

# **Extravaganza and Cosmopolitan Lifestyle: Trends and Approaches in Asian Drama Production**

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## **Abstract**

Television dramas, or soap operas, have long been an integral part of the global television industry. The Asian television drama, first introduced in the early 1970s, has taken precedence in the East Asian television industry. Viewers from across the Asian region now eagerly view their favorite dramas from Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Asian dramas are more than just another phenomenal success; they have become a household name. While Hollywood continues to play an important role in television scheduling, recent trends indicate that the pattern of television content importation across Asia has increasingly come to include a significant number of programs from the eastern part of the world. The importation of programs from other ASEAN countries has had a significant impact on the Malaysian television industry. Asian dramas refer to serial televised dramas, recorded in an Asian language, and with predominantly Asian casts and production crews. Furthermore, imported urban or trendy dramas, as well as locally produced dramas depicting stylish cosmopolitan lifestyles and romance, are rapidly becoming popular in Malaysia. These genres emphasize a consumerist aspect of culture in an effort to appeal to younger viewers. Against this backdrop, this paper will examine the development of the urban/trendy drama in the context of the Malaysian television industry. Using selected dramas sampled from across the Southeast Asian region, this study uses comparative textual analysis to examine the representation of the urban/trendy drama.

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## **Introduction**

Television dramas are undoubtedly one of the most popular genres in the global television industry. In Southeast Asia, television dramas have played an integral role in the development of the regional television industry. In fact, television dramas have been a popular cultural artifact since the 1970s. Interestingly, the popularity of television dramas has been relatively consistent across the Southeast Asian region due to the growing demand over recent years for Asian dramas from Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The increase in the variant flow of television dramas within the Asian region indicates that this particular Asian genre has been well received by audiences across the region. In this respect, Chan and Ma (1996) observed that regionalism, as well as globalization, play an important role in the Asian television industry's programming distribution. In this context, regionalism is best understood as the flow of Asian programs "tailor-made" for regional audiences.

The programs made available to audiences via the Malaysian television industry are a mixture of productions that have originated from different parts of the world. While Hollywood continues to play an important role in Malaysia's television scheduling, a recent trend indicates that the importation pattern has grown to include an increasing number of programs from the eastern part of the globe. One of the more popular entertainment sources among local Malaysian audiences is the television drama. Non-Western dramas first began airing on Malaysian televisions during the 1980s. However, it was not until the turn of the millennium in 2000 that Asian and local dramas became an important facet of the Malaysian television industry.

Asian dramas refer to televised serial dramas that use a particular Asian language and have a predominantly Asian cast and production crew. The popularity of Asian dramas among Asian national audiences is thought to be a product of cultural proximity, thus allowing audiences to

identify with and more easily understand the plots and settings (Huang, 2011). Additionally, Latiffah et al. (2009) maintained that Malaysian audiences found the storylines and themes shown in Asian dramas to be more relevant to their daily lives. Another factor contributing to Asian audiences' fondness for Asian dramas is the combination of their actors' and actresses' looks and talents. In recent years, "urban dramas" or "trendy dramas" from within the Asian region, as well as locally produced dramas that depict stylish cosmopolitan lifestyles and romance, have been observed to be increasingly popular in Malaysia. The depiction of stylish urban lifestyles replete with extravagant outfits and accessories that reflect the prevailing consumerist culture is one of the more attractive hallmarks of the urban/trendy drama (Iwabuchi, 2004). This emphasis on consumer culture is what attracts younger viewers to this subgenre. It is against this backdrop that the development of the urban/ trendy drama in the Malaysian television industry is examined. The representation of selected urban/ trendy dramas from within the Southeast Asian region are studied using comparative textual analysis.

### **The Malaysian Television Environment**

From the outset, Malaysian television content and programming has always been a combination of local and imported content. Television services were first introduced to Malaysia in 1963. In the first several years of its operation, imported programs, mostly from Hollywood, constituted a sizable portion of local television scheduling. In part, the importation of scheduling content was driven by the inability of the local television industry to produce enough local material to fill all of the available airtime slots. This was due to a lack of local expertise and financial resources necessary to produce quality programs. Therefore, efforts to produce domestic content were often limited and with amateurish results. With so much imported American content used to offset the scarcity of local content, it might be reasonable to conclude that the local television industry has been built upon the success of the American or Hollywood film and television industry (Karthigesu, 1994).

By the 1980s, Malaysian public policy began to shift in favor of supporting the development of locally produced content to the extent that the Malaysian government imposed a quota of 60:40 on local versus imported programs (Hamisah & Abdul Muati, 2009). The underlying quota policy reflected a deep interest by the state in preserving local Malay culture and identity by advancing and controlling the production of local content. Imported programs, typically from the West, were seen by many sectors in Malaysia as having a negative influence on local audiences and as displacing local culture and values (Karthigesu, 1994).

However, the target set by the government for the implementation of the quota system proved difficult to achieve and Malaysia's television industry continued to be dominated by foreign content. Both the market demand and competition between stations left the stations' management with few alternatives other than to opt for imported programs. Locally produced programs were seen as lacking the quality of imported programs and as incapable of attracting high ratings. This invariably resulted in the further proliferation of foreign programs throughout the 1980s.

The drive to promote and protect Malaysia's local culture and identity was further advanced in the 1990s when a new 80:20 quota policy was introduced (Hamisah & Abdul Muati, 2009). This would have resulted in local programs occupying as much as 80% of airtime, thus dropping the imported programs share to 20% by the year 2000 (Ramlah, 1998). However, by the 1990s Malaysian viewers were already desiring more locally produced programs and a number of production companies were launched to meet the demand for local content with which to fill time slots.

A study conducted by Juliana et al. (2013:164-165) revealed noteworthy data concerning television dramas in the Malaysian context. In an analysis of a week of television scheduling for free-to-air (FTA) television, it was determined that animation contributed to the highest percentage of programs aired with 17.2%, and television dramas, which included television serials and soap operas, followed with 13.8%. The breakdown of the popular genres is shown in the table below:

Table 1

*Genre Breakdown of TV Programs Aired on FTA TV Channels from March 1-7, 2012*

Genre	TV1 (%)	TV2 (%)	TV3 (%)	ntv7 (%)	8TV (%)	TV9 (%)	Total (%)
Animation	4.4	20.0	18.1	30.0	3.0	27.4	17.2
TV Drama/TV Serial/Soap	5.5	8.7	21.6	8.8	27.3	12.9	13.8
Documentary	24.2	2.6	3.4	1.3	1.5	4.8	6.4
Cooking/Food	-	1.7	3.4	3.8	3.0	1.6	2.3
Current Affairs	4.4	-	0.9	1.3	-	-	1.1
Comedy	-	3.5	0.9	-	-	-	0.9
Children	3.3	3.5	2.6	5.0	-	9.7	3.8
Game Show	-	0.9	0.9	2.5	7.6	-	1.7
Health	1.1	-	1.7	-	-	-	0.6
Info/Gossip	1.1	0.9	1.7	1.3	3.0	3.2	1.7
Magazine	5.5	8.7	5.2	5.0	3.0	1.6	5.3
Motivation	-	0.9	0.9	-	-	-	0.4
Movie	-	7.0	4.3	3.8	3.0	1.6	3.6
Music	1.1	1.7	1.7	-	6.1	-	1.7
News	4.4	2.6	3.4	3.8	4.5	1.6	3.4
Others	6.6	9.6	2.6	2.5	6.1	6.5	5.7
Reality TV	2.2	0.9	2.6	12.5	15.2	1.6	5.1
Religion	7.7	1.7	1.7	-	-	1.6	2.3
Sitcom	3.3	3.5	2.6	-	1.5	-	2.1
Sports	7.7	-	3.4	-	-	-	2.1
Talk show	8.8	6.1	5.2	1.3	1.5	14.5	6.0
Telemovie	2.2	1.7	3.4	-	-	3.2	1.9
Travel	3.3	0.9	-	-	1.5	1.6	1.1
TV Series	3.3	10.4	2.6	12.5	7.6	6.5	7.0
Variety	-	2.6	5.2	5.0	4.5	-	3.0
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

In terms of the origin breakdown of TV dramas aired on FTA television channels in March 2012, Juliana et al. (2013:166-67) also found that 59% of the drama were local productions and the remaining of 41% consisted of dramas imported from China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, and the U.S.A.

Table 2

*Origin Breakdown of TV Dramas Aired on FTA TV Channels from March 1-7, 2012*

Origin	TV1 (%)	TV2 (%)	TV3 (%)	ntv7 (%)	8TV (%)	TV9 (%)	Total (%)
China	-	-	-	-	13.33	-	2.74
Hong Kong	-	10	-	-	-	-	1.37
Indonesia	-	-	12	-	-	27.27	8.2
Korea	-	10	-	14.29	13.33	-	5.48
Malaysia	100	80	76	28.57	6.66	72.72	58.9
Philippines	-	-	4	-	-	-	1.37
Singapore	-	-	-	-	20	-	4.11
Spain	-	-	4	-	-	-	1.37
Taiwan	-	-	-	42.86	46.67	-	13.70
Thailand	-	-	4	-	-	-	1.37
U.S.A.	-	-	-	14.29	-	-	1.37
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Currently, many of the television dramas aired on Malaysian television are either locally produced or imported from neighboring countries within the Asian region. This suggests that the Malaysian audience has, in recent years, become increasingly receptive to local dramas and more open to embracing television dramas from across the Asian region. This may also explain the phenomenal success of the Asian drama genre in this country.

### Television Drama

There is no doubt that serial television dramas have become the most popular genre on television. Watching television dramas has become a national addiction in many countries (Ng, 2001). The popularity of television dramas in Malaysia is evident from the high importation throughout the 1980s and early 1990s of what might affectionately be referred to as “the American soaps.” Among some of the more popular TV dramas from this period were *Dallas*, *Knots Landing*, *Falcon Crest*, *Dynasty*, and *The Bold and the Beautiful*. At its height, *Dallas* was aired in almost 90 countries, making it one of the most widely aired American soaps in television history (Cashmore, 2002).

*Dallas* centered on the Ewing family, a fabulously wealthy American family who owned an oil company and lived on a luxurious ranch outside of Dallas, Texas. The story's dramatic complications revolved around romance and business, as well as the family's wealth and troubles (Ang, 2013). The other American television dramas previously cited exhibited similar dramatic themes of elevated tension, animosity, and conflict between families as a result of operating a family business. Furthermore, each episode of these dramas followed a similar formula in which the main plot device was the conflict faced by the central characters. Sub plots would serve to add to the complication and suspense. Moreover, while *Dallas* was certainly faithful to this formula, Ang (1985) observed that *Dallas*, which exploited consumer capitalism, luxurious settings, and glamorous lifestyles as a pivotal plot device, marked the beginning of a new subgenre in the already existing television drama genre. In fact, many of the more popular American television dramas that aired throughout the 1980s and 1990s adopted a similar formula, thereby increasing their popularity in many parts of the world.

The development of Western dramas was further enhanced in the early 2000s with the popularization of Latin American television dramas known as telenovelas. In addition to imported American television programs, telenovelas were often imported from Brazil and Mexico and were regularly broadcast by almost all Malaysian television stations. The success of the telenovela peaked with the screening of *Rosalinda*, which captured 2.6 million Malaysian viewers per episode (Md Azalanshah, 2013). The popularity of this genre resulted in local television stations sourcing more serial dramas from the Latin American region. Some of the more popular telenovelas to be broadcast on Malaysian televisions included *La Usurpadora (Deceptions)*, *Juana La Viroen (Juana's Miracle)*, and *Yo Soy Betty La Fea (I am Betty, the Ugly One)*. Like their American counterparts, the Latin American television dramas also displayed similar characteristics in terms of their themes. Family, romance, success, failure, and vengeance were common plot elements in every episode. Similarly, the telenovelas depicted the luxurious and extravagant lifestyles of their characters, who were always dressed in smart attire. Almost all of the

actors were attractive Latino men and women who played successful characters in the story. Furthermore, like the American soaps, the telenovelas were often set in huge, luxurious mansions that provided a backdrop to the conflict and suspense of the story.

Beginning in 2000, the production of local dramas gradually increased in tandem with these developments and local television stations such as TV3 began to dedicate more slots for broadcasting locally produced dramas such as *Drama Suria*, *Identiti*, and *Samarinda*. One local Malay drama, *Nurkasih*, broadcast on TV3, reportedly attracted 19 million viewers (Daniels, 2013). The popularity of local Malay dramas has subsequently altered the importation pattern of foreign programs. However, while American programs continue to play an important role in Malaysian television scheduling, recent trends indicate that the importation pattern now includes a significant number of programs from the eastern part of the world, thus quickly becoming a new standard in the Malaysian television industry.

As previously noted, Asian dramas are televised serial dramas, recorded in a particular Asian language, and with an almost entirely Asian cast and production crew. Common themes reflected in this genre include family and romantic relationships (Md Azalanshah, 2011). Huang (2011) stated that the popularity of Asian dramas among Asian countries is a function of cultural proximity, making it easier for Asian audiences to understand the plot and setting. Both Japanese and Korean dramas have been well received among Taiwanese audiences (Huang, 2011), in spite of, or perhaps as a result of, a history of Japanese colonization of the country. This is explained by Chua (2004) as a generational phenomenon, as these dramas are popular among a younger generation who have embraced “diluted emotions” toward the colonization history. Less controversial Korean dramas are widely accepted in China, Hong Kong, and the Philippines (Huang, 2011).

Cho (2010) described the Korean Wave as the spread of Korean creative and cultural products across the Asian region, such as television dramas, pop music, films and game shows. The consumption of these products has increased audiences’ interest in Korean actors, actresses,

musicians, and places (Cho, 2010). China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are among the Asian countries to have become captured in this wave in the form of movies, dramas, songs, and their associated celebrities (Shim, 2006).

Korean pop culture has also been met with great interest in Singapore (Korea IT Times, December 31, 2005). The Korean Wave in Malaysia began in 2002 with the airing of *Winter Sonata* on TV3 (The Edge Malaysia, February 7, 2011). According to Yun Jae Jin (Managing Director of Korean Tourism Organization, Kuala Lumpur) in an interview with The Edge Malaysia (2011), dramas such as *Winter Sonata*, *Jewel in the Palace*, and *Autumn in My Heart* have become huge successes due to several contributing factors, such as “aesthetic cinematography, huge capital investment in the Korean film industry, acting talents and traditional Korean values” (Taste for all things Korean, para. 3). These dramas also present fascinating themes like everlasting love, old-fashioned romance, male chivalry, and filial piety (Korea IT Times, 2005).

Locally, Latiffah et al. (2009) asserted that Malaysians have found the storylines and themes presented in Asian dramas to be more relevant to their daily lives than Western dramas produced in Hollywood. Perhaps another factor contributing to Asian audiences’ desire for Asian dramas is the combination of attractive features and talent among their actors and actresses. The resemblance in appearances engenders a feeling of “Asian-ness” and a sense of identity among audiences (Chua, 2004).

The demand for Asian dramas continued into 2011 when Malaysian viewers were assured by Media Prima Berhad, one of the country’s largest television industry contributors, that they would be offered more compelling programming content inclusive of both Western television series and Asian dramas. Media Prima Berhad announced that their 2011 program line-up would include a range of imported Asian dramas centered on the themes of romance, family, and corruption. This content would be imported from Hong Kong and Korea, and would include such

dramas as *Burning Flame 3*, *All Men Are Brothers*, *He's Beautiful*, *The Fugitive*, and the highest rated drama in Korea, *Lobe & Dreams* (Media Prima, 2010).

Lindsay (2005) noted that apart from Korean dramas, Indonesian dramas, or sinetrons, were a lucrative and promising industry. Their success in Indonesia began in the late 1990s in response to the decline of the Indonesian film industry (Aartsen, 2011). Sinetrons proved to be a more affordable alternative for Indonesian television stations as compared to the high costs associated with film production (Aartsen, 2011). By 2007, sinetrons had become among the most watched programs in Indonesia (Nielsen, January 31, 2011). In 2006, TV9, a local Malaysian television channel, discovered that dedicating daily slots to Indonesian sinetrons was a winning strategy that ensured the channel's competitiveness among other channels. As a result, Indonesian dramas like *Kiamat Sudah Dekat* (*Doomsday is Coming*) and *Mutiara Hati* (*Heart of Pearls*) attracted a viewership approximating 1.1 million and 1.6 million respectively, translating into success for TV9 (Media Prima, 2010).

Sinetrons, which might sometimes run for hundreds of episodes, are commonly viewed in many Malaysian households (Md Azalanshah, 2011). Examples of some long running sinetrons include *Puteri Yang Ditukar* (*Swapped Princess*) (aired on TV3) with 175 episodes (Budiey, 2011); *Anugerah* (*The Gift*) (aired on TV9) with approximately 470 episodes; (Rayendra, 2012); and *Cinta Fitri* (*Fitri's Love*) (aired on TV9) with approximately 1000 episodes (KapanLagi, 2011). Sinetrons are usually scheduled for daytime viewing on FTA Malaysian television channels, like TV3 and TV9. According to Rinanna Poudyal, a former sinetron scriptwriter, viewers of sinetrons are generally housewives who enjoy daytime entertainment while completing household chores (Selvary, 2011). Interestingly, Poudyal also stated in the same interview that most sinetrons are adapted from Japanese, Korean, and Indian movies or television serials. The sinetrons' engaging plots also help to maintain the viewers' interest (Md Azalanshah, 2011). Normally, the storylines revolve around themes of good versus evil, rich versus poor, magical and

spiritual prowess, karma, and the rise of fame and success which captivates audiences and urges them to watch on a daily basis.

### **Urban/Trendy Drama**

During the 1990s, the East Asian television landscape was dominated by Japanese television phenomenon known as the “trendy drama” (Ang, 2007). Trendy drama was a term used to describe popular Japanese TV dramas in 1980s. This popular genre emerged to reflect the attitudes of a younger Japanese generation during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, and highlighted young Japanese lives using a modern style and a light touch (Lee, 2004). Japanese trendy dramas featured the latest in fashionable Japanese lifestyles, reflecting the inclinations of program sponsors and advertising agencies (Arita, 1997). Lee (2004) also observed that the term “trendy drama” is used in Japan to denote any youth-oriented drama and is not strictly limited to the specific type of drama that prospered in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Consequently, trendy drama is included as a subgenre of drama in line with the tastes of the younger generation. One of the central features of the urban/trendy drama is the depiction of stylish urban lifestyles abundant with extravagant outfits and accessories which reflect the prevailing consumer culture (Iwabuchi, 2004). The heavy emphasis on the consumerist aspect of Japanese culture in urban/trendy drama attracts young viewers.

In short, trendy drama is about well-dressed characters in designer clothes who dine at expensive Western restaurants in the entertainment districts of the city. In addition, the actors and actresses are some of Japan’s most beautiful men and women (Chua, 2004). According to Ang (2007), trendy dramas are stylish, gorgeous-looking, youth-oriented mini-series that generally center on romantic relationships among young professionals within a contemporary urban setting. Trendy dramas appeal to young Asian audiences as they depict the problems associated with a personal lifestyle born out of relationship uncertainty, which is analogous to the consequences of changes in contemporary society (Ang, 2007; Ito, 2004).

The trendy dramas' extravagant depictions and appealing narrative structures have certainly had a tremendous impact on television industry development within the Asian region. Chua (2006) noted that trendy dramas were indeed a regional phenomenon, especially in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore in the 1980s and the 1990s. However, toward the end of the 1990s, trendy dramas slowly declined in their popularity and, by 2000, trendy dramas from Japan faced increased competition from similar products produced in Korea.

Chua (2005) also cited that although Japanese TV dramas have been a significant contributor to the total export of Japanese TV programs, the success of the genre has been somewhat problematic. The Japanese television industry has never been particularly interested in the export market as the financial return on production investment is low. The regional space once occupied by Japanese trendy dramas has since been filled by Korean productions, often tailored to the export market. This move to highlight popular Korean culture formed part of the new economic initiative in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Chua, 2005).

Notably, the new form of popular culture, vis-à-vis popular trendy dramas from Korea, in many ways resembles and follows the same formula previously adopted by Japanese trendy dramas. Kim (2005) describes Korean trendy dramas as an imported genre from Japan. Nonetheless, Korean dramas are cultural products that represents a culture of consumerism, and depict the lavish and fashionable lifestyles of the ideal Korean. Korean trendy dramas are sensitive and light-hearted, with a focus on visual imagery; they are fast paced and feature cheerful background music. Furthermore, these dramas showcase Korea's upcoming young stars wearing the latest fashions. In short, trendy dramas are geared toward satisfying the cultural tastes of Korea's new generation which was born during Korea's period of rapid economic growth. This generation has experienced the benefits of economic prosperity and has launched Korea's consumer culture. Simply stated, Korean trendy dramas are a product of the rapid spread of that consumer culture (Kim, 2005).

It is interesting to note how much of the literature concerning trendy dramas has framed the development of this subgenre within the Japanese and Korean context. Interestingly, the term “trendy drama” is not unique to Japanese or Korean television dramas. An initial observation of the content and style of popular dramas from predominantly local and regional productions which are presently broadcast on Malaysian television, reveals that these programs share many similarities with their Japanese and Koreans serial drama counterparts. For the purpose of this study, four dramas from Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Korean were selected based on several criteria, such as the depiction of a modern, stylish, and urban lifestyle, all of which are key ingredients of trendy dramas. A more detailed comparative discussion on Asian dramas broadcast in Malaysia will follow.

### **Regionalization**

Regionalization provides a context for studying the development of trendy dramas within the Asian region. In a general sense, regionalization is concerned with products produced specifically for the consumption of audiences in specific geographical areas. According to Chan and Ma (1996), the regionalization of Asian television products refers to the flow of Asian television artifacts, which include the production of programs and the exchange of expertise within the Asian region. Similarly, Hsin (2012:63) stated that that regionalization is a contemporary and ongoing trend of integrating resources and media productions within a geographic region. In addition, Keane, Fung and Moran (2007) cited that regionalization is a link to new developments in the Asian media market that focus on regional networks which depend less on U.S. productions. In this regard, Hsin (2012: 63) said *“The rise in the East Asian TV industry occurred based on the specific context of the free-trade mechanism of the Asian TV market. This free-trade within the Asian region contributed to the formation of regionalization.”*

The recent emergence of many Asian countries as major producers and exporters of popular cultural products, such as television dramas, highlights the need to consider

regionalization in order to understand of the proliferation of trendy dramas within the region. Presently, it is crucial to recognize South Korea as an important agent in accelerating the process of regionalization, as this is the country that gave rise to Hallyu (Korean Wave), or the phenomenon of Korean entertainment and cultural products within the Asian region during the late 1990s (Korea.net).

Studies by Waterman and Everett (1994) provide important insights for understanding the development of program flow in the Asian region. Their findings indicate that U.S. television programs still dominated the Asian market during the late 1980s, whereas the intra-regional television exchanges were not very active during that time. Nevertheless, this situation would appear to be changing with signs of Asian regionalization increasingly occurring (Chan & Ma, 1996). Iwabuchi (2004) and Lee et al. (2008) also highlighted the growing significance of regionalization over recent years, especially for television products within the Asian region. Similarly, Kim (2005) suggested that regionalization referred to the contemporary and ongoing trend of integrating resources and media productions within a specific geographic region. Jonghoe (2008) further identified a number of contributing factors to explain the growing circulation of Asian cultural products across the region. The two factors most strongly associated with the regionalization process are cultural proximity and cultural discount (Jonghoe, 2008).

Cultural proximity refers to media products containing values that are shared or are common to more than one culture and are therefore readily transferable. Audiences tend to favor television programs that maintain similarities with their own culture (Straubhaar, 2007). According to Lee et al. (2008), audiences rely on a shared frame of reference, based on familiar cultural patterns, which enables them to appreciate and identify with foreign content espousing similar values to their own. Cultural discount, on the other hand, describes the diminished value of cultural products in foreign markets (Hoskin & Mirus, 1988, as cited in Straubhaar, 2007).

Products with such cultural discount are unlikely to be successfully traded due to the presence of unsuitable content or dissimilar values. Asian television productions have cultural

proximity when local audiences regard the storylines and themes shown in these productions as being relevant to their daily lives (Latifah et al., 2009). In short, regionalization is a process that occurs within a specific geographic area with a specific cultural references as opposed to the globalization process, which moves beyond a specific geographic area; the flows are multi-directional, and intertwined in complex global economic activities.

During the 1980s in Malaysia, products from Hollywood, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and India were prevalent in television scheduling and received favorable responses from local audiences. At that time, few Malaysian audiences had developed a preference for local productions. It was not until the 1990s that local productions, as well as regional productions from neighboring countries such as Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, began to have an impact on Malaysian audiences. These products were predominantly dramas. A new trend emerged in the early 2000s with the importation of programs from across the Asian region. Importing programs from other ASEAN countries soon became the standard operating procedure for the Malaysian television industry.

## **Findings and Discussions**

For the purpose of this study, four dramas from across the Asian region were selected for analysis. The selected dramas were among the more popular televised dramas aired in Malaysia in 2014. Each depicts modern, stylish, urban lifestyles, which are considered to be the essential ingredients for trendy dramas. Japanese dramas were not included in the analysis because there were no Japanese dramas broadcast on Malaysian television during 2014. The last Japanese drama broadcast in Malaysia was *One Litre of Tears* on 8TV in 2007.

### *Aku Isterinya (I'm His Wife) (Malaysia)*

*I'm His Wife* is a story centered on Mya Arlissa, an orphan raised by her grandmother and aunt following the death of her parents. Her uncle later sells her to David, who operates a prostitution business. Mya meets Mikail, one of David's clients, who comes from a wealthy

family background. Mikail decides that he wants to own Mya and pays David to free her. Mya is kept as his mistress for some time until Mya pleads with Mikail to marry her as she is unhappy living the sinful life of a mistress. Mya endures Mikail's unfair treatment of her. After discovering how Mikail views her, Mya finally decides to free herself from him. Mikail makes it difficult for Mya to leave by demanding a ransom of MYR 50,000 in exchange for her freedom. Subconsciously, Mikail does not want to lose Mya and in fact loves and cares for her, although he never reveals his true feeling toward her.

The brothel or bordello featured in this drama where Mya and Mikail meet for the first time is an urban location, a place for those with large disposable incomes seeking pleasure and entertainment. Under Malaysian law, unmarried Muslim couples are prohibited from being alone together. In confronting this prohibition, *I'm His Wife* highlights an aspect of the urban lifestyle, for such intimacy between unwed couples is more commonly associated with city lifestyles and modern living.

Through an analysis of *I'm His Wife*, it is evident that the characters are portrayed in stereotypically traditional roles. The patriarchal superiority of marriage is prominent in Mya and Mikail's relationship, where Mya is often portrayed as the vulnerable, submissive, and dependent wife. Apart from the main characters, Suzanne, a young graduate fashion designer from overseas, is depicted as a seductive character in love with Mikail and as obsessed with her own beauty in a bid to win Mikail's affections.

The other two female characters are Datin Adiba, Datuk Lufti's (Mikhail's father) first wife, and Lisa, Datuk Lufti's second wife. Both women are also portrayed in stereotypical manner as a soft-spoken, caring wives and mothers. Although Lisa is an educated woman with a degree from overseas, her academic achievement is rarely highlighted, as more attention is given to her being the wife of Datuk Lufti.

As in many Malay dramas, the character of Datuk Lufti is depicted as being a very successful businessperson who rules over his business empire. Similarly, Mikail is depicted as an

educated and successful young man who enjoys a modern city life. Each of these characters are featured in a stylish manner, wearing sophisticated clothes, living in lavish homes, and driving luxury cars. This depiction has been carefully constructed to communicate sophistication and urbanism.

*Cinta Ku (My Love) (Indonesia)*

Lestari is a beautiful young girl, although slightly uninhibited. Lestari lives with Ranti who works as a servant in Divo's house. Divo is a successful young businessman with a beautiful family. Divo lives with his wife Naomi and their daughter, Nadya. The family also lives with Fanny (Divo's brother), Ocha (Divo's sister), and Karin (Naomi's mother). Their lives are happy and relatively uneventful until Naomi is killed in a plane crash.

Karin blames Divo for Naomi's death and grows to despise him. Meanwhile, Lestari appears in Divo's life, as they frequently meet through a series of unexpected events. This invariably leads to a burgeoning relationship between Lestari and Divo, who slowly fall in love with one another. Due to the differences in their class status, Karin, Divo's mother-in-law, frowns upon Lestari and Divo's relationship and plots to separate them. To this end, various plans are orchestrated by Karin and Riska, Naomi's godmother, which include faking Naomi's death. Riska also attempts to disguise herself as Naomi to confuse Divo and defraud him of his wealth.

This Indonesian urban love story is centered on the mother-in-law's efforts to separate Divo and Lestari. The class struggles between rich and poor are major plot elements of the storyline. This type of plot is featured commonly in Indonesian dramas, unlike Malaysian dramas whereby class differences are downplayed. Furthermore, the romance between Lestari and Divo is of secondary importance, with more attention given to Karin and Riska's conspiracies to seize Divo's wealth. Lestari and Divo's relationship is moderated through constant monitoring of Divo's mother-in-law. Romantic interactions between the two main characters happen

unexpectedly, perhaps so as not to distract the viewer from the more captivating story of Karin and Riska.

The characters in this drama tend to be model stereotypes. On one extreme, Lestari is depicted as a young girl from a poor family with a good heart, who is constantly being intimidated by Karin and Riska. Portrayed as a loving person, Lestari has a high degree of tolerance for Karin and Riska, who together form Lestari's extreme opposite. Karin is depicted as a cruel person who is greedy and selfish, and always plotting and conspiring to take advantage of Lestari. As in many television dramas, Divo's character is depicted as a successful young businessman with a fortune who is attractive and well mannered. He is a loving husband and father, and always cares for his family.

The central location for this drama is the luxurious mansion occupied by Divo and his family, the mansion itself being used to reinforce the image of Divo's success and privilege. In contrast, the suburban slums are used to emphasize the disparity between the rich and poor. Most characters, with the exception of Lestari, are shown wearing stylish outfits, designer hairstyles, and skillfully applied expensive cosmetics, especially Riska and Karin. The underlying message is that elegance and modernization go hand-in-hand. It is also interesting to note the subtle association made between the conceitedness of Riska and Karin and the desire for upward social mobility or to live outside one's class.

### *The Heirs (Korea)*

This story features a group of rich, privileged, and elite high school students who are being groomed to assume their families' business empires. They are sent abroad to study and to gain experience in order to manage their families' wealth. Kim Tan is a handsome young man and heir to a large Korean conglomerate who has been sent to the elite school in which the story is set. He has a greedy stepbrother, Kim Won, who desires to assume the family's wealth for himself. While studying abroad, Kim Tan meets Cha Eun Sang, a girl from a poor family background who has

travelled to the U.S. in search of her sister; he falls in love with her. However, Kim Tan is already engaged to Rachel. Thus, Kim Tan's attempts to navigate this love triangle form an important plot element in *The Heir*. Upon his return to Korea, Kim Tan learns of Kim Won's plans to assume control of his family's wealth and assets.

The urban settings, such as Los Angeles and Seoul, are also used as important plot devices to establish the love story between Kim Tan and Cha Eun Sang and to create a more sophisticated romantic drama. Like the two previous dramas, *The Heir* is centered on a love that transcends social and economic classes, between a rich young man and a poor girl. The rich young man, Kim Tan, is a character with status and wealth. In direct opposition, Cha Eun Sang is a poor shy girl who is down-to-earth. Although an effort is made to portray a successful female character in Rachel, the drama continues to reinforce a gender stereotype by highlighting her obsession and devotion toward a man.

As noted earlier, Cha Eun Sang and Kim Tan's romance becomes more complicated when it is revealed that Kim Tan is already engaged to Rachel, a young educated girl who is also from a rich family background. The plot is further confounded by another character, Choi Young-do, who is in love with Cha Eun Sang. The story does not have a straightforward plot. Key themes discerned from the analysis involve revenge, greed, the ruthless pursuit of wealth, and power. Scenes that involved offices, in which the characters engage in corporate issues and discuss their company's wealth and fortune, are an integral part of this drama.

The urban drama is also evident in the way characters are presented physically. Most of the characters are depicted as highly sophisticated, dressed in elegant and classy styles typical of Korea's wealthy social elites and enjoying luxurious items. In short, *The Heir* glorifies a life of luxury associated with society's upper class.

#### *Temptation of Wife (The Philippines)*

*Temptation of Wife* is the story of two best friends, Angeline and Heidi, who share a deep bond of friendship. Heidi is an orphan who was adopted by Angeline's parents, Abner and Minda.

While, Angeline matures into a fine young woman, Heidi on the other hand, has become a hostile young woman who regards Angeline as being inferior to her. Angeline's beauty and personality earns her the attention of many young men, but she only has eyes for Marcel. Eventually she decides to marry Marcel and to abandon her plan to become a nurse. As a wife, she tries to fulfill her duties and take a good care of her entire family, including her in-laws. However, to her surprise she learns that Marcel has had an affair with Heidi and gotten her pregnant.

The story revolves around the romance and revenge of the protagonist character Angeline, who is betrayed by her husband and her close friend Heidi. The drama centers on the romantic relationship between two young people set against an urban backdrop. The earlier episodes centered on Angeline, an ordinary middle class girl, and Marcel, the rich aristocrat. These episodes featured their romance from the day they first met until their eventual marriage. The later episodes feature Angeline's married life and her poor treatment at the hands of her mother-in-law who believes herself to be superior because of the differences in their social status.

The plot did not become complicated until Heidi betrayed Angeline by having an affair with Marcel and attempted to kill her. Having survived the encounter, Angeline returns to take her revenge and seek justice. Whereas most Asian dramas depict the female protagonist as weak and dependent, and maintain this stereotype throughout the story, the character of Angeline has a complete role reversal in the later part of the series. Assuming a new identity, Angeline is now portrayed as being more confident and strong.

The urban or modern lifestyle of this drama is emphasized through the depiction of luxury bungalows, corporate offices, spas, and salons which are considered as places for the wealthy. The choice of premises shown is deliberate. This is a carefully assembled facade to create the illusion of sophistication in order to further represent rich and successful people living an urban life. Many of the characters are portrayed as having sophisticated jobs and interesting lifestyles. Furthermore, most of the characters appearing in the drama are attractive, regardless of their age. Characters are

dressed smartly in fashionable attire and brandishing luxurious accessories, again to further promote the idea of the extravagant city lifestyle.

## **Conclusion**

In the context of television drama, the Asian cultural exchange has undoubtedly created a new television phenomenon in the Asian region. Trendy dramas, adorned with the sophistication of modern lifestyles, in many ways reflect the contemporary hopes and dreams of many Asian communities by constructing their ideal world. These ambitions transcend ethnic and linguistic barriers, such that none of the Asian dramas analyzed in this study were at all unique representations of their country of origin. The same themes found in the Malaysian dramas could be easily identified in the Korean, Filipino, and Indonesian dramas. Furthermore, there was nothing distinctly “Asian” about these themes as the same could be found in many Western (Hollywood) and Latino dramas. A common thread amongst all dramas, irrespective of region of origin, is a reoccurring theme of love among typically young and/or middle aged people against a modern urban backdrop. Such familiar urban backgrounds create a sense of familiarity for domestic audiences.

Themes of urban romance, family, and vengeance transcend national boundaries as demonstrated in the selected Asian dramas from across of the Asian region. These themes are particularly apparent in the Indonesian and Filipino dramas. In the Indonesian dramas, the mother-in-law is cast into the role of the antagonist, masterminding plans to destroy Divo and his love life. In the drama from the Philippines, the protagonist, Angeline, takes on a new identity and a different personality following her attempted murder. The romantic aspects serve only to provide some relief from the revenge-based storylines that are the driving force behind these dramas and what ultimately attracts their audiences to them.

In the production from Malaysia, the urban romance focuses on the love-hate relationship between the two main characters. Audience emotions vacillate between these affective states as

they are kept in suspense wondering if Mya and Mikail will ever be together again and live happily ever after. In the Korean drama, similar themes emerge through the secret feelings that Kim Tan has toward Cha Eun Sang and the stepbrother's plans to assume control over the family's wealth.

Of course, romantic dramas on television are far from new. Almost all television dramas center on a romantic narrative structure of young or middle aged people living in a city. In a general sense, the narrative structures follow the time-honored approach with a beginning (set up), middle (confrontation), and ending (resolution). However, the television dramas examined in this study took simple love stories and complicated them, a formula common to trendy dramas and one well received by audiences across the Asian region.

Another feature common to the trendy drama, and reflected in the dramas analyzed, is the challenging of relationships. A third party, usually the antagonist, will attempt to separate the idealized couple. Other characters introduced throughout the story serve to create additional complications to the main plot. These characters add suspense and uncertainty.

Family is another important element integral to all of the dramas analyzed. Many conflicts and challenges surrounded family matters. Also of note, all of the dramas analyzed relied on extraordinary settings and interesting camera techniques to highlight the sophistication of the characters and settings. The Korean drama, for instance, was shot on location in the popular city location of Los Angeles. This setting was used extensively in the opening act to establish the story of how the main characters met. Other locations included striking office suites, luxurious and well-decorated mansions, impressive posh restaurants, spas, and other entertainment outlets which were used to insinuate an association between modern lifestyles and the urban environment.

Most of the characters appearing in each of the dramas were either young or middle aged. They were all very attractive with excellent features, and dressed in an elegant and stylish manner. Their characters' lifestyles were well-planned exercises in extravagance so as to grab the

audience's attention. These characters serve as role models for the standard of living that viewers should aspire to emulate.

Furthermore, the characteristics and plot elements of the Asian dramas described in this study shared many elements with the Western and Latino dramas previously mentioned. Themes of romance, family, vengeance, and embellished urban lifestyles are an important focal point of all television dramas globally. In short, the glorification of consumer culture and materialism are universal features of television dramas, and are not in any way unique to Asian dramas. There is nothing particularly "Asian" about Asian dramas other than the languages of the scripts and the ethnic appearances of the ensemble cast. All dramas, whether they are Asian, Western, or Latino, rely on a simple narrative of romantic love between two individuals; that story is exaggerated through the aid of apparent sophistication and complexity to create an illusion of elegance and an idealized, if unattainable, lifestyle in the eyes of the audience. Indeed, in scratching the surface of these seemingly complex dramas, one finds that they offer little, if any substance.

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