo-European philosophical traditions) has often been implicated in discussions of modernity. In East Asian societies where the Confucianist social order is seen as a deep-rooted social and cultural force, discussions of modernity and modernisation have often revolved around the tension between the spread of individualism and liberalism that come with modernisation and contact with the West. The preservation of traditional sociocultural values and familial and social structures that stress mutual obligations, social harmony and a certain form of "benign" paternalism have been key concerns. The popular television dramas in these societies seem to provide a public imaginary space where such tensions and conflicts are often played out in dramatic ways. They provide places where simulated or compromised solutions are proposed and explored.

<sup>2</sup>Popular TV romance dramas in particular can serve as a window to the ways in which the topic of the (non-) self-determining subject is explored. These dramas typically present a scenario in which strong mutual love and desire between two people come into conflict with the existing sociocultural values (e.g., familial, social constraints). In this paper, I analyse a recent popular South Korean TV romance drama: (1) *Autumn in My Heart* (also known as *Endless Love I*, *Autumn* for short below) and contrast it with (2) *Friends*, another recent popular TV romance drama jointly produced by television companies in Japan and South Korea. These cultural products are shown not only in their respective societies but also sold to television companies in other neighbouring countries; their VCD/DVDs are widely marketed and circulated in East Asian areas (e.g., Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mainland China). 1

<sup>3</sup>*Autumn* is about a brother (played by Song Seung-hun) and sister (played by Song Hye-kyo) who had grown up together and had developed a very close

relationship in a happy middle class family until one day the family found out that the girl was actually not their own. There had been a mistake in the hospital and two baby girls were swapped. Hye-kyo was 14 when this mistake was discovered. She returned to her real mother's poor working class home (her father died from blood cancer before she was born), while the middle class family left Korea for the States with their son and newly recovered daughter as an attempt to forget about the whole incident. From then on, Hye-kyo was separated from her "brother" (Seung-hun) and started her longing for him. Ten years later, the middle class family returned to South Korea and the "brother" and "sister" met again and fell in love. Seung-hun wanted to break his prior engagement with his fiancée to marry Hye-kyo. However, family and friends still saw them as "brother" and "sister" (despite the fact that they are not related in blood) and imposed great familial and social pressure on them to end their "improper" relationship. Later, Hye-kyo discovered that she had blood cancer. She hid her illness from Seung-hun and wished him happiness with his fiancé. Seung-hun, not knowing about Hye-kyo's illness, and under a guilty conscience to make it up to his fiancée (who had attempted suicide for him), consented to leave Hye-kyo and go back to the States with his fiancé. At the last moment, he found out about Hye-kyo's illness and rushed to the hospital. Families and friends were finally moved by their love for each other and did not prevent them from spending their last days together. Hye-kyo died from her illness soon and Seung-hun, having lost all hope and interest in life, was hit by a truck.

<sup>4</sup>To the Western audience, such a storyline may seem implausible and perhaps impossible. For instance, how can family and friends find any legitimate reasons to prevent Seung-hun and Hye-kyo from loving each other when they are not blood relatives? Seung-hun's father mentioned once that their "improper relationship" would bring disgrace to the family. His mother did not support their union, either, as she could not bear to see the "brother-sister" relationship being transformed into a romantic, sexual relationship. She became ill, tormented by her own guilty feelings: she blamed herself for not taking Hye-kyo with her to the States ten years ago and she thought that their "love" for each other was a tragic distortion of their original brotherly and sisterly feelings due to their long separation. On the other hand, Seung-hun felt guilty for breaking his prior promise to his fiancé. Hye-kyo was also full of guilty feelings for she felt that they were hurting everybody who cared about them.

<sup>5</sup>Almost 90% of the time when the couple talked to each other, they were in tears and were deeply tormented by the conflict between their perceived obligations

towards family and friends who loved them and their strong desire to stay together. At one point, they decided to part so that "no one would get hurt any more" (without admitting that they themselves were deeply hurt). Such self-negating actions were coupled with an unquestioning acceptance of the legitimacy of the familial and social demands on them. Is the current South Korean society very much against the development of an autonomous individual and the individual's self-determining actions? On this issue, Korean cultural studies scholar Lee Dong-hoo had the following comments:

Many Korean dramas, especially daily soap operas, put values on relationships, such as family relationship and friendship. Even a success story, which emphasizes one's own will to succeed, doesn't neglect the aspect of human relationships. ... The traditional Confucianist ethics or patriarchal ideology can be found in the dramas' emphasis on relationship or one's social role. And I think that keeping good relationships is one of the survival strategies in Korea. The Korean society has been maintained by the closely connected social nets. The dramas may (unconsciously) reflect this reality.

<sup>6</sup> Lee's remarks about the importance of Confucianism in the Korean society are evidenced in the long-term activities of the well-organised Confucianist society ("Confucian Forest"), which maintains special schools in major cities and counties, offering instruction in Confucianist ethics, rituals and practices (Wu 27). Another example of Confucianist relational ethics can be found in the recent rejection by the South Korean parliament of the nominated female prime minister; one of the reasons quoted is that her son has chosen to be an American citizen (Nan 26).

<sup>7</sup> Before moving on to a discussion of the ideological implications of the tragic ending in *Autumn*, let us first look at another recent popular TV romance drama, *Friends*, which was jointly produced by Japanese and South Korean television companies. Interestingly, *Friends* did not start with a scene in Korea or Japan but with the Victorian Harbor scene in Hong Kong, with spectacular cosmopolitan skyscrapers in the background, and a Western-style saxophonist playing Jazz music in a busy street corner. Tomoko, a tourist from Japan, was left on her own by her colleague who had travelled with her on holiday but was keen to see her boyfriend who worked in Hong Kong. Soon, Tomoko was robbed of her handbag in a busy street. In chasing the robber, she mistook Kim as the culprit. After the misunderstanding was cleared up, they became friends. Kim was a college student

from South Korea and an active member of the Film society in his university. He was in Hong Kong trying to shoot his first and last movie on a shoestring budget (last because he had decided to give up film-making after this to conform to his father's wish for him to run the family business). Tomoko agreed to help Kim by acting in his movie, which was about a young woman running and searching for true love in the busy streets of a foreign place (Hong Kong). After the short stay in Hong Kong, they returned to Japan and Korea respectively and started their e-mail correspondence. Soon they fell in love.

8 Tomoko felt that corresponding with Kim made her able to like herself again. Coming from a divorced, single-parent family and not doing very well in school, she had tried to commit suicide before. Her lowly, routine job as a sales assistant in a big department store in Tokyo also gave her little satisfaction and purpose in life. However, after starting her romance with Kim, Tomoko seemed to have regained confidence in herself and a purpose in life -- she started taking lessons in the Korean language, worked very hard and finally succeeded in becoming a tour guide for Korean trips so that she could move to South Korea. Likewise, Kim found that he could become himself again when he was with Tomoko. Tomoko encouraged him to pursue his dream of becoming a movie director. However, aggravating family pressure later made Kim wonder whether he was right in defying his father's wishes (by pursuing a film career and loving a Japanese woman) and he blamed Tomoko for his strained relationship with his father. Tomoko, dejected and heart-broken, returned to Japan. Kim, having lost Tomoko, came to his senses and returned to his low-paid job as a film production assistant. Finally he succeeded in gaining a prize for his movie and his parents came to the award ceremony indicating a softening on the part of his father, who finally came to recognise the value of, and his passion for, film work. Kim later became re-united with Tomoko.

9 The happy ending of Friends stands in sharp contrast with the tragic ending of Autumn. The simulated ending of Friends reflects "imaginary realism", one of the newly appropriated strategies based on marketing considerations found in the recent hugely successful blockbuster movies produced in South Korea; it "enables [one] to escape the restrictions of reality without losing a sense of the real" (Lee 12). In Autumn, Hye-kyo frequently said to Seung-hun that their actions would be punished and she later remarked that her illness was a punishment for hurting other people. This tragic ending thus seems to have the ideological, didactic effect of teaching about the punishment for violating the Confucianist social order.

<sup>10</sup> Friends, on the other hand, seems to use the hybrid, third space created by the cosmopolitan scene and Western symbols (the Western street musician playing jazz) in Hong Kong (a former British colony which claims itself to be "the Manhattan of Asia") to fabricate a modernised, Westernised and yet still Asian background for the love story to start in. Tomoko was instrumental in inducing Kim to follow his dream, to become the person he really wanted to be. Kim's subsequent success which helped win the acceptance of his father symbolises the possibility of the maturing of the self-determining subject in the new, globalised economic order (Kim's superior in Kim's military service once encouraged him to follow his passion and contribute to the film-making industry to bring glory to the nation) and the possible gradual transition from Confucianism to a certain form of nationalist liberalism in South Korea (e.g., following one's dream and contributing to national glory simultaneously), under the influence of seemingly more Westernised neighbouring societies (e.g., Japan, Hong Kong).

<sup>11</sup> Autumn and Friends seem to represent two different possible stances towards the traditional order at this historical juncture when South Korea is experiencing enormous economic success and going through modernisation and a certain degree of Westernisation that come with its participation in the global economic order. Sociocultural tensions, conflicts and resolutions are simulated and explored in the relatively safe, imaginary space of popular TV dramas, which apart from playing their economic part in a highly successful national media industry, also play an important role in engaging the transnational public (e.g., audiences in East Asian societies which share a Confucianist tradition) with sociocultural issues in an imaginary space.

<sup>12</sup> As in the feminist retelling and re-staging of the traditional Chinese opera Butterfly Lovers in newly formed Communist China in the 1950s to explore the self-determining subject and autonomous actions of the female protagonist (Li), these Korean TV dramas seem to provide an important public space for the explorations of a society's cultural ethos and the contested issues of modernity, Westernisation and cosmopolitanisation. They reflect the articulation of different (contradictory) cultural, economic and historical forces and their potential constitutive impact on the future sociocultural landscape of East Asian societies awaits further research.

## Notes

<sup>13</sup> For instance, the media in Hong Kong and China readily talk of the coming of the "Korean Wave" and the names of Korean TV idols such as Song Hye-kyo, Song Seung-hun and Won Bin (who co-starred in Autumn) are familiar to many Chinese young people. The final episode of Autumn aired on Asia Television (ATV) in August 2002 had attracted as high as 70% of that night's television audience in Hong Kong, a rare phenomenon that ATV hurried to boast of.

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