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Korean TV dramas find new fans, outlets with online video

DramaFever Web site delivers shows via Hulu

By Wailin Wong, Tribune reporter
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A samurai movie crossed with the TV series "24" and "The West Wing." If that's not your fancy, how about "Anne of Green Gables" meets cooking show "Iron Chef"?

Those are some of the ways American viewers describe their favorite Korean TV dramas, a genre that has amassed a small but dedicated audience across the U.S., including in Chicago.

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Now, thanks to the mainstream explosion of online video, fans of Korean dramas are finding new ways to watch their shows, while entrepreneurs are eyeing opportunities to bring this content to a much wider audience. This dynamic underscores how the Web can expose a quirky subculture or underground phenomenon to more people through the increased flow of multimedia content and word of mouth.

The 2009 debut of singer [Susan Boyle](#) on "Britain's Got Talent," for example, went unnoticed by most Americans until the video of her performance exploded on [YouTube](#), which led to a chart-topping album.

Late Carnegie Mellon University professor Randy Pausch's inspirational speech in 2007 on his struggles with pancreatic cancer was another real-life event that became an Internet sensation and later a best-selling book titled "The Last

Lecture."

In Chicago, many devotees of Korean dramas got hooked when, while idly channel surfing, they landed on an episode broadcast on WOCH-Ch. 41 (formerly Ch. 28) and became attracted to the family relationships, contemporary romances or historical pageantry depicted in the programs.

"People go crazy over this stuff," said Seung Bak, one of the co-founders of New York-based DramaFever, a Web site launched in August for North Americans to watch Korean shows. About 70 percent of the site's 250,000 unique monthly users are non-Asian, the company said.

DramaFever negotiated licensing agreements with major Korean broadcasters to stream their content on the site. Shows are supported by advertising, but users can pay \$4.99 per month for an ad-free subscription.

This month, DramaFever unveiled a partnership with [Hulu](#). The online video site features five Korean shows courtesy of DramaFever. Bak and co-founder Suk Park said they will add fresh titles to Hulu on a monthly basis. They're also planning to add shows from other Asian countries to DramaFever's lineup.

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"The popularity of this was never in dispute. It was about how to access it," Bak said. "The general availability of the content has always been a big issue."

The growing online availability of Korean dramas is a boon to fans who have struggled to find a steady supply of shows. Because WOCH is an analog-only station, even determined Chicago-area viewers experienced difficulty finding the channel or watching it clearly after the transition to digital signals last summer.

Alternatives to broadcast television include DVDs or scouring the Web for videos posted by other fans, often pirated or broken up into six- or seven-minute pieces, options that have limitations.

"It is difficult to find (DVDs) because I don't speak Korean. I don't feel comfortable going into a Korean video store and browsing," said Chicagoan Heather Jagman, who began watching dramas more than five years ago when she stumbled on the historical epic "Dae Jang-Geum," or "A Jewel in the Palace."

A co-worker told Jagman, 39, about DramaFever last year. Watching foreign-language TV on a laptop has its drawbacks, as Jagman and her husband have difficulty reading subtitles if they're both clustered around a small screen. But she's still hooked.

"I don't watch a lot of TV," said Jagman, 39. "Why I come back to Korean dramas is because I was a literature major, and there's that whole idea of stories being the same across cultures."

Gail Shintaku of Mount Prospect said she experimented with one site and missed five episodes of a show because the videos were unavailable or "would run funny."

Shintaku discovered Korean dramas when, about 10 years ago, an aunt mailed her VHS tapes of a show called "Winter Sonata" while she was keeping her ill mother company. Shintaku estimates she and her mother watched the entire series eight times. Now she buys DVDs online and swaps them with her sister and another friend.

"They're all good: the cute ones, the historical ones, the modern-day ones, even the ones with family problems," said Shintaku, 66. "We watch them all."

Fascination with South Korean culture is such a prevalent force in other parts of the world, especially Asia, that the phenomenon has its own term: Hallyu, or the Korean Wave. Robert Cagle, a cinema studies specialist at the University of Illinois Library in Urbana-Champaign, said the Web has been a major force in spreading Hallyu and Korean dramas. Not only are there Web sites to watch videos but also online fan forums.

"It is inspiring to see how these fan groups, or 'families,' as some prefer to be called, have developed amazingly complex social networks, bringing together viewers from all parts of the globe and disseminating information every bit as quickly as any news service could," Cagle wrote in an e-mail.

Bo Brown said joining an online message board for Chicago-area drama fans in 2003 marked a turning point in her overall Web usage.

"Being on the board shaped all of my Web habits because I wasn't a person who was on the Web a lot," said Brown, who added with a laugh that "the amount of time I waste on the Internet is directly related to Korean dramas."

Online activity on the forum and offline meet-ups have dwindled in recent years as programming became harder to find, said J.P. Paulus, who helps moderate the Chicago message board. Paulus, who started watching Korean dramas in 1994, is unsure about making the switch to online.

"For me, it's still complicated to be able to watch them the way I would like to," said Paulus, referring to the richly decorated sets and costumes of a typical historical saga. "Certainly with a Korean drama, there's so much detail in the show that a 15-inch screen is not going to do."


Still, Bak believes that bringing these shows to the Web will win new fans and satisfy existing ones, like Amber Lee, who grew up in South Korea watching serials almost every night. Lee lives in Chicago, but the dramas connect her with friends back home. Although she can't watch an episode at the same time it airs in Korea, catching up later has its advantages.

Normally, "you have to wait to see the ending, but if you use the Web site, it's like watching a long movie because you can see the start and ending all at once," Lee said.


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Dr. Strangelove

University of Ottawa

Author of Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People (University of Toronto Press, 2010)

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