

# MEDICAL K-DRAMAS: A CROSS-SECTION OF SOUTH KOREA'S GLOBAL CULTURAL INDUSTRY

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## ABSTRACT

Starting off from five medical K-dramas, *General Hospital 2 / 종합병원2* (2009), *Brain / 브레인* (2011), *The Third Hospital / 제3의병원* (2012), *Medical Top Team* *메디컬탑팀* (2013) and *Doctor Stranger* *닥터이방인* (2014), this article attempts to explore different ways in which the creative content industry reflects genuine Korean cultural beliefs, moral values, political attitudes and economic goals in order to promote a successful image of Korea in the increasingly competitive soft power global context. My aim is to look beyond the specific storyline and recurring constitutive features of medical TV series and instead bring forward those elements that characterize Korea's current soft power approach to the globalized world: professional competence, hierarchical social relations and high technology. The latter deserves special attention, as South Korea's medical industry is currently flourishing, with state-of-the-art hospitals being built as far as the Middle East and Africa, while medical tourism is undergoing an unprecedented boom at home. In between these, the audience of medical K-dramas gains insight into Korean social relations, the dynamics of power and the human implications of any great achievement. Therefore, the creative content in these productions reflects the way South Korea wants to be perceived by the international community.

**Keywords:** soft power, Hallyu, Korean Wave, medical drama, medical tourism.

## INTRODUCTION

Ever since *Hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, crossed borders and expanded beyond a regional phenomenon in the late 2000s, South Korea's<sup>1</sup> presence on the international scene has been acknowledged like never before. From Tunis to Vancouver and from Teheran to Paris, people from all over the world have been exposed to Korea's cultural influence to some degree, be it cars, phones, K-pop music or K-drama television programs.

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<sup>1</sup>Hereafter, Korea will indicate South Korea unless otherwise specified.



Lee Myung-Bak, whose White Papers marked a new era in cultural diplomacy, was not the first Korean president to put content industry on the political agenda, but it was during his office (2008–2013) that Hallyu, and implicitly soft power, became a top priority as instrument for nation branding, to accelerate the country's cultural and economic progress. This policy was later embraced by Saenuri's newly elected Park Geun-Hye in 2013, who announced “creative economy” as her political project, at the core of which “lie science, technology and the IT industry, areas that I have earmarked as key priorities”. Through the convergence of science, technology and culture with industry, Park envisioned the accomplishment of a “Second Miracle on the Han River”<sup>2</sup>.

In terms of soft power, which deals with attracting and seducing rather than coercing in order to influence behaviour, this focus on science, technology and culture industry materialized in a strong backing from top businesses in the production and promotion of Hallyu products overseas, like K-pop and K-dramas. In turn, the content of these products is adjusted to suit not only standards of quality entertainment, but also economic goals, such as the promotion of Korean mobile devices, tourist attractions, heavy industry, medical equipment and professional expertise.

Dramas, and medical K-dramas in particular, are perhaps the most representative cultural product of this industry in terms of the soft power strategies it employs, because they provide the perfect medium for contextualized dissemination of contemporary Korean values and economic achievements. The viewers of these television programs are exposed not only to the web of intricate social relationships that shape the Korean society, but also to the local work ethic, beauty and moral standards and the high-technologization of life, from everyday gadgets like smartphone apps to the state-of-the-art electronic enhancement of hospitals. All these elements build into one picture of global Korea that affects the viewers' perception of the country and its people. The worldwide popularity of Korean mobile devices, the boom of medical tourism as well as the increasing export of medical know-how to countries where Hallyu products have achieved high ratings validates the interdependence between the creative content industry, the economy and the current political agenda of the Korean government.

Starting off from five medical K-dramas, *General Hospital 2 / 종합병원2* (2009), *Brain / 브레인* (2011), *The Third Hospital / 제3의병원* (2012), *Medical Top Team / 메디컬탑팀* (2013) and *Doctor Stranger / 닥터이방인* (2014), this article attempts to explore different ways in which creative content reflects genuine Korean cultural beliefs, moral values, political attitudes and economic goals in order to promote a successful image of Korea in the increasingly competitive soft

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<sup>2</sup> *The Miracle on the Han River* is a concept used to refer to South Korea's postwar rapid industrialization, technological achievement, rapid urbanization, education boom, democratization and rise in living standards that occurred ever since the 1960s.

power global context. Consequently, I have focused on drama productions that match both presidents Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-Hye's office terms and can, therefore, be acknowledged as recent products of soft power strategies.

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study uses a qualitative research method that draws upon narrative and interpretive analysis. The qualitative research first focused on selecting five medical dramas from the multitude of similar series available online, using as criteria the year of production (to match the period of official soft power policies), the broadcasting channel (to gain insight into other perspectives than of public national broadcasters), the thematic content and the overall relevance to the topic under discussion. I was particularly interested in series that differ from one another thematically, but at the same time are connected through the key elements of professional competence, hierarchy and high technology. Most of these dramas were familiar to me before starting my research, as an enthusiast viewer on Dramaload and YouTube. Secondly, I extracted from the selected dramas those elements that substantiated my assumptions about the three key elements: work ethic and fields of medical expertise, types of hierarchical relationships and causes of discrimination, contextualized use of high-tech equipment and product placement. For example, both *Brain* and *Doctor Stranger* feature characters overtly using Samsung smartphones and testing their different applications or physical features, while in *General Hospital 2* and *Medical Top Team* there is an extensive use of tablets, LCD displays and surgical equipment, correlated with complex medical terminology explained on-screen in Korean and English. Thirdly, I made an investigation of how these medical dramas could relate to the medical tourism boom in Korea and the exporting of Korean medical know-how by looking at relevant statistical data and similar research done on the tourism and IT industries.

In carrying out this qualitative approach, I primarily used five kinds of resources. First is the theoretical framework, which integrated this study in the context of soft power and sociological theories of communication. A second resource is statistics and reports from official organizations and governing bodies such Korea Tourism Organization or Korea Health Industry Development Institute, that illustrate the government's soft power policies. Another type of statistics involved ratings for the selected dramas, from Hallyu-oriented websites and audience-rating companies. Thirdly, I used published and unpublished academic dissertations related to medical dramas, the Hallyu phenomenon and Korea's soft power policies. A fourth resource involved online academic articles, encyclopedias and scholarly journals. The fifth resource and the core material of my analysis were the five medical K-dramas, which I watched online. I took into consideration not only the duration, air time, number of episodes and patterns of theme, characters

and plot, but also focused on why and how these variables are exploited to prompt added value to these entertainment productions and ultimately, a successful response from their audiences.

The limitations of my study are of two kinds and leave the door open for further research on the topic of medical K-dramas. First, the lack of resources in Korean language, which would have given more “insider” perspectives about specific soft power policies aimed at boosting medical tourism, as well as detailed information regarding the beneficiaries of Korean medical know-how. Secondly, the mainly qualitative approach situates this study in a hypothetical context, because there is no absolute, clear evidence as to how much the broadcast of medical K-dramas actually influences the growth of the medical industry (medical tourism included) and the purchase of Korean high-tech products.

In order to underline the specificity and aims of medical K-dramas, I will first draw a brief parallel to other similar international programs, namely American medical series, as it is in the United States that the genre was born and several features of contemporary American medical dramas can be identified in their Korean counterparts.

In the subsequent section, I will refer to several soft power strategies that are used in medical K-dramas and how they illustrate values and attitudes that represent Korea’s global stand, moreover, the way it wants to be perceived by the international community.

The last section of this article will consist of a brief investigation of how soft power translates into economic progress, ultimately a form of hard power, by exploring the booming medical tourism industry in Korea and plastic surgery as successful products of the Korean Wave.

#### MEDICAL DRAMAS AS A SPECIFIC GENRE

First aired at the beginning of the 1950s in the United States, medical dramas center on events and characters in a medical environment, most often a contemporary urban hospital, with a special focus on medical procedures.

Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, in his 1964 work “Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man” predicted a big success of the medical genre on TV, because this medium “creates an obsession with bodily welfare”:

*One of the most vivid examples of the tactile quality of the TV image occurs in medical experience. In closed-circuit instruction in surgery, medical students reported a strange effect – that they seemed not to be watching an operation, but performing it. They felt that they were holding the scalpel. Thus the TV image, in fostering a passion for depth involvement in every aspect of experience, creates an obsession with bodily welfare.*

Although the television medium developed enormously in the next half a century as it entered the digital age, medical series retained some initial features, particularly the realism of the medical procedures. This, despite higher production costs, proved to be one of the ingredients of success and paved the way of medical dramas into an established television genre and a staple product for major broadcasters around the world. Recent examples of this are American medical series *E.R.*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *House M.D.* and *Scrubs*.

In her study about the reception of *ER* in Britain, “where medical dramas have been a highly popular television staple”, and in France, “where both their numbers and the enthusiasm of the public have been much lower”, Solange Davin revealed similar interpretive themes in all 200 viewers’ responses. In both countries, the “Americanness” of *ER* was seen as a major asset in fostering a sense of excitement, of fascination, of anticipation which local channels seem unable to deliver. In addition, spectators from both countries used the series as a source of socio-medical data on the American market-led health structures, which they compared and contrasted with European healthcare organization. The no-payment-no-treatment system was rejected as unacceptable and was overwhelmingly considered inferior to British or French welfare provision, which makes free care available to all citizens, rich or poor. There was also widespread consensus about realism, *ER* being repeatedly depicted as realistic and so true-to-life that *you feel that you are there*, many wrote. In this discourse, the “Americanness” of *ER*, which was foregrounded at other times, was now rendered invisible as bio-medicine, technology, hospital procedures and routines, doctors’ gestures and mistakes were taken as universal and the ward became an almost familiar, and thus realistic, space. Viewers’ personal experiences and knowledge could act as a benchmark of reality – they recalled stays in or visits to hospitals and/or recounted appointments with physicians and drew private connections (Davin, 2001).

With such a worldwide appeal, in both anglophone and traditionally “anti-American” societies, the presence of American culture is reflected in the content as well as the marketing of Hallyu productions. In his article, Shim pointed out that “in their efforts to create a cultural industry, Koreans emulated and appropriated the American media system”, however Hallyu cultural products do not merely imitate American productions, but they incorporate into a global, hybridized form of Korean culture, that appeals to American audiences for this reason (Shim 2006, 32).

It is precisely this hybridity which is the key ingredient of the popularity of Korean medical dramas, not just in the United States, but also in Asia and the Middle East, and analyzing its component elements sheds light on the soft power strategies employed to maximize the success of these cultural products in economic terms.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF KOREAN MEDICAL DRAMAS

Korean medical dramas display several similar features to American series, especially in the initial stage of the genre on the peninsula, from 1995 to 2007. These first series, such as *General Hospital* (종합병원, 1995), *Medical Brothers* (의가형제, 1997) or *Medical Center* (메디컬센터, 2000), dealt – in rather general terms – with the daily bustle in the hospital, the lives of the patients and the hardships and ambitions of doctors, and aired for at least one season (16 to 92 episodes), therefore outlining most typical features of American medical series. However, these ice breakers did not gain a large recognition among Korean audiences (who were also fans of American medical dramas) and the following productions were noticeably shorter in length and more embedded in Korean social issues and values. For example, *White Tower* (하얀거탑), *New Heart* (뉴하트) and *Surgeon Bog Dal Hee* (외과의사봉달희), all produced in 2007 and running for a maximum of 23 episodes, dealt with issues that would become basic ingredients of future medical K-dramas: institutional power struggles, discrimination because of educational background or striving to succeed as a female doctor in the male-dominated field of surgery. The **one-season format** is kept to this day, with most current productions spanning over an average of 20 episodes of approximately 60 minutes, aired twice a week, after prime time news bulletins.

The **setting** of these dramas is invariably a large university hospital in a big city like *Seoul* (“*St. Mary's Catholic University Hospital*” was a frequent location for filming), which aspires to become the best in the country. To support this objective, which also forms the basis for the plot, these hospitals are enhanced with state-of-the-art equipment which is paired with the doctors' unique talents and professionalism in order to offer a highly competitive alternative to American university hospitals, which are sometimes mentioned in reference to VIP patients' treatment choices. As I shall discuss later on, this scenario is not at all fiction, and the recent boom in Korea's medical tourism industry indicates just how serious Korean hospitals are about international competition.

Moreover, just like their American counterparts, Korean doctors are faced with various challenges, from emotional problems to life-and-death situations that require their utmost personal involvement and surgical skills. As they surpass these difficulties, they develop into highly competent medical specialists who master not only the precision of the scalpel, but also discover themselves and come to understand the importance of compassion towards patients and loved ones. Oftentimes, this also translates into a moment of realization, when long-time rival doctors come to recognize each other's skills and show mutual unconditional respect. This **theme** is common in productions on both sides of the Pacific and allows audiences to have a better understanding of the social and emotional factors behind the medical profession.

Whereas American series focus more on the lives of individual **characters**, Korean dramas favour the interpersonal dynamics of the collective and generally follow a pattern that reflects the local social values and antagonisms: two male lead doctors engage in a fierce competition to be the best in the hospital and claim the top hierarchical position, but are caught in a love triangle with a less skilled female doctor. She nonetheless helps them both achieve emotional maturity, while she succeeds in improving her medical performance by learning from them. This focus on a lead trio is also prevalent in other types of K-dramas because it capitalizes on competition (education, profession, love), which is an inherent part of Korean life. It is interesting to notice the portrayal of the “negative” male lead, who often exhibits traits that are associated with *Koreanness* in many Hallyu and non-Hallyu productions: injustice and abuse in earlier life, continuously struggling for the top position but falling into a “second best” position, facing discrimination because of social, educational and family background, being overcome by feelings of envy and frustration while harbouring a revenge plan upon all who caused him harm. However, it is this particular character who eventually reaches self-realization by abandoning negative feelings and also achieves professional success and peer recognition.

Subsequently, the **plot** of medical K-dramas usually centres around the hidden intentions of one of the lead characters, while each episode develops secondary smaller plots that result from the continuous influx of patients into the hospital. This feature is also where each drama brings in its share of originality, by presenting a storyline that goes beyond the operating room and touching upon delicate social issues such as discrimination, institutional corruption, professional ethics, tradition *vs.* modernity and even the subterfuges of the South-North political agenda.

#### CASE STUDY: FIVE KOREAN MEDICAL DRAMAS

In order to discuss the soft power strategies employed in Korean medical dramas, I will first make a brief presentation of the five series that I have chosen to illustrate my observations, focusing on the key elements explained above and the productions' ratings.

*General Hospital 2* / *종합병원2* aired on public broadcaster MBC, from November 19th, 2008 to January 15th, 2009, for a total of 17 episodes, on Wednesdays and Thursdays at 21:55. The setting is a big university hospital in Seoul, where a fresh graduate female doctor wants to be a medical malpractice litigation specialist. She gains experience while observing and working with a team of young doctors, of which the male lead intern struggles to become a fully accomplished doctor. Special attention is given to hierarchical structure and the value of institutional 'face', as the hospital is involved in several malpractice

controversies concerning their patients. The drama reported average ratings of 16.4% nationwide and 17.1% in the capital.

*Brain* / 브레인 aired on national public broadcaster KBS2, from November 14th, 2011 to January 17th, 2012, for a total of 20 episodes, on Mondays and Tuesdays at 21:55. It is the story of ambitious surgeon Lee Kang Hoon who struggles with his traumatic past to overcome his teacher and rival and becomes the director of an elite neurosurgery institution in Korea, Chunha University Hospital. His obsession with success is both his greatest flaw and his strength, as he develops complex relationships with those around him: a master-pupil relationship which turns into a psychological war with his superior, Professor Kim Sang Chul, a discreet romance with third-year resident Yoon Ji Hye, which transforms into a love triangle because of another top male surgeon with better credentials, SeoJoon Suk. This drama achieved ratings of 12.9% nationwide and 13.6% in Seoul, while MyDramaList mentions online viewership ratings of over 20%.

*The Third Hospital* / 제3의병원 aired on private channel tvN, from September 5th to November 8th, 2012, for 20 episodes, on Wednesdays and Thursdays at 23:00. Bringing in a fresh perspective to both drama production and to contemporary medicine, this series revolves around two departments competing Western (surgery) and Eastern traditional (acupuncture) medicine at a university hospital in Seoul. The two irreconcilable teams eventually join forces to become the best alternative hospital in the country. As each department features a genius doctor, top surgeon Kim Doo Hyun and talented traditional medicine doctor Kim Seung Hyun, a love triangle develops when female surgery intern JinHye In begins to admire Seung Hyun. In addition to their conflicting perspectives on medicine, the two male doctors have a common traumatic childhood experience. At the center of a secondary plot is a supporting character played by K-Pop idol Choi Soo Young, of Girls' Generation. The challenge to reunite Western and Eastern (traditional) medicine ultimately benefits the patients and presents the foreign viewer with a very competitive image of Korea's medical expertise. The websites AsianWiki and HanCinema give this drama an overall rating of 90/100, based on the visitors' votes.

*Medical Top Team* / 메디컬탑팀 aired on MBC, from October 9th to December 12th, 2013 for 20 episodes, on Wednesdays and Thursdays at 22:00. Among the medical K-dramas discussed here, this production focuses the most on professional competence, state-of-the-art medical technology and the open competition with other renowned international hospitals, in the fields of thoracic and cardiovascular surgery. As the title indicates, this drama introduces a team of highly qualified medical specialists from different fields and institutions, co-opted by the vice-president of GwangHye University Hospital to become the leading medical specialists in the country and to challenge similar international institutions. The main lead, Dr. Park Tae Shin, is a graduate of medical school in the United States, yet he humbly chooses to work as a volunteer in rural hospitals before being

invited to join the team. After encountering cardiovascular chief Han Seung Jae and younger thoracic specialist SeoJoo Young, who are locals of GwangHye Hospital, their relationship evolves into a profession-love triangle. Just like *The Third Hospital*, this drama features a famous K-Pop star (Choi Min Ho of SHINee) as a supporting character. Despite Dr. Park's initial outsider status, the team members join forces in order to face the various challenges that arise and use their multidisciplinary expertise for the benefit of all patients, not only VIPs – an issue very much at the core of the Korean healthcare system. This production gained ratings of 5.5% nationwide and 8% in Seoul, according to TNmS Media Korea and AGB Nielsen Korea.

*Doctor Stranger* 닥터이방인 aired on national private broadcaster SBS, from May 5th to July 8th, 2014 for 20 episodes, on Mondays and Tuesdays at 22:00. Unlike the other four dramas, this production revolves around the life story of one character, Park Hoon, a South Korean surgeon who was sent with his father to North Korea when he was a child, amidst a diplomatic crisis concerning the health of North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung. Through pressure and various unorthodox methods, Park is trained to become a genius doctor and he eventually manages to escape to the South, accidentally landing a job at a top university hospital in Seoul. This drama brings a new perspective to the recurring “outsider” character in medical K-dramas and adds a political dimension to the medical profession. Despite his remarkable medical talent and speaking the same language, he is treated as a foreigner, the hospital staff and the patients distrust and fear him, which all adds to his struggle to find his North Korean love, a doctor herself. A profession-love triangle forms as the daughter of the hospital's CEO falls in love with Park Hoon, only to reveal the conflictual personality of the other male lead surgeon, who is driven to excellence by his thirst for revenge. The “doctor stranger” is played by famous Hallyu actor Lee Jong Suk, who does a great job at portraying the tragic fate of ordinary people caught in the intricate web of politics between the two divided Koreas (both male lead doctors are the products of secret negotiations between the South and the North). This drama gained average ratings of 11,8% nationwide and 14% in Seoul. Despite the political implications, *Doctor Stranger* gained an unexpected recognition among Chinese fans and is scheduled to be made into a film, to be released only in China. The storyline is expected to be different though, with the 1,400-minute drama being cut down to 120 minutes and additional shooting of footage, while the actors' voices will be dubbed (Jones 2014).

As the ratings indicate, these series had larger audiences in Seoul and on online drama websites. The differences in viewership could be linked to the novelty of the various series that were broadcast in 2007, when the medical genre began to incorporate legal and ethical elements from the procedural detective genre (*General Hospital 2*), the featuring of notable actors in the cast and expanding the thematic horizon to psychology and politics (*Brain, Doctor Stranger*).

### BEHIND THE DOCTOR'S MASK: SOFT POWER STRATEGIES

Upon closer examination, beyond the specific storyline and recurring constitutive elements, medical dramas are the perfect medium to disseminate the directions of Korea's current soft power approach to the globalized world: professional competence, hierarchical social relations and high technology. The latter deserves special attention, as South Korea's medical industry is currently flourishing, with state-of-the-art hospitals being built as far as the Middle East and Africa, while medical tourism is undergoing an unprecedented boom at home. Therefore, the creative content in these productions reflects genuine Korean cultural beliefs, moral values, political attitudes and economic goals which shape the way this middle power wants to be perceived by the international community.

#### I. PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

Regardless of their specialization, personality or educational background, the majority of medical staff depicted in these K-dramas are highly qualified, diligent and reliable health professionals. This is particularly true for the main characters, who are often top surgeons in their respective fields, but also applies to intern doctors, nurses and paramedics who are usually the first to intervene in emergency situations. Everyone is putting their skills and hard work on the line, and even those who initially started as cheaters or avoiding work, eventually learn to respect and care for their patients and grow professionally, as well as emotionally, by the end of the last episode.

Striving to be the best in Korean society typically involves facing social pressure, so not one of the main characters in these five K-dramas is overlooked from the pains of discrimination, humiliation and compromise. Enduring all this in order to become a fully qualified doctor is similar to the image of South Korea's remarkable economic progress, the "Miracle on the Han River", that took only 30 years to accomplish. When Park Chung-Hee seized power in 1961, South Korea had a per capita income of less than \$80 per year. Today, it is the world's 15th largest economy.

Moreover, the viewers of medical K-dramas might notice a focus on specific fields of medical expertise: thoracic and cardiovascular surgery, reconstructive surgery, cancer treatment and neurosurgery. The emphasis on these fields is not random, but reflects those areas of medical competence in which Korea excels at international level. While the country is often linked to plastic surgery because of the popularity of Hallyu celebrities, few people know that it has the highest rate (over 60%) of five-year survival after surgical treatment for most major cancers.

In the light of these facts, professional competence lies at the core of Korea's international reputation and this claim is also supported by examples from the K-dramas discussed here – in *Brain*, *Medical Top Team* and *Doctor Stranger*, one

of the lead doctors has either graduated from a top medical university in the United States or is offered a privileged position there. It is also quite common for VIP patients to express a preference for American hospitals over Korean ones, but change their option at the very last moment and give a vote of trust to their local specialists.

Hand in hand with professional competence is the appreciation of human life. As in the case of VIP patients, these top doctors come to realize that they should dedicate their effort and skills to the benefit of all people who need them, regardless of social background. This issue is prevalent in all five dramas and its moralist tone can be linked to the national health insurance policy in Korea, which discriminates between regular and premium medical services, according to income.

## II. THE IMPORTANCE OF HIERARCHY IN SOCIAL RELATIONS

Originating in Tang China and spanning well over a millennium across the peninsula, Neo-Confucianism is still deeply ingrained in Korean social relations, from principles regarding one's family, to education and work ethics. Neo-Confucianism puts emphasis on the importance of the family and the group over the individual and has been extended to Korean business as well (Kim and Park 2003). For example, employees are expected to regard the workplace as a family, with the head of the company as “the patriarch” who enjoys exclusive privileges while the employees are expected to work harder. The businesses tend to operate on Confucian ethics as well, such as the importance of harmonious relations among the workers and loyalty to the company. Importance is placed on attributes such as differences in age, kinship status, sex, and socio-political status (Kim 1996, 220). Although these principles may come across as draconian, they did materialize in uniquely Korean assets: the teamwork spirit and the “can do” work ethic that is behind Korea’s miraculous advancement, since the 1960s.

Another prevalent image in these K-dramas is the fierce competition among doctors and the relationship with peers and superiors. Regardless of whether they are an intern or a top surgeon, everyone faces pressure from above, which often means compromising or breaking the work ethics for institutional fame or financial gain. Despite it being a construct, power is very little negotiated and those who have an initial advantage (such as educational background or belonging to elite families) usually take it for granted and act for their own benefit and in disregard of the patients.

The realities of the Korean workplace influence even the way people look, and it is interesting to notice the connection between facial features and success, which in turn reveals why Koreans are so open to surgery in terms of socially “fitting in” and also why surgeons are such popular characters in K-dramas. As

pointed out in an article on Beyond Hallyu (2013) about the plastic surgery debate, the hyper-competitive nature of modern Korean society has come to exist mostly as a result of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and has largely influenced the massive increase in cosmetic procedures in Korea. However, there are also other cultural and social influences, such as the widespread belief in physiognomy, or the reading of faces, rooted in Neo-Confucianism. In a survey in 2005, around half of Koreans believed that a person's character can be determined by looking at their facial features and that your face can influence your fortune, which in turn encourages Koreans to follow the same trends. Therefore, the influence of Neo-Confucianism on plastic surgery trends lies in its emphasis on conformity.

Another survey conducted in 2012 shows that four out of ten Korean people felt that they had been discriminated against because of their appearance, with half of them having never been hired at all as a direct result. Additionally, 85.2% of those interviewed felt appearance has an effect on the outcome of job hunting, which can explain why Korean men and young women use plastic surgery more than people in other countries with high cosmetic surgery rates (Greece, for example). Lizzie from Beyond Hallyu concludes that *plastic surgery, particularly natural-looking, 'Korean-like' surgery, has become a status symbol and a sign of success* that is largely acknowledged by society.

The mix of hierarchical pressure and fierce competition inevitably fosters various degrees of bias against skilled individuals, because of their "outsider" status (education / alma mater, social background, professional affiliation, political or ethnic belonging) as depicted in *Medical Top Team* and *Doctor Stranger*; because of their gender, with the obvious prevalence of male doctors and medical experts and the portrayal of female doctors as "lesser skilled" and excessively feminine (*Brain*) or, if they do have the skills and ambition to climb the hierarchical ladder, they are being dissuaded from competing for top positions (*General Hospital 2*, *Medical Top Team*); and also because of their incapability to "fit in", and the recurring theme for this is a common traumatic past experience between two main characters (*Brain*, *The Third Hospital*).

The denunciation of corruption at institutional level and in politics and the conundrum of North Korean refugees in *Doctor Stranger* are aspects that challenge the rigidity and opacity of hierarchical structures on both sides of the DMZ and emphasize on the devastating effect they have on social relations among ordinary people: mistrust, loss of family and loved ones, stigmatization or unemployment.

But the Confucian social ethics is also at the root of a collective sense of belonging (to the medical department or hospital), which in turn motivates each individual in the team to work towards a common goal for the benefit of the patients, and that, eventually, boosts the reputation of the medical institution itself. In this context, hierarchy is the foundation of respect and recognition of another's achievements, as it often happens in the last episodes of these K-dramas.

### III. HIGH-TECH MEDICAL EQUIPMENT AND INNOVATION

Medical high technology is perhaps the most visible aspect of Korea's development in these dramas, even more so because this image fits in perfectly with the global IT-savvy profile Korea has built for itself over the past decades. The state-of-the-art hospitals we see in medical K-dramas are a natural and expected confirmation of the degree to which high technology has become a part of life for ordinary Korean people. This impression is underlined by the highly professional performance of doctors and other medical staff, whose knowledge of innovative surgical procedures and triumph during most emergency situations instill a feeling of trust and admiration in the viewers.

High technology is usually depicted through a realistic, large-scale use of the latest mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets, notebooks, LCD displays and high-tech medical equipment like operating room systems, CT scanners and imaging systems. It is also worth paying attention to the frequent use of medical terminology, with names of various complex procedures being explained on-screen in English and Korean.

But Korea's medical assets go beyond high-tech equipment and well into traditional culture, as the country inherited a thousand-year old tradition of acupuncture from China, which it has further developed and which is still largely popular today, especially among senior citizens. Dramas like *The Third Hospital* only do justice to this medical tradition, that favors non-invasive procedures and the efficient management of inner energy (*qi*) over modern Western-style medicine. In one episode of the drama, a foreign (English) doctor that visits Korea for a surgery conference suddenly collapses to the floor because of chronic back pain, but is reinvigorated and brought back on his feet by the traditional medicine doctor who performs a successful emergency procedure on him. The foreign "patient" publicly acknowledges his benefactor and concludes that "I shall have to study in depth Korea's oriental medicine".

The practical use of high technology devices and equipment is usually depicted in the context of diagnosis, emergency communication and ultimately, during surgery procedures, for the successful treatment of patients. Most of the actors in these K-dramas master the terminology and act out very realistic surgeries, thus making complex medical procedures visually accessible to their audiences. This could also be interpreted as commodification of healthcare, so that viewers have insight into the medical profession and gain more self-confidence in choosing their own doctors and treatments. Additionally, audiences of medical K-dramas would know what to expect from a Korean hospital, should they ever find themselves in the circumstances to need one, or by actively seeking Korean medical expertise through medical tourism.

### SOUTH KOREA'S MEDICAL TOURISM INDUSTRY

Before addressing the boom in Korea's medical tourism industry, let me briefly introduce an example of soft power strategy designed by the Samsung Economic Research Institute, which gives a good overview of how Hallyu content industry is developed and what are the expectations of its creators: *Stage 1. Popularity of Korean popular culture: Korean dramas, movies and K-pop become popular outside of Korea. Other countries start broadcasting Korean dramas; Stage 2. Purchase of Korean popular culture products: besides broadcasting Korean dramas, movie ticket sales and DVD sales start rising. Foreigners start buying K-pop records and attend concerts; Stage 3. Purchase of other Korean products: Hallyu inspires countries to buy Korean products related to the Korean popular culture such as food, Korean language, plastic surgery and tourism; Stage 4. Favorable impression of Korea: other countries get a new positive impression of South Korean lifestyle and culture.*

It is interesting to notice how each stage caters to specific industries. Stages 1 and 2 are most relevant for the Korean music, movie and broadcasting industries. Stage 3 is very relevant for companies like Samsung, Hyundai and LG, which hope product exposure in the creative content of Hallyu productions will bring more attention to their products. Whereas stages 3 and 4 are most relevant for the Korean government, since they project a favorable, desirable even, image of Korea worldwide (Tuk 2012, 27).

Technological sophistication and professional competence dominate medical K-dramas precisely for these reasons and act as the main tools in promoting Korea as the most obvious choice for medical tourism. As Sherri L. Ter Molten (2014) notes, "these images are familiar rather than foreign, and attached to them are memories from their favourite dramas, movies or K-pop music videos." It's worth recalling here the not-so-random presence of K-pop idols (who are also icons of Korean beauty) in medical drama productions, in supporting roles that emphasize softness and encourage them to look pretty and smile often. Molten adds that "Korean tourism agencies are already capitalizing on U.S. fans' love of Korean popular culture in the hopes that they will ride the Korean wave all the way back across the Pacific Ocean to visit South Korea itself."

In a report submitted to the U.N. World Tourism Organization in 2012 and entitled "Medical Korean Wave 4.0", executive director Semann Kim of the Medical Tourism Department at Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) outlined the success factors behind Korea's growth as a medical tourism destination: *excellence in medical care and service* – the top survival rate for cancer, Asia's best international medical journal publication, state-of-the-art medical infrastructure, projects to export medical IT to Saudi Arabia over the next 10 years; *easy accessibility* – the close proximity of Seoul to major cities in Asia, easy connections to other major cities and direct flights available from major cities in

North America and Europe; “*Hallyu*”, *Korean Wave* – the influence of K-pop stars and the standard of Korean Beauty which gained growing recognition of expertise in the field of cosmetics, as well as the abundant opportunities for cultural/touristic activities; and *the strong support from government* – the government selected ‘medical tourism’ as one of the new economic growth engines.

The report further mentioned a new approach of creative solutions, that would focus on traditional medicine as Korean speciality, whose uniqueness and effectiveness of traditional treatments (for example, skincare or weight loss) would differentiate Korea from other destinations. Additionally, an on-line platform for medical tourism would be developed by KTO in order to promote medical tourism, so that the potential medical tourists and the medical providers can easily interact with one another. The report concluded that “KTO envisions Korea as a medical tourist destination improving the quality and efficiency of medical care that’s value based”.

Consequently, as of 2014, the medical industry in Korea has followed three main directions of development: medical innovation, local medical expertise and the globalization of Korean medical know-how. Medical innovation translated into a continuous collaboration between science and technology industry – for example, big “chaebol” businesses that developed a medical division such as Samsung Medical Center, LG Life Sciences and medical manufacturing companies like Pharmicell, Zerone or Mediana. Statistics from the Korean Medical Devices Industry Association indicate an average annual growth rate of 7% in the medical device market between 2007 and 2012, with a manufacture growth rate of 6.5%, a rise in exports to 9.1% and an import average growth of 5%.

The local medical expertise, in turn, encourages the growth of medical tourism. Seoul TouchUp and Korea Health Industry Development Institute reported a constant increase in the number of medical tourists in Korea since 2007, so that in 2014 their number was well over 300,000. The vast majority of foreign patients come from China (60,000 tourists), followed by the United States (approximately 30,000 tourists), Russia (17,000 tourists), Japan (the only decreasing trend, at 15,000 tourists) and Mongolia (approximately 10,000 medical tourists). The most popular procedures involve double eyelid and nose surgeries, which are done by 80% of the medical tourists. For non-Asian tourists, facial bone surgery, liposuction and facelift are the most popular options. The reasons for these foreign patients’ choice of Korea were the familiarity with the country’s high technology, the popularity of Hallyu beauty standards and cosmetic surgery and the medical expertise at affordable prices (50% to 70% less for various procedures, compared to Singapore and the United States). In this context, Korea has come to own a total market share of 24% (5 trillion dollars) of the world’s plastic surgery market in 2014, according to the Fair Trade Commission of the Republic of Korea.

The globalization of Korean know-how is visible in Korea's medical investments abroad: setting up hospitals, medical centers and hospital information systems (HIS) in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates or Ethiopia, the training of foreign doctors at Seoul National University Hospital and sending emergency units for relief operations in different parts of the world where catastrophes occurred (for example, the Ebola Virus epidemic in West Africa in 2014 or the aftermath of the Nepal earthquake in 2015).

### CLOSING REMARKS

This brief presentation of Korea's medical industry and the development of medical tourism served to illustrate how Korea's soft power strategies, as reflected in Hallyu products like medical K-dramas, translate into economic progress, ultimately a form of hard power.

By projecting images of professional competence, hierarchical social relations and high technology, which are at the core of Korean social and moral values and economic goals, medical K-dramas shape the way international audiences view the country and at the same time offer an alternative to the Western-style healthcare standards by emphasizing the country's double specialisation, that combines the oriental medicine tradition with top-notch surgical expertise. The use of creative content has in turn favoured the boom of medical tourism, with fans coming to Korea to have a firsthand experience of the country they had seen in series, to visit places of interest, but also to benefit from Korean medical expertise at much lower prices than in their home countries China, USA or Japan.

Further beyond their overt economic objective, these dramas provide the perfect contemporary context for easy insight into Korean social issues such as institutional corruption, gender and educational bias and the conundrum of North Korean refugees, challenging the perfection of technological and welfare achievements, yet in this way providing a plausible overall picture of the country. This straightforwardness about sensitive issues is also a form of soft power and it is worth noticing Korea's neutral status as producer of creative content and its lack of a "colonial baggage". As digital-marketing specialist Wayne Arnold pointed out, "Korea combines easy-to-access entertainment with a "non-confrontational image ... whereas with brands like the U.S., brands like Russia, brands like China, you have immediate polarization." (National Post, August 2, 2014)

It can therefore be concluded that medical K-dramas are a successful product of the Hallyu creative content industry and that the three key ingredients discussed here *shape a general positive picture of Korea that results in global appreciation of the country and its people.*

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