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The Melodramatic Mundane in South Korean Television

Yin Yuan
(Saint Mary's College of California)

Abstract

While scholarship on South Korean screen culture has focused on melodrama as the dominant narrative mode, I argue that K-dramas since the mid-2010s have become increasingly invested in mundane, everyday practices such as cleaning, cooking, and commuting. Yet, these K-dramas do not jettison the melodramatic plot. Rather, they use an overdrawn plot and affect to spotlight the broader social, political, and economic forces that constrain everyday life, in order to explore how the uneventful work of daily life can contest, even transform, those forces. Theorizing an emergent mode of South Korean television that I call the "melodramatic mundane," this paper reads K-dramas within the context of everyday life studies and sociological analyses of precarity in South Korea. After a brief survey of the programming trend, I examine *Because This Is My First Life* (2017) and *My Mister* (2018) as two case studies to explore how and why everyday life has emerged as a distinct problem in contemporary South Korea.

Keywords: precarity, K-drama, melodrama, everyday life, neoliberalism

K-drama scholarship typically identifies melodrama as the dominant narrative mode and a key element of *Hallyu's* global success.[1] But while melodrama is characterized by overdrawn affect and plot, K-dramas in the last decade have become increasingly invested in everyday practices such as cleaning, cooking, and commuting. These are "mundane" practices so routine that they lose attention rather than capture it, counter to the logic of a melodramatic imagination that, as Peter Brooks defines it, creates "drama—an exciting, excessive, parabolic story—from the banal stuff of reality."[2]

Yet, since the mid-2010s, K-dramas have married the seemingly opposed modes of the melodramatic and the mundane. This paper analyses the programming trend in order to theorize an emergent mode of Korean television that I call the "melodramatic mundane," in which everyday life functions as the site of both sociohistorical oppression and creative transgression. As Ji-yoon An observes in a recent special issue on K-drama studies, current K-drama research has prioritized audience reception and industry analysis, while "textual readings of key genres and dramas are still lacking."[3] My paper is motivated to address this gap, not just because the increasing porousness between film and television makes K-drama a valid form of screen culture deserving of the kind of close analysis traditionally applied to film, but also because television's centrality to everyday life means its narrative logics hold key sociological insights.[4] By reading the "melodramatic mundane" within the context of social precarity in post-financial-crisis South Korea, and examining *Because This Is My First Life* [Ibeon Saengeun Cheoeumira] (2017) and *My Mister* [Naui Ajeossi] (2018) as two case studies, I explore how and why everyday life functions as analytical problem and imaginative resource in contemporary South Korea.

The Mode of the "Melodramatic Mundane"

While scholars debate over melodrama's defining features, most agree that it uses hyperbolic plot and symbolic mise-en-scène to create pathos, orchestrating intense emotion within its characters and the audience to reveal what Brooks calls the "moral occult."[5] Personal life—"constituted,"

according to Ien Ang, "by its everyday realisation through personal relationships"—might provide the "core problematic of the narrative,"[6] but the melodramatic mode works through the "intensified symbolisation of [such] everyday actions."[7] Thus, while drawing on everyday life as "manifest 'material,'" melodrama ultimately "displace[s] [that material] into quite different patterns, juxtaposing stereotyped situations in strange configurations, provoking clashes and ruptures which not only open up new associations but also redistribute the emotional energies which suspense and tensions have accumulated, in disturbingly different directions."[8] The point, as Brooks articulates it, is to push "through and beyond the surface of things to what lies behind."[9] Such tendencies toward the symbolic create "Manichean conflicts between good and evil" that generate audience identification with and empathy for victimized protagonists.[10] These protagonists function as repositories of virtue; their persecution facilitates the eventual recognition of their moral goodness and reaffirms the ethical legibility of an otherwise chaotic world.[11]

Korean melodrama reflects Western influences but also draws on native narrative forms.[12] Its dominance in local film and television can be attributed to what Nancy Abelmann calls the "melodramatic sensibility" of a nation that has undergone dramatic social transformation within a compressed period.[13] Melodramatic excess, orchestrated through idealistic protagonists, obdurate villains, and excessive plot turns, offered ordinary people living through an extraordinary time a cathartic language for their own tumultuous experiences. And while, according to Kathleen McHugh, the "moral clarity" of Euro-American melodrama is sometimes "attenuated" in the melodramas from the "Golden Age" of South Korean cinema, Korean television serials tend more frequently to repress ambivalence through escapist resolutions that allow viewers, in the words of We Jung Yi, "to transcend their daily impotence and insecurity, albeit momentarily and fantasmatically."[14]

The past decade, however, saw the emergence of a class of K-dramas that depict everyday life not to transcend it but to engage with both its failures and promises. That is, if traditional melodramas typically imagine everyday life as helplessly subject to forces that are larger than life, in these K-dramas the mundane practices of daily living take on

a certain emancipatory potential.[15] This programming trend occurred alongside cable TV's growing challenge to the monopoly of terrestrial broadcasters, as most of these shows—including but not limited to *Misaeng: Incomplete Life* [Misaeng] (tvN, 2014), *Reply 1988* [Eungdapara 1988] (tvN, 2015–16), *Dear My Friends* [Dieo Mai Peurenjeu] (tvN, 2016), *Because This Is My First Life* (tvN, 2017), *My Mister* (tvN, 2018), *Be Melodramatic* [Melloga Chejil] (JTBC, 2019), *When the Camellia Blooms* [Dongbaekkkon Pil Muryeop] (KBS2, 2019), *When the Weather is Fine* [Nalssiga Joeumyeon Chajagagesseo] (JTBC, 2020), *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* [Gaenmaeul Chachacha] (tvN, 2021), and *Our Blues* [Urideurui beulluseu] (tvN, 2022)—aired on cable channels. Jean-Paul Baldacchino and Eun-Jee Park point out that innovative cable television content has diversified genre offerings, "prompt[ing] the free-to-air TV networks to go beyond the comfort zone of melodrama and romantic comedy." Consequently, melodramatic first-wave K-dramas have been replaced by more socially "realistic" dramas that "run counter to hegemonic cultural narratives."[16]

However, the shows I mentioned above do not abandon the melodramatic but use it to provide a fuller picture of the sociocultural matrix within which mundane practices take on meaning. For instance, *Misaeng,* lauded for its realistic portrayal of the ordinary salaryman, uses melodramatic conventions—a virtuous victim-hero beset by forces beyond his control; hints of his mysterious relationship with the company's executive director—to highlight the exploitative forces of the neoliberal workplace, while creating expectations for future revelations that do not occur.[17] Pathos is released neither through the spectacular reversal of fortune nor through the failure of such reversal to happen "in the nick of time," but through the exuberating celebration of the mundane, as when a simple Christmas card from Jang Geu-rae's manager comforts him in distress and reawakens him to the importance of being "drunk" on even the minutiae of life.[18]

Focusing on the unexciting tasks of organizing files, drafting proposals, preparing presentation slides, and even writing holiday cards, *Misaeng* dignifies mundane workplace practices as heroic ways through which ordinary people persist in a world full of injustices. Unlike

classical melodrama, the show moves not toward the public recognition of Jang Geu-rae's virtue, but toward Jang Geu-rae's transformed understanding of the meaning of his work and those with whom he works, as these workplace routines become ways through which he makes mistakes, grows, and recognizes the complicated humanity of his co-workers, who have "their own game of *baduk* to play."[19]

A similar conjoining of the melodramatic with the mundane animates *When the Camellia Blooms*. Its sensationalist serial killer plotline set in a small town draws attention to the extreme social exclusion that child-rearing unwed mothers face in South Korea, while the daily work, talk, and relationships among the townsfolk not only create the communal knowhow that eventually solves the murder but become the device through which the long-suffering protagonist, an unwed mother who was herself an orphan, finally experiences one miracle in her unfortunate life.[20] As the town policeman reflects in the last episode, "Miracles don't exist. It's just the little heroes inside us working together. The small acts of kindness done by kind people."[21]

Similarly, in *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha,* the melodramatic secret harbored by the male protagonist, revealed in the show's final act to include investment fraud, a car accident, and multiple attempted suicides, underscores the devasting impact of South Korea's speculative economy on ordinary people, while the grounding rhythms of everyday life—making food, building houses, repairing things, buying and selling provisions—in a seaside village provide the means through which the protagonist rediscovers and rebuilds civic bonds eviscerated by fictitious capital.

These shows exemplify the "melodramatic mundane," which uses overdrawn plot and affect to spotlight the social, economic, and political forces that constrain everyday life, while exploring how the uneventful work of daily living can contest, even transform, those oppressive forces. The former movement is not uncharacteristic of South Korean melodramas. As McHugh has argued, opposed to "American melodrama's proclivity for converting all political and social problems into personal ones," South Korea's take on the genre places "an unrelenting emphasis on the fallibility of human social and political

systems and their sometimes nefarious effects on human relations and communities."[22] Yet, the turn toward the everyday as a potential site of resistance against the violence of such social and political systems marks a novel development in contemporary K-dramas.

So, why now?

Neoliberal Precarity and Everyday Life

South Korea's post-war growth between the 1950s and the 1990s might have been lauded as a developmental miracle, but it was accompanied by labor exploitation, uneven wealth distribution, and eroded civil liberties. As Chang Kyung-Sup has argued, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis in South Korea constitutes the outworking of extant "structural pitfalls and dangers of [its] economy-driven compressed modernity."[23] The economic crash and ensuing neoliberal reform created mass unemployment, labor precarity, and an ever-widening wealth gap, facilitating what Cho Hae-joang describes as "the formation of a disconnected society led by competitive and restless youth entrapped in a crisis of biosocial reproduction."[24]

For the generation born after the mid-1980s, South Korea has become "Hell Joseon," a popular phrase reflective of the pervasive helplessness among youths toward life in an entrenched class-based society where the rich get richer and the poor can only "give up"—on dating, marriage, children, home ownership, career, community, hope, indeed life itself. This generation of youths has been variously dubbed the "Give Up Generation," the "880,000 Won Generation" (a reference to their low monthly pay), and the "spec generation" (*specs* derives from the English "specifications" and refers to resumé-building activities). For these youths, the normative ideals of an "ordinary life" have become unaffordable luxuries.

Drawing on the work of Japanese activist Amamiya Karin, Anne Allison has argued that youths in 21st-century Japan are, likewise, "ordinary refugees" denied the kind of life that once "constitute[d] the norm(al)."[25] These youths suffer from "social precarity—a condition of being and feeling insecure in life that extends to one's (dis)connectedness

from a sense of social community."[26] Amamiya herself, among others, has identified "similar situations of precarity" in Japan and Korea.[27] In South Korea, such widespread feelings of insecurity have created twinned cultural psychologies: nihilistic despair on the one hand, and, on the other, a relentless accumulation of *specs* that instrumentalizes selfhood out of fear of losing out, which equally amounts to a surrender of one's "sense of autonomy, moral dignity, and political sovereignty."[28]As Cho observes, South Korea's compressed growth in the post-war decades led to a "destruction of the quotidian" that has persisted under contemporary neoliberalization, where exhausted youths have neither time nor space to "ask existential questions or assert themselves as human beings."[29]

Cho, however, turns to the affective activism outlined by Allison in the Japanese context as a similar source of hope for Korea. Not any "organized social movement" but a politics "based on the values of caring and solidarity,"[30] such affective activism entails individuals collectively confronting the travails of everyday life and sharing in each other's pain. Everyday life takes center stage in this vision of hope. Though precarious, it contains the seeds of subversion, providing the scene of solidarity through which those who are "fed up with suffering alone" can "activat[e] around collectivized forms of survival and care."[31] As Allison explains, affective activism constitutes "work at the level of daily life and advocate[s] for an everyday sustaining of people caught on the edge, slipping through the cracks, or simply trying to make ends meet in these increasingly precarious times."[32]

It is in this context that we should understand the recent emergence of the melodramatic mundane. Foregrounding everyday life as a central problem, the melodramatic mundane stages the precarity of daily existence and creates affect around its shared pain, even as this narrative mode examines the subversive potential of daily procedures that can create communities of care.

Case Study 1: *Because This Is My First Life*

Yoon Ji-ho, an assistant screenwriter, and a transplant from South Gyeongsang, is forced out of the Seoul apartment she paid the deposit on

because her father, who shows overwhelming son preference, registered the house under her brother's name. Unable to afford Seoul's sky-high rent, and sexually assaulted by the director on her drama project, she quits her job and enters a contract marriage with a house-poor man named Nam Se-hee, helping him with housework in return for a room of her own at minimal rent.

Though billed as a rom-com, *Because This Is My First Life* (hereafter *First Life*) features classic melodramatic elements. The show self-reflexively comments on its genre conventions by opening with a fictional "melodrama" that Ji-ho is helping write, in which a repressed woman suffocated by marriage desires divorce.[33] Scenes from this show-within-the-show function like highly-stylized set pieces, using dim lighting, Victorian-era décor, and violent emotion to create the kind of domestic claustrophobia that Elsaesser has identified as central to Hollywood family melodrama.[34]

Yet, *First Life* will play out its melodramatic affects in a conspicuously different manner. Similar to Korean Golden Age melodrama and unlike its American counterparts, *First Life* spotlights the social, economic, and political contexts that have produced Ji-ho's precarity, instead of displacing them into the realm of the personal. Ji-ho's circumstances underscore how "job insecurity and housing uncertainty," as Minwoo Jung observes, are central to "social precarity in South Korea in the post-financial-crisis period."[35] In episode 2, homeless Ji-ho temporarily lodges at a worksite that her director has arranged for her, which subsequently exposes her to his sexual assault. Leaving in anger and aimlessly trekking through the city, her pyjama-clad body as a sign of her physical displacement, Ji-ho breaks down in tears in the middle of a road tunnel. This melodramatic climax, orchestrated through the scene's sentimental music, close-up shots, symbolic setting, and expressive bodily gesture, uses vivid emotionalism to underscore the matrices of insecure housing, exploitative work, and gender violence that have combined to produce Ji-ho's plight.

Further, *First Life* locates Ji-ho's social precarity within the long history of South Korean modernization. Walking down the aisle on her wedding day at the beginning of episode 6, Ji-ho recalls her own history,

one that is at once personal and national:

> "1988. The whole world is looking at South Korea." On the day in 1988 that the World Festival was going to start, I was in Mom's belly getting ready to be born. So, I became an '88er the world was watching over. Born during the heyday of South Korea, naturally, our family had a car. I spent my early childhood in this high growth and abundance. . . . When I grew up, dreams came to have ranks. We were not '88ers, but became the 880,000 Won Generation. The votes of people in their twenties had no power. The world was no longer paying attention to South Korea. In the infinite war, while my friends were betting their necks for *specs*, I stood out because I was a snail with dreams. Even if I was slow, if I worked hard, my dreams would eventually come true. I stubbornly believed that. If I were to tell the 20-year-old me [about whom I have become today], would that punk believe me? [36]

Figure 1. Scenes from Ji-ho's life are intercut with historical footage.

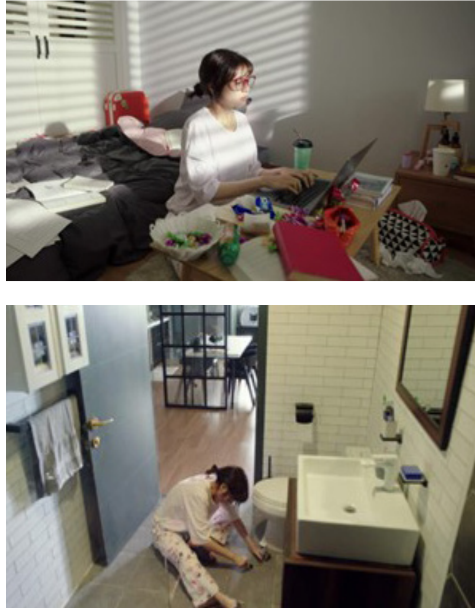

Figure 2. Ji-ho cleans the apartment as she works on “Turtle Goshiwon.”

As Ji-ho narrates the above in voice-over, scenes of her youth are intercut with real-world footage from the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the 1997 IMF crisis, and candlelight protests against political corruption, US trade imperialism, and the pressure-cooker education system (Figure 1). The montage then fades to black, the scene transitioning into a series of slow-motion close-ups of Ji-ho and Se-hee’s pensive expressions as they solemnly begin their walk down the aisle. These cinematic choices frame Ji-ho’s story as a generational phenomenon. The scene stages a conspicuous intersection between the private and the public, the fictive and the historical, identifying its melodramatic narrative as a specific revelation of how structural forces impact everyday lives.

Yet, the show does not end with such critique but explores how Ji-ho engages in everyday domestic practices to create an ontological sense of home, precarious as it may be. As geographers have pointed out, “place”

is not just an empirical locality but also an experiential space constituted by and created through ongoing practices.[37] In episode 2, a minute-long montage shows how Ji-ho alternates between working on her drama script and cleaning the apartment (Figure 2). The scene explicitly states that Ji-ho cleans not out of obligation but for herself. By pairing writing with cleaning, the show meditates on the space-making nature of Ji-ho's housekeeping. Thinking about her script as she cleans grout and wipes down surfaces, with her rhythmic motions embodying her mental creativeness, Ji-ho exemplifies the inventive everyday practitioner who, as Michel de Certeau has theorized, "insinuates" her own native ways of being "*into* the system imposed on [her]," thereby "creat[ing] for [herself] a space in which [she] can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place."[38]

Notably, Ji-ho's script is titled "Turtle Goshiwon." A single-room rental catering to students preparing for exams, the *goshiwon* housing form has since the Asian Financial Crisis expanded into "residential establishments targeting single and mobile populations including 'laid-off fathers' and the 'IMF homeless.'"[39] As her first independent drama script, "Turtle Goshiwon" not only reflects the centrality of spatial precarity to Ji-ho's self-understanding but also reflects her efforts to make symbolic meaning out of it. After all, "stories," as de Certeau has observed, "carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces."[40]

This focus on Ji-ho's cleaning as "tactical" resistance is striking given the repressive domestic space depicted in the show-within-the-show that opened *First Life.*[41] The pointed contrast between the two suggests that the affirmation of the quotidian works not through idealizing the domestic sphere but precisely through recognizing its oppressive qualities. Scenes of Ji-ho and Se-hee's parents typically involve each mother preparing food, washing dishes, or otherwise picking up after the fathers. During episode 10's *jesa,* a Korean ancestral rite with "clearly defined [gender] roles," Ji-ho's in-laws delight in having her prepare food and even stop Se-hee from helping her clean up after.[42] The show thus portrays the hardships endured by women within South Korean households, which are rooted in Confucianist gender hierarchy. As John Finch and Seung-kyung Kim have observed, though the advent

of Western modernization has increased women's opportunities in the workforce, "women's roles within the family have resisted change," and they continue to shoulder the burden of housework.[43]

However, by making Ji-ho and Se-hee's relationship a contract marriage, wherein both parties agree upon the exchange of specific goods, services, and money, *First Life* accords to the wife an agency typically denied her in the family. The explicit reformulation of marriage as a contract provides a legal framework through which, as Fredrich Engels has shown in his analysis of the Western bourgeois family, each contracting party is recognized as "'free' and 'equal.'"[44] On one level, this contract allows Ji-ho to remain "other" within the patriarchal system that outwardly assimilates her, since she performs typical house-making activities while surreptitiously adapting them to her interests.[45]

On a deeper level, however, the contract marriage device also exposes the illusion of free choice that structures the modern love marriage within a society riddled with urban and gender inequalities. Shulamith Firestone's classic analysis of romantic love as an institution "complicated, corrupted, or obstructed by *an unequal balance of power*" applies with particular potency to *First Life*.[46] Rendered homeless by both patriarchal and capitalist forces, Ji-ho's choice to marry for a house only makes visible the gendered economics structuring all marriages, for which the rhetoric of love merely provides "the illusion of free choice."[47] Rather than being opposed to Confucian familism, *First Life*'s contract marriage device highlights the continuities between Eastern and Western ideologies. Thus, Ji-ho's confession regarding the truth of her marriage does not surprise her father-in-law, who also happens to be a teacher of Confucianist ethics. Instead, he approvingly declares that "all marriages are like that. Who marries only because of love? The conditions should meet."[48]

While critical of Ji-ho's father-in-law, however, *First Life* also narratively authorizes his sentiment since it imagines love as the result and not the origin of marriage. Despite the show's critique of marriage, Ji-ho and Se-hee's participation in its quotidian rituals—sharing a living space, eating together, watching soccer on the sofa, she helping with his family's *jesa* and he helping with her family's *kimjang*—ends with the

couple falling in love (Figure 3). Unlike in Firestone's Western-oriented critique, where pre-existing romantic love is "corrupted" by a sexual division of labor that always carries "an unequal balance of power,"[49] in the K-drama genuine emotional intimacy is not independent of, but rather produced through, its characters' daily negotiation of the institutional structures that facilitate their ongoing relationships.

Significantly, this intimacy first emerges as an affective consequence of Ji-ho's housekeeping in episode 1, which depicts the protagonists' first day as housemates. Se-hee returns from a long day at work to find a clean apartment and a contented cat, while Ji-ho, having dispensed with her tenant duties, sleeps comfortably for the first time in a room she can call her own. The nearly 3-minute-long sequence, entirely without dialogue and scored by sentimental music, follows Se-hee as he moves through the tidied-up space, marvelling at Ji-ho's housekeeping and reading her explanatory post-it notes. Close-up shots, which cut from Se-hee to Ji-ho asleep in her room, to the purring cat in Se-hee's lap, establish the experience of wellness as an embodied affect that consolidates the trio as

Figure 3. Se-hee and Ji-ho participate in the quotidian rituals of married life.

a community. This wellness derives not merely from the satisfaction of physical needs, but also from the intersubjective sense that, thanks to Ji-ho's housekeeping, each of the apartment's three inhabitants is, as Se-hee observes, "feeling well for the first time in a while."[50] On display is what Allison describes as a performance of shared hardship that "stage[s] a scene of belonging"[51] through the acknowledgement of common pain. Ji-ho's housekeeping produces a companionate space in which she and Se-hee, each exhausted by hyper-productive urban life, can rest and share in the experience of home.

Multiple scenes, later on, will depict Se-hee and Ji-ho sitting on the living room couch talking about the difficulty of life in a world where, as Se-hee notes, "everything is in a state of oversaturation or depletion."[52] The apartment captures something of the "constructed and flexible friendship zone" that Allison reads in the Japanese drop-in center notably named "My Home," in which shared space makes room for shared views and rhythms and thereby provides a way of "overcoming depression."[53] *First Life* conveys this solidarity, forged and cemented through the quotidian routines of a married life that appears conformist but is in fact inventive, by depicting it as the blossoming of love. While critiquing the interconnected institutions of marriage, housing, and work, the K-drama explores how individuals negotiate these systems in relation with each other to create their own personal meanings.

Case Study 2: *My Mister*

Partly due to its rom-com conventions, *First Life* ultimately affirms heterosexual marriage as a way of resisting urban precarity. For those more situated on the margins, however, "(heteronormative) homelife" is an unattainable dream, and a more open-ended sociality is needed.[54] This is the case for *My Mister*'s Lee Ji-an, a temp employee crippled by debt, harassed by a loan shark, and sole care-giver for her ailing grandmother.

On paper, *My Mister* has all the ingredients for melodramatic excess, yet these plot points, including murder, an illicit affair, corporate machinations, and audio surveillance, only occupy half the screen time. Equally central is the fictional Hugye neighbourhood where both Ji-an

and her supervisor Park Dong-hoon live. The show seemingly suffers from a split personality, oscillating between the high drama of corporate politics and the mundane rhythms of everyday life in Hugye, where Dong-hoon and his brothers and friends, all neighbors who have grown up together, play soccer on Sunday mornings and trade stories nightly at their local bar.

Notably, Ji-an has no access to Hugye's neighborhood life. While this initially establishes Ji-an and Dong-hoon as opposites, the show gradually reveals that Ji-an's extreme circumstances, which allegorize the 1997 debt crisis and its intensification of labor precarity, also hold the key to unlocking the truth of Dong-hoon's silent suffering. A middle-aged engineer stifled by workplace politics and cheated on by his wife, who is in an affair with his boss, Dong-hoon as the show's titular *ajeossi* ("middle-aged uncle") reflects the crisis of masculinity afflicting post-crisis South Korea. As neoliberal labor flexibilization policies led to permanent "occupational downgrading," patriarchs found themselves reduced to purely commodified, and thus expendable, units of labor.[55] Tellingly, most of Dong-hoon's brothers and neighbors have been laid off from their corporate jobs. As "the only one among those in the neighborhood who still works at a big company,"[56] Dong-hoon is urged to stay on "no matter what."[57]

Dong-hoon, however, is miserable, a point evident to all but himself as shown in episodes 1 and 7. His inability to articulate his misery points to the contradictory subjectivity produced under neoliberal governmentality, where the will to foster a productive life also kills life in a million other ways. Central to Foucault's analysis of power, "governmentality" names how the government conducts and administers its subjects by "guiding" rather than repressing life, co-opting its subjects as voluntary participants who govern themselves according to the vision of wellbeing projected by the neoliberal state.[58]

My Mister examines the technologies of such governmentality through its focus on the subway, a sign of the functionalist city that ensures the circulation of capital and labor for maximal productivity and economic exploitation.[59] Subway scenes occur in twelve of the K-drama's sixteen episodes and frequently depict the rush-hour commute, where

Figure 4. Subway scenes in *My Mister*.

strangers rehearsing the same home-work-home drill are enclosed within subway cars, their bodies as crammed together as their relationships to each other non-existent. This homogenous mass of bodies provides the backdrop for Dong-hoon's alienation, his mind rebelling against the appropriative logic of the neoliberal economy even as his body, obedient like a well-trained soldier's, continues to go through the motions (Figure 4). Dong-hoon's mind-body incongruence, which he expresses in a text to a friend in episode 5, highlights the masking of coercion as consent in the neoliberal city.

My Mister's melodramatic arc makes visible the violence of this coercion, surfacing it to conscious perception. Thus, the subway is also an ongoing site of surveillance, revealing the sinister forces that not only "guide" the bodies of labor but actively police them. In episode 3, under the orders of Dong-hoon's boss, Ji-an makes use of the crowded subway car to wiretap Dong-hoon's phone. The dramatic plot exposes the truth of the train as a form of what de Certeau calls "travelling incarceration" [60] and also connects it to other forms of urban surveillance. As Jung Won Sonn

and Jae Kwang Lee argue, the heavy adoption of electronic payment, mobile phones, and automobile black boxes, as well as the widespread use of open-street CCTV, means that South Korea has "one of the highest densities of surveillance technology in the world."[61] In drawing audience attention to such surveillance, Dong-hoon's bugged phone constitutes a melodramatic revelation of the truth of Seoul's urban panopticon.

Yet, it is precisely through cultivating an awareness of the panopticon that the opportunity for resistance emerges. The subway thus also provides the pivotal site for Dong-hoon and Ji-an's evolving relationship, as they turn from antagonists into genuine friends (Figure 5). It is on the subway that Dong-hoon finally recognizes the truth of his alienation by seeing it mirrored in Ji-an's starker plight. "Do you know why you like me?" he asks Ji-an. "Because I'm pitiful. Because you're pitiful, you're crying with me who is pitiful like you."[62] Ji-an mirrors this insight back to Dong-hoon: "Why were you nice to me? Wasn't it for the same reason?"[63]

More explicitly than *First Life,* Ji-an and Dong-hoon's connection, which remains platonic till the end, captures the "soulful" sociality that Allison sees in projects like "My Home."[64] The subway is recuperated as a scene of relational belonging, becoming a makeshift home stitched together by "connectedness which is post-identitarian and premised on mutuality and care."[65] Dong-hoon and Ji-an's shared pain underscores precarity as an ontological condition that structures alike the lives of individuals who otherwise appear very different from each other—on the one hand, a young, indebted temp woman employee; on the other, a

Figure 5. Dong-hoon a nd Ji-an's mutual recognition on the subway.

middle-aged, married manager with a seemingly secure job.

When melodramatic suffering recognizes its shadowy self in the repressed violence of the everyday, *My Mister*'s redemptive arc is launched. This redemption works through what Pierre Mayol has called "the [quotidian] practice of the neighbourhood," through which the dweller "poeticize[s]" the city, "refabricat[ing] it for his or her own use by undoing the constraints of the urban apparatus."[66] After the scene of recognition on the subway, Dong-hoon walks Ji-an home for the first time. Passing by the bar where the Hugye neighbors have gathered as usual, the whole neighborhood joins in the walk, fulfilling Dong-hoon's earlier promise that if Ji-an calls, "more than 30 people in that neighborhood will run over to help you. A hundred will come if you ask."[67]

For Ji-an, who has lived on the margins physically, socially, economically, and emotionally, this practice of the neighborhood is the quotidian life that she has never known. Now, in walking with the other

Figure 6. The practice of the neighbourhood in *My Mister*.

dwellers, she is incorporated into the neighborhood as one of its own. As they talk, the neighbors rearticulate their mutual commitment to each other by contributing new memories to the cultural collective (Figure 6). Ji-an's personal story becomes integrated into neighborhood lore; her paths are no longer unaccounted for but become legitimized as part of "the network of social relations inscribed in the environment."[68]

Through its embrace of Ji-an, Hugye demonstrates its flexible sociality—one with its routines, but "whose potentiality for being and belonging is open."[69] This openness of the neighborhood seems centrally connected to the collective precarity that it is dedicated to staging, as when the failed actress Choi Yoo-ra, another outsider drawn to and eventually adopted by the neighborhood, tearfully confesses to loving the Hugye dwellers for their failures: "This neighborhood seems broken, and so do the people who live in it. But no one here looks unhappy. I swear. That's why I like you. You comfort me."[70] The mutual recognition of precarity drawing together the show's main characters suggests that more than Ji-an and Yoo-ra finding a home in Hugye, the fictional place of Hugye is itself conjured up and sustained through the bonds of recognition and solidarity forged among its practitioners old, new, and yet to come.

Conclusion

In both *First Life* and *My Mister,* the sustaining power of everyday life works through the unexpected solidarity between a socioeconomically vulnerable woman and an older man with greater means. Both shows examine the power disparity between these characters but also articulate neoliberal precarity as an ontological condition that similarly constrains individuals who otherwise occupy different subject positions. The shows' ability to balance identity-driven critique and trans-identitarian solidarity, without the blanket denial of one or the other, derives from the melodramatic mundane's acknowledgement of the relational intimacies that can emerge through the daily navigation of repressive orders. As Ji-an's grandmother tells her, "all relationships are amazing and precious."[71]

First Life ends with marriage, albeit a non-traditional one. *My Mister*'s flexible community, too, has arguably parochial foundations. As Dong-hoon explains to Ji-an, "me, my dad and my brothers all graduated from Hugye Elementary School. My friends' fathers are also alumni. Our fathers are friends. That neighborhood is like that."[72] While traditional structures come under critique in both shows, these structures are not imagined as a counter to, but rather as soil for, the cultivation of new socialities. In this regard, both shows exemplify how, as Peter Paik argues, K-dramas provide "models for negotiating the competing demands" between "tradition and modernity."[73] If traditional narratives tend to reproduce hegemonic power by pretending that ordinary life is "natural" and without history, while post-traditional ones critique dominant structures by substituting identity politics for a more nuanced engagement with messy quotidian experience lived under and within the interlocking structures of gender, race, and class, K-dramas can provide a third way. The global resonance of South Korean television testifies to a transcultural desire for a critical consciousness bearing on everyday ways of being, and for a political praxis that is not imposed upon but emerges out of, mundane relationships and experiences.

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Notes

[1] See, for instance, Keehyeung Lee, "Speak Memory! *Morae Sigye* and the Politics of Social Melodrama in Contemporary South Korea," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 4, no. 4 (2004): 526–39; Sooyeon Lee, "The Structure of the Appeal of Korean Wave Texts," *Korea Observer* 43, no. 3 (2012): 447–69; We Jung Yi, "Melodramatic Tactics for Survival in the Neoliberal Era: Excess and Justice in *The Heirs* and *My Love From the Stars,*" *Journal of Korean Studies* 23, no. 1 (2018): 153–73; and Kathryn Hartzell, "Foreign but Familiar: Genre and the Global Korean Drama Fandom," in *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Media Fandom,* ed. Robert Andrew Dunn (Hershey: IGI Global, 2020), 92–117. Hartzell reads both *Because This Is My First Life* and *My Mister,* the two case studies I consider in this paper, as exemplifying the melodramatic genre. In his recent essay, Steve Choe examines the aesthetic distinctiveness of what he calls K-drama's "affective interludes," noting that "their pathos is inseparable from the operation of the melodramatic mode and its articulation of virtue in the K-drama" (Choe, "Melos in the World of K-Drama," *Korea Europe Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Politics, Society, and Economics* 3 [2022]: 6).

[2] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 2.

[3] Ji-yoon An, "New Directions in K-Drama Studies," *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 14, no. 2 (2022): 92. See also Choe, "Melos in the World of K-Drama," 3–4. Recent scholarship that addresses this gap includes Choe's wide-ranging essay as well as Ji-yoon An, "K-Drama 2.0: Updating Tropes with Intertextuality and Cinematic Visuals in *Crash Landing on You,*" *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 14, no. 2 (2022): 131–47.

[4] See Youna Kim, *Women, Television and Everyday Life in Korea: Journeys of Hope* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[5] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 4.

[6] Ien Ang, "Melodramatic Identifications: Television Fiction and Women's Fantasy," in *Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular,* ed. Mary Ellen Brown (London: SAGE Publications, 1990), 79

[7] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama,* ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 79.

[8] Ibid., 82.

[9] Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 2.

[10] Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory,* ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 77.

[11] Ibid., 66–67.

[12] Darcy Paquet, "*Christmas in August* and Korean Melodrama," in *Seoul Searching: Culture and Identity in Contemporary Korean Cinema,* ed. Frances Gateward (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), 44.

[13] Nancy Abelmann, *The Melodrama of Mobility: Women, Talk, and Class in Contemporary South Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 100.

[14] Kathleen McHugh, "South Korean Film Melodrama: State, Nation, Woman, and the Transnational Familiar," in *South Korean Golden Age Melodrama: Gender, Genre, and National Cinema,* eds. Nancy Abelmann and Kathleen McHugh (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 24; Yi, "Melodramatic Tactics for Survival," 157. On the fantasy structure of K-dramas, see also Sooyeon Lee, "The Structure of the Appeal of Korean Wave Texts," 454–58.

[15] On traditional melodrama's tragic perspective toward everyday life, see Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 88–89; and Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave, 1989), 41.

[16] Jean-Paul Baldacchino and Eun-Jee Park, "Between Fantasy and Realism: Gender, Identification, and Desire among Korean Viewers of Second-Wave Korean Dramas," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 17 (2020): 8, 20.

[17] On *Misaeng*'s realism, see Sung-mi Ahn, "'Misaeng' Syndrome Grips the Nation," *The Korea Herald,* November 12, 2014, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20141112000845; on the victim-hero in melodrama, see Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 42; on *Misaeng*'s depiction of the neoliberal workplace, see Joanna Elfving-Hwang, "Aestheticizing Authenticity: Corporate Masculinities in Contemporary South Korean Television Dramas," *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 15, no. 1 (2017): 55–72.

[18] *Misaeng: Incomplete Life* [Misaeng], episode 13, directed by Won-seok Kim, aired in 2014, on tvN. K-drama translations are from Netflix unless otherwise noted. On melodrama as a "dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of 'too late' and 'in the nick of time,'" see Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 69.

[19] *Misaeng: Incomplete Life,* episode 6.

[20] See Boon Young Han, Min Ok Yang, and Ryan Gustafsson, "The Social Exclusion of Child-Rearing Unwed Mothers in South Korea," in *Handbook of Social Inclusion: Research and Practices in Health and Social Sciences,* ed. Pranee Liamputtong (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 1–21.

[21] *When the Camellia Blooms* [Dongbaekkkon Pil Muryeop], episode 20, directed by Yeong-hoon Cha, aired in 2019, on KBS2.

[22] McHugh, "South Korean Film Melodrama: Melodrama," 25.

[23] Kyung-Sup Chang, "Compressed Modernity and Its Discontents: South Korean Society in Transition," *Economy and Society* 28, no. 1 (1999): 47.

[24] Hae-joang Cho, "The Spec Generation Who Can't Say 'No': Overeducated and Underemployed Youth in Contemporary South Korea," *positions* 23, no. 3 (2015): 438.

[25] Allison, "Ordinary Refugees: Social Precarity and Soul in 21st Century Japan," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2012): 358.

[26] Ibid., 348–49.

[27] Jung-Soon Shim, "Voices of the 880,000 Won Generation: Precarity and

Contemporary Korean Theatre," in *Performance, Feminism and Affect in Neoliberal Times,* eds. Elin Diamond, Denise Varney, and Candice Amich (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 216.

[28] Hae-joang Cho, "The Spec Generation who Can't Say 'No,'" 453.

[29] On the "destruction of the quotidian," see Hae-joang Cho, "'You Are Entrapped in an Imaginary Well': The Formation of Subjectivity within Compressed Development—A Feminist Critique of Modernity and Korean Culture," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2000): 54.

[30] Ibid., 458–59.

[31] Anne Allison, "Ordinary Refugees," 362.

[32] Anne Allison, "The Cool Brand, Affective Activism and Japanese Youth," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2–3 (2009): 105.

[33] *Because This Is My First Life,* [Ibeon Saengeun Cheoeumira], episode 1, directed by Joon-hwa Park, aired in 2017, on tvN.

[34] Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury," 84.

[35] Minwoo Jung, "Precarious Seoul: Urban Inequality and Belonging of Young Adults in South Korea," *positions* 25, no. 4 (2017): 746–47.

[36] *Because This Is My First Life*, episode 6. I have revised Netflix's translation of this scene to restore the culture-specific references in the original. For instance, Netflix translates "betting their necks for *specs*" simply as "racing against the clock."

[37] See Sarah Pink's helpful survey of the literature in *Situating Everyday Life: Practices and Places* (London: SAGE, 2012), 23–28.

[38] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 30.

[39] Jung, "Precarious Seoul," 752.

[40] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 118.

[41] Ibid., 40.

[42] On the gender roles of *jesa,* see Awki Seo, *Creating Subaltern Counterpublics: Korean Women in Japan and Their Struggle for Night School,* trans. Yuri Kamada (Kyoto and Victoria: Kyoto University Press and Trans Pacific Press, 2017), 28.

[43] John Finch and Seung-kyung Kim, "The Korean Family in Transition," in *Routledge Handbook of Korean Culture and Society,* ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge, 2017), 139.

[44] Fredrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), 97.

[45] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xiii.

[46] Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 130.

[47] Ibid., 139.

[48] *Because This Is My First Life*, episode 15.

[49] Shulamith Firestone, 130.

[50] *Because This Is My First Life*, episode 1.

[51] Allison, "Ordinary Refugees," 364.

[52] *Because This Is My First Life*, episode 4.

[53] Allison, "Ordinary Refugees," 366.

[54] Ibid., 361.

[55] Dae Il Kim, "The Korean Labor Market: The Crisis and After," in *Korean Crisis and Recovery*, eds. David T. Coe and Se-Jik Kim (International Monetary Fund: Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, 2002), 288.

[56] *My Mister* [Naui Ajeossi], episode 3, directed by Won-seok Kim, aired in 2018, on tvN.

[57] Ibid., episode 1.

[58] Thomas Lemke, "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique," *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 3 (2002): 52.

[59] On the subway as a form of "spatiotemporal coercion," see Pierre Mayol, "The Neighborhood," *The Practice of Everyday Life, vol. 2: Living and Cooking,* Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, ed. Luce Giard, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 12.

[60] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 111.

[61] Jung Won Sonn and Jae Kwang Lee, "The Smart City as Time-Space Cartographer in COVID-19 Control: the South Korean Strategy and Democratic Control of Surveillance Technology," *Eurasian Geography and Economics,* vol. 61, no. 4–5 (2020): 484.

[62] *My Mister,* episode 12.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Allison, "Ordinary Refugees," 352.

[65] Ibid., 366–67.

[66] Mayol, "The Neighborhood," 13.

[67] *My Mister,* episode 10.

[68] Mayol, "The Neighborhood," 9.

[69] Allison, "Ordinary Refugees," 366.

[70] *My Mister,* episode 7.

[71] Ibid., episode 16.

[72] Ibid., episode 10.

[73] Peter Paik, "The Korean Wave and the Impasse of Theory," *Telos* 184 (2018): 132.

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