

Fedorenko's next work.

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Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture: Transmedia Storytelling, Digital Platforms, and Genres by Dal Yong Jin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022. 252 pp.

As the first monograph on South Korean (hereafter Korean) webtoons, Dal Yong Jin's new book, *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture: Transmedia Storytelling, Digital Platforms, and Genres*, examines webtoons as a pivotal cultural product poised to shape the next generation of *hallyu*. Webtoons represent a novel youth culture that has evolved through integration of digital media, originating from print comics (*manhwa*). Distinguished from their printed counterparts, webtoons captivate audiences with their distinctive vertical format, vibrant color palettes, purposeful spacious layouts, and imaginative incorporation of sounds and visual effects. This book delves deep into "a critical understanding of webtoons as a transnational media phenomenon" (8), shedding light on their technological development, the political, economic, and sociocultural factors that underpin their significance, platformization, and their emergence as a transnational, transmedia storytelling phenomenon.

In its exploration of the evolution of webtoons, *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture* divides their history into four chronological eras, effectively charting their development. The inception of webtoons can be traced back to the late 1990s, when they rapidly emerged as a prominent facet of youth culture. During the first generation, webtoons owed their growth to advancements in the internet and the establishment of websites. Transitioning into the early 2000s, major internet portals, such as Daum and Naver, began to offer their own dedicated webtoon pages. These platforms, during the second era, fostered distinct attributes that set webtoons apart from traditional *manhwa*. The third era was ushered in by the advent of mobile phone technology and government-driven investment, resulting in an expansive diversification of genres and themes with richer and more elaborate storylines. Consequently, webtoons evolved into primary source material for big-screen adaptations. In the most recent era, spanning from the mid- to late-2010s, webtoons entered a phase of convergence

with social media, expanding globally and solidifying their status as a significant cultural export.

The concept of platformization provides a framework to effectively examine the production of webtoons, especially in discussing the political economy of webtoon platforms and their role within the Korean cultural industries. Platformization refers to “a strategy used by cultural firms that focuses on the value of the digital platform ecosystem and seeks to facilitate and expand integration, orchestrate resources, compose services and encourage joint creation among relevant actors” (50). Of particular significance is the evolving relationship between webtoon platforms and the creators themselves, known as webtoonists, within the context of mega webtoon platforms. The structural dimension of platformization, exemplified by the substantial investments, integration efforts, and subsidization of webtoon operations by these mega platforms, raises concerns about the potential monopolization of a select few webtoon companies. This concentration, in turn, affects artists by funneling them towards a limited number of platforms, potentially stifling genre diversity. The platformization of the intellectual property aspect of webtoons can also have adverse effects, depriving artists of opportunities to secure more favorable terms for their work after the initial publication of their original webtoons.

Two important facets of the emerging digital culture inherent to webtoons are snack culture and binge reading. Snack culture refers to “the habit of quick consumption of information and cultural resources on mobile platforms” (81). Binge reading describes the practice of individuals immersing themselves in webtoon series for extended periods, forgoing the practice of patiently awaiting subsequent episodes. This trend gained traction in tandem with the freemium business model, where readers pay for webtoon episodes rather than awaiting their gradual release over time. Snack culture and binge consumption have exerted substantial influence, not only within the realm of webtoons but also across other cultural forms, such as film, dramas, and platform-based business models. This culture of impatience underscores the ways in which fans are leveraged and their leisure time is monopolized by webtoon platforms, mirroring analogous dynamics observed in other cultural industries, like gaming and OTT (over-the-top) platforms.

Webtoons have successfully entered the realm of transmedia storytelling in the context of big-screen culture. A notable example explored in Chapter 4 is *Misaeng: Incomplete Life*, which deftly captures the popular sentiment of the loser syndrome or the notion of *byeong-mat* (moron taste) humor among Korean youth. These themes contributed to the webtoon’s initial popularity and paved the way for its successful journey into transmedia adaptations. The visual

richness inherent to webtoons also simplifies the process of envisioning and translating their narratives into compelling visual storylines for adaptations. In addition, the proliferation of broadcasting channels and the involvement of platforms like Netflix have played pivotal roles in expanding webtoon-based transmedia. While it is essential to acknowledge that a direct one-to-one translation of characters, structures, and storylines from the original webtoon into other cultural formats is often not feasible, webtoons nonetheless stand as a formidable source of creative material for the development of global cultural products.

Webtoons have become a dynamic and influential component of the new Korean Wave, particularly as they undergo transformation into content suitable for global OTT services and film adaptations. This evolution involves the growing incorporation of authentic Korean cultural elements within webtoon narratives, a strategy that resonates strongly with its global fan base. The participatory culture exemplified by fan translations also highlights the widespread appeal of webtoons. However, it is essential to note concerns regarding issues of piracy and the uncompensated utilization of fan labor.

In discussing sociocultural perspectives on webtoon artists, *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture* draws insights from the perspectives of Yoon Tae-ho, a preeminent and highly influential figure in the world of webtoons. Of particular significance are the practical implications of webtoons as cultural creative works. Yoon passionately argues for the importance of government support for artists and highlights the potential of blockchain technology as an innovative business model capable of mutually benefiting both webtoon companies and artists.

Overall, the comprehensive examination offered by *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture* reveals the profound impact of webtoons, showcasing their transformative influence on cultural industries and products, both within Korea and on the global stage. The emphasis on the value of Koreanness in the global market is especially noteworthy, along with heartfelt concerns such as the imperative for webtoonists to explore diverse genres while navigating the delicate balance between preserving their uniqueness and fostering progress. *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture* provides a meticulously crafted and extensive exploration of this new transnational, transmedia cultural phenomenon. The book serves as a valuable resource for both undergraduate and graduate courses encompassing the topics of media, globalization, and Korean popular culture. It also holds appeal for a broader audience with interests in Korean culture, media, and *hallyu*. In particular, readers will find the critical reflections on the consequences of platformization, the evolution of media technologies, and the development of cultural products, all within the context of political, economic,

and sociocultural implications, to be enlightening and thought-provoking throughout the book.

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