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## **The Cultural Cold War Goes “Vulgar”: Radio Serial Melodrama in Post–Korean War South Korea, 1956–1960**

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This study explores the birth of the popular radio serial drama under the Cold War doctrine of national broadcasting in 1950s South Korea. By examining texts, critiques, production practices, and writers, I interrogate how the anti-Communism propaganda mandate was negotiated in radio drama, influenced not only by the South Korean government and the field of radio production but also by the U.S. cultural Cold War programs and Americanization. As the result of historical contingencies within radio-drama production, the propaganda mission of national broadcasting morphed into “vulgar” melodrama, focused on romantic triangles and urban lifestyles. Whereas themes contrasted with the government intention, the genre effectively supported the purposes of anti-Communist propaganda by promoting the American way of life, wherein individual freedom was identified with capitalist consumer modernity. In this vein, serialized melodrama heralded an important shift in radio propaganda from direct and overt anti-Communism to a more ambiguous and recreational direction. This complex process is considered in relation to Americanization of radio writers and the U.S. cultural Cold War efforts, such as the Broadcasters Exchange Program.

*Keywords: cultural Cold War, anti-Communism, Americanization, propaganda, broadcasting history, Korean drama*

In 1958, a South Korean broadcasting journal wrote sarcastically of the latest daily radio serial to air on the state-owned broadcasting station, KBS:

Sŏngae in *A Star’s Hometown* . . . used to be a daughter of a successful businessman, now living with her widowed mother. She is a college student and a famous violinist. Far from sad, she lives with luxurious “enjoyment” [*enchoiment’ŭ*] every single day, going

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on a drive with Mr. Paik or traveling to Incheon with Hyun Park's little sister Jeongrim. [She enjoys] sea bathing, fishing, modeling, filmgoing . . . When would she ever read a book or practice Mendelssohn's *Concerto for Violin*? Amazing. (Q, 1958, p. 51)

This review allows us to picture the spectacular, imaginative world created by the serialized radio drama of the time—a young woman entertained with higher education, upper-class leisure activities, and Western modernity. Devastated by the Korean War (1950–53), South Korea had become one of the world's poorest countries. Radio serial drama in the 1950s, however, was at variance with the grim realities of the postwar nation. Centering on a love triangle between a cutting-edge career woman, her younger rival (i.e., a perky, audacious college student spoiled by wealthy parents), and a war-traumatized man, the sound of modernity was reified by an acoustic motif that included the clicking of high-heeled shoes, the honking of automobiles, forks clattering against plates in a Western restaurant, and beer splashing into glasses.

The content of the 1950s radio serials—mostly female-centered sagas featuring love triangles and urban lifestyles—in many ways resembled that of present-day, contemporary urban romances, or what is called “trendy drama” in Korean television (D. H. Lee, 2004). The melodramatic radio serials, which were often criticized for “vulgarity,” differed from earlier, single-episode dramas dominated by overtly anti-Communist propaganda, a genre called the “drama of purpose” [*mokchŏkkŭk*]. How, in the late 1950s, did the drama of purpose give way to serialized, popular melodramas? During the same period, anti-Communist propaganda was the *raison d'être* of radio broadcasting. To understand the rise of popular serial dramas during the height of the Cold War, it is necessary to consider the broader historical context of the cultural Cold War, Americanization, and production practices.

Radio broadcasting was introduced as a technology of Japanese colonial rule (1910–45)<sup>2</sup> and was later controlled by the U.S. military government (1945–48). Under both regimes, it was used mainly as a form of publicity media, providing propaganda about government policies. After the Rhee administration (1948–60) incorporated the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) into the Ministry of Public Information, the Korean War added urgency to the station's anti-Communist, pro-Rhee government mission (Baek, 2007; Park, 2000). Television did not come to South Korean homes until 1961, and thus radio was the only medium that could simultaneously reach nationwide audiences.

This article explores how the anti-Communist propaganda doctrine was negotiated through radio serial drama. Examining content, critiques, production practices, and the habitus of writers in relation to the cultural Cold War and Americanization, I present two arguments. First, the propaganda mission of national broadcasting morphed into “vulgar” melodrama as the result of historical contingencies within radio-drama production. These contingencies included a writer shortage, technological limitations, film-industry relations, and commercial motivations. Second, due to the extensive Americanization of radio writers and cultural Cold War efforts by the United States, such as the Broadcasters Exchange Program, the genre of “vulgar” radio melodrama effectively supported the purposes of anti-Communist propaganda by promoting consumerism and the American way of life. In this vein, serialized melodrama heralded an

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<sup>2</sup> Radio broadcasting began in 1927 in Korea.

important shift in radio propaganda from direct and overt anti-Communism to one that was more ambiguous and recreational. The following sections demonstrate tensions and contradictions among various actors involved in this complex process.

### The Birth of Radio Serials During the Cultural Cold War

Serial production of original radio dramas began in 1956. The first original serial, *The Blue and Red Thread* [*Ch'öngsil Hongsil*], was broadcast every Sunday night for 30 minutes from October 1956 to April 1957, and a newspaper article dubbed its popularity "the *Ch'öngsil Hongsil* boom" (Baek, 2007). In 30 installments, the serial revolved around a love triangle involving a war widow, a bachelor, and a young and affluent girl. After its remarkable success, KBS produced weekly serials, including *A Blooming Season* [*Kkoch' p'inün sichöl*] and *When Spring Comes* [*Pomi omyön*], which was followed by the production of daily serials such as *Over the Mountain and River* [*San nömö Pata könnö*]. Between 1958 and 1960, between 13 and 14 serial dramas were broadcast every year on KBS.

Daily serials were aired during prime time, mostly between 7 p.m. and 9:30 p.m., and each installment ran for 15 to 20 minutes. Soon after its introduction, the genre was considered the most popular in prime time. Whereas serial drama in U.S. early radio history was directed primarily at an audience of women (Hilmes, 2007), this was not necessarily the case in Korea. Many accounts of 1950s radio listenership by Korean media historians describe family members surrounding a radio receiver listening to various programs together. A recurring image in historians' accounts of rural areas is that of neighbors gathering for collective listening in a household with a radio set. Producers and writers in the 1950s emphasized that serials should be "what a daughter-in-law and her father-in-law can hear together without having a blush" (Editorial Office, 1957, p. 8) and "a family-oriented work that people of all ages can enjoy simultaneously" (S. Lee, 1957, p. 63).

The post-Korean War radio serials were predominantly melodramatic in that they depicted moral polarization via heightened emotionality and an emphasis on consumerist modernity. Most serials ended happily, with the protagonist couple affirming their romantic love and the other characters finding fulfillment in other ways. In *The Blue and Red Thread*, a female lead, Eja, and a male lead, Engineer Na, who used to be in love with each other before the Korean War, are reunited in a job interview. Engineer Na's courtship of Eja is obstructed by the meddling of a female antagonist, Dongsook, and by Eja's inner conflict between her desires as a sexual being and the chastity Korean society imposed on widows. In the end, however, with Engineer Na about to visit America as the result of an invitation by the U.S. State Department, he and Eja pledge eternal love, and Dongsook devotes herself to charity in an orphanage. As I will explain, Na's U.S. trip mirrors the ongoing exchange programs implemented by U.S. propagandists.

Other serials followed the lead of the first, adopting similar plots, characters, and narrative devices before a different trend emerged in the early 1960s more focused on family drama. Noteworthy is that female characters vividly embodied emerging Western modernity without being excessively sexualized or stigmatized. It is one of the most remarkable peculiarities of radio serial drama, starkly different from other popular narratives. In many post-Korean War films and literature, women were either "fetishized as the embodiment of Western modernity" or "chastised to be integrated into the tradition of

patriarchy" (Hwang, 2008, p. 155). However, radio serials blurred the duality of a traditional, chaste, and virtuous woman versus a Westernized, sexually assertive, and "dangerous" one.<sup>3</sup> As in *The Blue and Red Thread*, a war widow in a radio drama could pursue romantic love without her story becoming an allegory about chastity or immoral sexuality. In this sense, *Eja* demonstrates a modern selfhood focused on independent individuality (H. J. Cho, 2005).

Serial drama helped radio redefine itself as a popular medium. Toward the end of the 1950s, radio serial drama became a well-established format for popular narratives, composing, along with film, the incipient state of what can be called the popular culture, or mass culture, of South Korea (Chung, 2014). Radio actors and actresses gained popularity, and reviews and reports on serials were published in newspapers. Radio serials' growing prominence during the time is also found in its adaptation to film and the popularity of the theme songs of serial dramas.

The burgeoning of radio serials in this period prompts reflection about its broader historical context. In the mid-1950s Koreans were forced to internalize Cold War ideology, and America had an impact on every corner of Korean society. The United States designated South Korea "a frontier state" in its role as a bastion of anti-Communism (Heo, 2008; quoted in Y. Lee, 2010, p. 151). Having developed in tandem with the Pacific War and the Korean War, radio broadcasting in the 1950s was still waging the battle for hearts and minds, imbued with belligerence in programming, rhetoric, and style. In this sense, anti-Communist propaganda lay at the heart of radio broadcasting throughout the 1950s.

In addition, the cultural Cold War of the United States had a great impact on 1950s radio. With the outbreak of the Korean War, the United States greatly expanded propaganda programs. The Eisenhower administration created the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) as an independent propaganda organization in 1953, intensifying cultural Cold War efforts. The cultural Cold War (Saunders, 1999) refers to the ways in which various cultural resources (e.g., pamphlets, posters, radio shows, film, literary or popular magazines, music, performing arts, art exhibits) were used as a form of psychological warfare. Cultural Cold War efforts took various forms, such as establishment of the Fulbright program and the CIA, dissemination of propaganda messages abroad through media and exhibits (Belmonte, 2008), the sending of performing artists and jazz bands abroad (Davenport, 2009; Prevots, 1998), and the building of media and communication networks (M. Kang, Baek, & Choi, 2007). The Cold War was waged most intensely in East Asia, but the region has been understudied in the literature on the cultural Cold War (Armstrong, 2003).

In the case of South Korea, the United States Information Service (USIS) played the most significant role in the cultural Cold War. Having established an office and branch centers throughout the southern part of the Korean peninsula since the late 1940s, the USIS-Korea conducted expansive

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<sup>3</sup> I see this as a result of complex determinants such as radio drama's focus on ordinariness—which contrasts with film's explorations of uncanniness and abjection—and its use of extended monologues, allowing more room for female characters to voice inner conflicts while abiding by the distinct morality of the medium that every character should be virtuous at her core. Representations of gender and sexuality in 1950s radio drama merit further analysis.

propaganda activities. Equipped with production units for motion pictures, exhibits, radio, and publication, it functioned as a training camp for Korean filmmakers (H. S. Kim, 2011). It also supported scholarly publications, organized exhibits of American artwork and technology, and sponsored American musicians' concerts in Korea (Liem, 2010). KBS was also especially under the influence of the USIS; It helped to rebuild radio stations during the Korean War and assisted KBS in setting up broadcast programs including relays from the Voice of America (VOA) and the Voice of United Nations Command (Liem, 2010). After the war, the USIS purchased radio sets to distribute to schools and public institutions, sponsored radio production, and provided KBS with broadcast materials. Ultimately, the USIS-Korea's propaganda activities worked "to perpetuate an image of the United States as a benevolent benefactor of South Korea, as well as to strengthen Korean's [*sic*] associations of the U.S. with modernity" (Liem, 2010, pp. 158-159).

If USIS propaganda activities presented America as a land of freedom, progress, efficiency, advanced technology, and a high standard of living, the U.S. Army base, which was the most immediate conduit to American culture and practices (Liem, 2010, p. 160), brought vulgarity, decadence, and promiscuity, represented by sex workers, dance halls, scanty clothes, and luxury goods. Two reflections are necessary regarding this multifaceted Americanization. First, cultural change clearly took place in tandem with an influx of American imports, practices, and cultural tropes. American-inspired boutiques, cafes, restaurants, parks, and nightclubs and dance halls were opening in Seoul. However, they were overrepresented in popular culture. It is worth emphasizing that immediate postwar Seoul was "a city of the walking wounded" (McHugh & Abelmann, 2005, p. 5). Second, although America was an object of desire (Yoshimi, 2003) and mesmerized ordinary perceptions, its materialist and consumerist aspects were in tension with South Korean government discourse emphasizing national unity and parsimony.

Radio serial drama was made an amalgam where baggage of anti-Communism and Americanized cultural modernity coalesced, oscillating between propaganda and entertainment. Inspired by Bourdieu's theory of the cultural field and radical contextualization, I discuss the content of radio serials in relation to production practices and wider historical contexts. Radical contextualization requires us to consider not just texts themselves but also the producers of works in terms of their strategies and individual or class habitus, the structure of the field itself, and its position within the broader field of power (Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993). This enables a productive approach to the cultural Cold War. Arguing that the cultural Cold War cannot be subsumed into the "official" strategy of Washington, as it was coordinated by the state-private network, Lucas (2006) asserts that "tensions and contradictions between the actors in the state-private network, in the ideology and interests of that network, in its 'cultural production' and in the reception of that production must be examined" (p. 5). Likewise, the cultural Cold War in South Korea was compounded by the involvement of multiple actors and the coordination of the U.S. propagandists', the Korean government's, and cultural producers' interests. Radio writers were themselves among the cultural producers who undertook the larger project of the cultural Cold War based on their own interests and visions, but they were still largely affected by the coordinated but sometimes conflicting interests of the United States and South Korea.

Historians of Korean broadcasting, especially of the 1950s, might find themselves frustrated by the loss of extensive primary data that would allow them to envision what the 1950s' radio programs sounded like, how they were made, and who the creators were. I primarily relied on broadcast journals,

magazine and newspaper articles, documents by radio writers, archived interviews, and partially available scripts of 19 KBS serials and their intertextual adaptations.<sup>4</sup> Spigel (1992) noted, in her study of the coming of television to the American home, that her use of sources guided her framework and argument. Likewise, my use of sources published by the Ministry of Public Information—*The Broadcast [Pangsong]*<sup>5</sup> and *Broadcasting Weekly [Chukan Pangsong]*<sup>6</sup>—and oral history interviews conducted and archived a half-century later by the Korean National Archives of the Arts<sup>7</sup> guided me to focus on contradictions and negotiations between the state, creators, and texts. Incomplete pieces of a jigsaw puzzle called attention to the inconsistency among the sources. Instead of looking for the veracity of each account, inconsistency offered a productive lens through which to understand the negotiations between the state, cultural producers, and texts.

### Indirect Propaganda and “Vulgar” Radio Melodrama

Broadcasting personnel in the mid-1950s began to reconsider what roles radio broadcasting should play. Concerns over KBS’s ongoing wartime baggage, propaganda-laden programming, and overly didactic style were voiced by radio writers and directors. A scriptwriter claimed, “Nobody would trust the untruthful demagoguery from North Korean broadcasting but ours from the Ministry of Public Information is also very distant from people” (Paik Ya, 1954, quoted in Baek, 2007, p. 343). According to the idea that broadcasting should comfort a nation that had suffered from the war, more entertainment programs (e.g., quiz shows and music programs) were scheduled toward the end of the 1950s. The production of radio serial drama began against this backdrop.

However, an impulse to captivate more listeners underwrote the shift. The Korean government was worried that the still insignificant number of radio listeners—only 15.07 per thousand Koreans owned a radio set in 1959<sup>8</sup> (Baek, 2007)—inhibited wider distribution of propaganda messages. The small number concerned the USIS too; the Korean situation was inconvenient compared with that of many other

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<sup>4</sup> Although most of the original scripts have disappeared, I collected all available original scripts, including entire scripts of *Lost Love [Ŏnŭ Hanŭl Alaesŏ]* (1959) and partial scripts of six other serials. Also, I cross-checked various textual reproductions of radio serials, such as novels and screenplays, that adapted each radio drama and digests of serials published in *The Broadcast*.

<sup>5</sup> This monthly journal was first published in September 1956.

<sup>6</sup> This eight-page newspaper was first published in 1957.

<sup>7</sup> The Korean National Archives of the Arts has created an online collection of oral history of Korean senior artists that is available through the Oral History of Korean Arts (<http://oralhistory.knaa.or.kr/gusool-artist>). Most artists were interviewed five times each; the collection includes transcripts and video recordings of these interviews. I used transcripts of interviews with the 1950s radio writers Yoo Ho and Han Unsa, and radio actress Baek Sunghye.

<sup>8</sup> Note that the actual number of listeners must have been larger than assumed, given that radio sets were shared with neighbors, especially when popular programs were broadcast. Also, there was a great divide in the number of radio receivers between the city and the countryside. According to a 1956 survey, 45.1% of Seoul households had a radio receiver (Y. Kim, 2009). The number of radio receivers increased from 140,000 in 1955 to 950,000 in 1961 (Liem, 2010).

countries where VOA programs could be broadcast into homes all day (Liem, 2010). In collaboration with the USIS, the government distributed amplifiers and ran mobile broadcast stations in rural villages. Broadcasting authorities' turning their attention to light entertainment genres should therefore be understood as part of efforts to address the paucity of radio listeners and their indifference to propaganda programs.<sup>9</sup> The authorities pondered how to effectively deliver propaganda messages and make them more resonant with audiences. One solution was to focus on indirect propaganda through entertainment programs (Byun, 1959; Paik, 1956)<sup>10</sup> instead of articulating overt propagandist messages in documentary, news, lecture, and reportage.<sup>11</sup> A director at the Bureau of Culture at the Ministry of Education emphasized that "entertainment programming shouldn't be just about entertaining but should function as a driving force for national life and weapon for national defense" (Byun, 1959, p. 13). Radio serial drama first came into being as part of this approach to indirect propaganda, as a way to increase audiences. Drama writers knew they were responsible for producing propaganda, but were told to make listeners believe that these programs were not intended as such. Radio drama was to inculcate the public with propaganda and educational messages in subtle and nuanced ways because if such messages were too obviously propagandist, they would bore listeners (W. Kim, 1958). The expectation that radio drama should instill and enhance popular enmity against Communism and North Korea seemed to remain intact.

Radio writers appeared to be fully compliant with the propaganda imperative. In a 1957 roundtable titled *To Improve Broadcasting Literature*, radio writer Park Jin said that "radio drama should aim at the reunification of our nation through eradication of Communism and at the construction of a democratic state" and lamented that "our morality is being corrupted by foreign films" (Editorial Office, 1957, p. 4); another prominent writer, Choi Yoan, stated that "radio programs should unknowingly encourage listeners to favorably respond to state policies" (Editorial Office, 1957, p. 4) and reaffirmed his hatred of Communism and determination to fight it through radio works (Choi, 1958). These statements concisely epitomize the meaning of anti-Communism at that time.

How successfully, and whether, the ultimate goal of indirect propaganda was realized in radio serials seems ambiguous. Specific guidelines on how to concretize the mission within particular genres were not provided, other than the stated goal of increasing entertainment elements by reducing the direct pedagogical tone of radio programs. Most radio serials turned out to be melodramas. The first radio serial, *The Blue and Red Thread*, became a prototype for the serial drama with its triangle romance, individualized characters, and urban settings. Of the 19 serials examined, 16 had a melodramatic conflict as a main plot, with *The Hill with Zelkova Tree, Mr. Park (Pak Seobang)*, and *Romance Papa* as the

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<sup>9</sup> The use of entertainment to reinforce political propaganda in NHK and the BBC has been well documented by broadcasting historians (Hajkowski, 2002; Hilmes, 2003; Nicholas, 2000; Smulyan, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Paik Chull was a literary critic and university professor. He seemed to be one of the opinion leaders with whom USIS-Korea kept in close contact during the 1950s. The U.S. State Department invited him to study at Yale University in late 1957, and upon return, he gave a lecture on American literature in USIS events ("Paik Chull to visit America," 1957; "USIS-Korea to lecture on American literature," 1958).

<sup>11</sup> Such programs as *Construction Today*, *Toward Reunification*, *The Road to Triumph*, and *Remarkable Progress* exemplify direct propaganda aimed to insinuate anti-Communist consciousness and boost the nation's morale (H. Kim, 1958).



exceptions. These serials hardly demonstrated abhorrence or fear of Communism or the desire to dissolve the North Korean regime, even in latent forms. Instead, Western cultural modernity, lifestyle, and consumerism were reiterated in plot lines that involved tropes and references to America and to Western events and activities.

Many serials were criticized for vulgarity. One newspaper review of a 1958 serial read:

I was astounded at a greasy, middle-aged man with filthy lust hitting on [a woman] in a spa hotel. Is erotic literature about to take over radio as well? Eight forty in the summer is early and kids are still hearing. (Q, 1958)<sup>12</sup>

Journalists, literary critics, scholars, and some listeners accused radio serials for being populist, too entertainment oriented, tasteless, and repetitive. This line of criticism is indicative of a significant gap between the government intention and end products, despite the consensus on the surface between radio writers and the state. Some audience members even complained that "KBS programs are too entertainment centered. . . . If shallow cheerfulness is the only thing pursued, our mind will not be cultivated" (Letter from Listeners, 1958). Critics who accused radio serials of vulgarity stated that most of them were about love, money, tears, decadence, and corruption. Cha Beom-seok (1960), a literary critic, writer, and a theatrical producer, made his dissatisfaction known in *The Broadcast*:

Most radio serial drama is in fact a repackaged version of cheap romance novel or the *sinp'a*<sup>13</sup>. . . . Episodes are very similar between each work and there are typical types of people. Given the cliché of triangular relationships, it is as if every radio serial was molded in the same frame. Most of them are about businessman, female secretary, café, bars, apartments, taxi, villas, etc. . . . Radio serials on KBS are turning away from social reality, ignoring a reportage character of drama. Their vulgarity is parallel to that of commercial broadcasting . . . . Radio serials are mostly oriented to a superficial sketch of society or frivolous romance revolving around overly emotional narrations and sentimental theme songs. (p. 36)

As the persistent criticisms of radio melodrama indicate, the indirect propaganda policy and consequent burgeoning of the genre stripped it of the overtones of propaganda. In her examination of the wartime BBC campaign, Nicholas (2000) similarly concluded that propaganda messages were blunted when turned into entertainment. In a similar vein, post-Korean War radio melodrama appeared to oscillate between propaganda and entertainment.

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<sup>12</sup> This work, *The Spring Comes and Goes*, ceased to be produced after five installments. An article on its discontinuation attributed it to the personal circumstances of its writer.

<sup>13</sup> *Sinp'a* is a Japanese theatrical genre that was popular in Korea during the colonial period. Typical Korean *sinp'a* are described as tearjerking melodramas with tragic worldviews and self-pity. *Sinp'a* derivatives in films, for example, are described in terms of emotional excess, narrative improbability, and social clichés (Chung, 2014).

### Radio Drama Production in Practice

The inconsistency of vulgar radio melodrama with the stated goal of anti-Communist propaganda can be contextualized by factors beyond state control. State policies pertaining to media and culture are always refracted through the field of production, which often generates unintended consequences. The field of radio broadcasting in the 1950s was largely affected by state control, but some of its elements were extrinsic to the fundamental nature of national broadcasting. Although the operation of KBS was entirely dependent on government funding and its foremost goal was to serve the state, it was also influenced by a private radio station, the film industry, and responses from various sources. The first private radio station, Christian Broadcasting System (CBS), was established in 1954 and gaining prominence toward the late 1950s. KBS staff were supervised by the Ministry of Public Information, but they had a great degree of flexibility in their jobs. The pool of scriptwriters included freelancers who were not employed by the state. Even government employees were not strictly confined to the work of KBS. Many created radio serials for CBS and worked on films, sometimes under several pen names. Most of them had backgrounds in theatre, literature, and other arts. This cross-pollination indicates that bureaucratic culture and artistic traditions coexisted in the field of radio production in the 1950s and into the 1960s.

Radio serials were produced with low budgets and minimal technology; many were created on deadlines by few writers. In addition, programming and scheduling were neither systematic nor stable. Because of the scarcity of writers<sup>14</sup> and their heavy workloads, they also wrote other kinds of programs; some even performed multiple tasks, including directing. Writers were paid by the piece and found the scale of pay unsatisfactory; therefore, they created as many programs as possible. In this context, similar settings, characters, and themes were recycled. In his examination of U.S. daytime radio serials in the late 1950s, Willey (1961) noted that mass production techniques employed by surprisingly few writers and their assembly-line mode of writing produced affinity in content, settings, and characters. Similar recycling of radio melodrama elements in Korea can be attributed to the paucity of radio writers and their resultant heavy workloads. Technological issues augmented these generally poor production conditions. Because only a few sound effects could be generated, for example, a formula was adopted to imply characters and settings (e.g., sounds of high heels, car horns, and other easily recognizable tropes). The repetitions of these sounds also contributed to the reproduction of similar, typically urban, settings.

These conditions and results call into question the widely held assumption about strong censorship within state-run broadcasting. If writers often created scripts for individual episodes just before recording, and if the writing of a particular scene was underway at the moment an earlier scene was being recorded (Min, 1959; Oh, 1957; Roh, 1995), prepublication censorship must have been ineffective. Interviews with two former radio writers, Yoo Ho and Han Unsa, support this conjecture: They vividly recalled how censorship worked in the 1960s, but did not recall how their works were censored in the 1950s (Yoo, November 3, 2005; Han, March 19, 2004). Yoo Ho went on to say that censorship rarely had

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<sup>14</sup> Howon Lee (1957), a chief of the literature and drama section in KBS, wrote that of the dozen radio playwrights in 1957, only three or four were able to consistently produce decent pieces. The small number of radio writers was perceived as one of the biggest issues at KBS. The station did not hire budding writers, and established writers in literature did not respect radio work (Editorial Office, 1958).

an impact on writers' work in the 1950s. Based on these statements and documents, it can be inferred that prepublication censorship was mostly not in place, enabling radio writers to have substantial leeway beyond state control.

Interactions between radio and film industries strengthened commercial motivation within the production of radio serial drama. *The Blue and Red Thread* was adapted into film, and the remake deal was settled even before its finale. Since then, almost every serial script was sold to film companies by the early 1960s,<sup>15</sup> even though script resale prices continued to rise with the popularity of radio serials. The remake of *Over the Mountain and River*, for example, attracted more than 80,000 audience members, which made it one of top 10 films at the box office that year ("Top ten films of 1958," 1958). Remakes proliferated partly because the film industry's rate of output required a constant stream of new, if not entirely original, scenarios. Many commercially successful films in the mid- to late-1950s were set "in contemporary, urban, and largely affluent settings" and maximized "the allure of the vast array of consumer commodities regularly paraded on-screen" (Chung, 2014, p. 108). Filmmakers sought to reproduce "the thrill of the modern" (Liem, 2010, pp. 179–180) by presenting chase scenes, Western-style apartments, tea rooms, dance halls, and jazz music. Radio serial dramas that shared with films the pursuit of modernity might have been a perfect source for adaptation.

For their part, radio writers, who had claimed they were suffering from underpayment, became highly motivated to reproduce genres of radio serials that had already proved successful. In other words, the film industry's growing interests in radio drama fed commercial interests to the radio writers. A critic wrote that the striking similarities of characters and narratives found in many radio dramas might result from radio writers' unspoken intention to see their works remade into film (Cha, 1960). As Mazzarella (2012) noted, the dichotomy between state and pedagogical versus market and entertainment logic was detached from historical realities.

To recap, the writer shortage, technological issues, and interactions with the film industry were the main factors that brought about similarities in the topics, settings, and plots of radio melodramas. A formulaic story line alone might have contributed to the blunting of propaganda. However, it would be inaccurate to say that the policy of indirect propaganda completely failed. Along with the unintended consequences produced by determinants outside of state control, radio melodramas centered on Americanized lifestyles, leisure activities, and consumerism. The effects of this subtle but effective form of propaganda are considered in the following section.

#### **Americanization of Radio Writers and the Broadcasters Exchange Program**

Most radio writers—born to upper-class, high-profile parents<sup>16</sup>—were fortunate to have attended college in imperial Japan or Seoul during the colonial era, when less than 0.2% of the same age group

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<sup>15</sup> All of the first four radio serials KBS produced in 1956–1957 and most of those produced in 1958 were remade in film.

<sup>16</sup> Park Jin was a child of a high-ranking official of the Japanese colonial government, and Cho Namsa was a child of a renowned scholar.

received higher education (K. Kim, 2003). As the result of rich experiences in media consumption they enjoyed during their formative years,<sup>17</sup> most of them pursued careers in literature, journalism, arts, or theatre before starting radio work. Personal networks enticed them into the field of radio when the majority of the South Korean workforce—79.5% in 1955 and 77.8% in 1960—was engaged in agriculture or aquaculture (K. Kim, 2003).

Westernized cultural consumption and lifestyle imbued their shared habitus. They were a privileged group, culturally and to a lesser extent economically; as such, they had been among the greatest recipients of Westernized culture and modernity. Presumably influenced by a European tradition of café culture, they enjoyed spending time at tea rooms, or what were locally known as *dabang*. Not only did Yoo Ho and Han Unsa fondly recall *dabang*-going as a favorite daily routine in the interviews, but numerous similar accounts are found in broadcasting publications. They seem to have cultivated their Westernized cultural tastes, practices, and sensibilities by drinking whiskey and coffee and socializing with other writers and artists at *dabang*. Even though the Westernized modernity was not necessarily limited to U.S. influences, America was seen as the epitome of it, thereby becoming its poignant signifier.

Enthusiastic about Hollywood films and American pop songs, radio writers' multifarious means of Americanization entailed not just an elitist acceptance of the United States' ideological superiority and cultural sophistication but also popular inclinations toward the "vulgarity and decadence of so called 'Yankee culture' represented by the U.S. military base [and] dance hall" (K. Kim, 2001, p. 265). Han Unsa's wartime experience of managing a UN officer's club—which was basically a dance hall—signals the latter aspect. Emerging Korean popular culture in the fifties was replete with ostentatious appellations of America, illustrated in such transliterated popular songs as "Lucky Morning" (1956), "Arizona Cowboy" (1955), and "America Chinatown" (1953; Y. Lee, 2010). The radio writers' world seems to have been saturated by that popular culture.

The Americanized lifestyles of radio writers were vividly reproduced in their melodramas. Such fancy Western practices as *dabang*-going, filmgoing, and partying and imported Western goods (e.g., pianos, high heels, and whiskey) played a marked role in radio serials. In the 14th episode of *The Blue and Red Thread*, for instance, Eja, who has tried to suppress her feelings for Engineer Na, finally bursts into tears and confesses love in a lengthy monologue. This critical moment is set in an all-night Christmas party. After other people went home or fell asleep, Eja and Engineer Na have a conversation while drinking beer and scotch. The same episode later puts Dongsook—the female antagonist who has aggressively pursued Engineer Na—on the spot. Saddened with unrequited love, she says to her worrying mother, "I might just want to go to America like my friends." *Song in My Heart* (1959) starts with a pianist's return from America, and *A Sunflower Family* (1960) describes horseback riding, dance parties, and family music concerts. Portrayals of the characters' American lifestyles, which mirrored the lifestyles of the creators themselves, constructed "the experiential quality of urban modernity" (Singer, 2001, p. 8) in radio serials.

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<sup>17</sup> Yoo Ho said in his interview that his family had owned a telephone since he was four years old (in 1925). During that time less than 0.002% of Korean households owned a telephone (see Yoon, 2010).

Radio serials' focus on Westernized, consumerist lifestyles contradicted broader government campaigns. In a war-torn country that had yet to break away from absolute poverty and the ruins of war, integral to postwar recovery and national rebuilding was the moral of parsimony and hard work. To justify the South Korean regime's superiority over that of North Korea, economic restoration was a pressing issue. The Rhee administration aimed to achieve it through consumption control. More generally, rigid morality and belt tightening were significant in anti-Communism in 1950s South Korea. National campaigns emphasized the need to economize on fabric, fuel, and rice in a time of scarcity (E. Kim, 2009). In this context, the Rhee regime considered an intrusion of American consumer and popular culture to Korean society as a source of moral corruption, undermining national unity. President Rhee's discourse on morality-righteousness [*do-ŭi*] warned against negative aspects of emulating Western cultures (Joo, 2009).

Radio writers working in the state-owned radio station did not always reveal their cultural tastes, particularly when they spoke directly to authorities. Although various written sources published during the time and the interviews conducted half a century later offer contradictory accounts, these inconsistencies provide opportunities to discern the strategies employed by these actors under state control. For example, Cho Namsa, creator of *The Blue and Red Thread*, lamented in 1958 that "Myŏngdong<sup>18</sup> became decadent, being filled with flash light of neon signs and coquettish noise of the end of a century . . . Premature *dabang*, vulgar stand-bars, and billiard rooms for freeloaders are burgeoning there." But according to an anonymous colleague (W, 1957), "Cho Namsa is a billiards expert and . . . always the most welcomed customer in the first-class stand-bar in Myŏngdong. He's a celebrity among beautiful women there." Cho's criticism of decadence in this context can be seen as performative at best.

Park Jin, another writer in the early days of radio serials, acted in a similar manner. In the aforementioned roundtable, he strongly argued for anti-Communism and expressed his concerns about decadent Western culture:

I had to include a cabaret<sup>19</sup> scene later in *A Blooming Season*, but I'd never been to that kind of place. . . . I once visited there to observe. It was so embarrassing to see young people holding tightly and dancing with each other that I just had a drink alone around a corner. (Editorial Office, 1957, p. 6)

Baek Sunghee—a radio actress who played the heroine, a barmaid, in *A Blooming Season* (1957)—provided an entirely different memory in 2006 when she recalled Park Jin taking her to this place to do research for her upcoming role. She described him as a regular customer, as quite accustomed to the place, and as getting along well with women there (Interview with Baek, October 12, 2006).

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<sup>18</sup> A downtown district in Seoul.

<sup>19</sup> In South Korea, a cabaret was a combination dance hall and bar that had female dancers or waitresses. Yongwoo Lee (2010) writes that cabaret culture stemmed from a social fever for specific dance music genres after the Korean War. According to him, "cabaret provided a space for Western-style social gatherings [*Sa-Gyo*], which were considered to be high-class by the general public, and challenged sexual mores of Korean society in the late 1950s" (p. 220).

These contradictions indicate the need to interrogate the flip side of statements made by radio writers in official, formal contexts and to critically interpret primary sources. The roundtable in which Park Jin funneled attention to his hatred of and will to annihilate Communism was arranged by the Ministry of Public Information. Perhaps it was necessary for him to conceal his Westernized, extravagant pastimes by presenting himself as an ardent anti-Communist. Likewise, Cho Namsa's allegation of cultural corruption was part of his acceptance speech when his one-act drama was given a government award. Both cases illustrate how radio writers self-censored in official settings, covering themselves with anti-Communist sentiment, and performed the role of loyal servants. They had to be the Cold Warriors within the larger psychological battles and play indoctrinating roles to lead the audience to recognize the urgent priorities of national security and combating North Korea. They were expected to persuade the audience of moral parsimony and national unity so that South Koreans could overcome the postwar state of disorder. In this context, radio writers avoided vocalizing their own luxurious, and even decadent, practices and instead acted like devoted national servants.

Radio writers of the 1950s and 1960s seem more like adherents to Americanized cultural modernity than political ideologues. Their embodiment of Americanized cultural modernity, or what Yongwoo Lee (2010) put as "a postcolonial mimesis of American modernity" (p. 193), had a significant impact on their work. The gap between the claims of anti-Communist warriorhood they made to the authorities and the vulgar, light, and entertainment-oriented texts they produced professionally is remarkable. Indeed, unlike other circles of elites, radio writers tended to step back from ideological battles. Han Unsa, who was known for political and historical realism in his radio dramas (e.g., about the colonial past, war experiences, and post-Korean War realities), stated, "Ideologically, I've never taken either the Left or the Right. Based on speculative philosophy, I think I am a speculative animal" (March 5, 2004).<sup>20</sup> His radio dramas developed an antiwar theme rather than an anti-Communist one (Yun, 2010).

Nevertheless, the fact that radio writers were lukewarm about insinuating antipathy to Communism into radio serial dramas does not mean their productions were devoid of propaganda. Instead, the way radio writers embodied American modernity and its impact on their work allows us to understand how the cultural Cold War operated. Radio writers believed that they were working at will, not manipulated by any kind of ideology. However, they were upholding a particular sense of democracy and way of life closely related to liberal democracy and individual freedom. In his radio serial *Lost Love* (1959), which dramatized romantic love between a soldier and a dabang barmaid during the Korean War, Han Unsa wrote:

Why do you think we are fighting? We are fighting for our freedom, so that an individual can beautifully realize his own desire. [Appealing] Guys! It deserves our celebration that a passionate young man loves a beautiful woman. The reason why we get through this war is to protect individual freedom and enjoyable life!

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<sup>20</sup> In this context, "speculative" refers to existentialism; he emphasized that he was strongly influenced by French existentialism.

Similar to Han Unsa, Yoo Ho stated that he was not interested in political ideology: "I just wanted to do whatever I want. Such-and-such ideology and such-and-such -ism? Huh! Democracy is all we need. What else do we need?" (November 3, 2005). All of these examples precisely epitomize the effect of the United States' Cold War strategy: separation from "ideology" in favor of the "universal ideal" of personal autonomy. This strategy was in full force during the 1950s, when the United States tried to disassociate itself from the taint of ideology to accentuate the contrast between its claim to individual freedom and the sufferings of people living in Communist states (Lucas, 1999; McCarthy, 2010). The most effective kind of propaganda was thus defined as the kind in which "the subject moves in the direction you desire for reasons which he believes to be his own" (National Security Council Directive, 1950, quoted in Saunders, 1999, p. 4). The post-Korean War radio writers in South Korea neither actively resisted state policy nor fully followed it; nonetheless, they perpetuated propaganda by internalizing the structure of Americanization and by generating their own strategies within that structure.

Intended or not, radio serials' emphasis on consumerist modernity, leisure activities, and urban lifestyles were resonant with the U.S. propagandists' orientation. Selling the American way of life abroad was crucial to propagating an image of America as a nation of affluence, progress, and happiness (Belmonte, 2008). Promotion of artifacts regarded as typical for American culture and society, including consumer products, high living standards, and the advantages of a free-market economy, was part of this attempt (Gienow-Hecht, 2004). International exhibits, for example, demonstrated "a typical furnished house, manufactured goods and appliances, and mail-order catalogues, as well as television and motion pictures" (Belmonte, 2008, p. 71). More important, promoting consumer products was meant to entail much more than merely extolling the material advantages of capitalism. To combat Communist allegations that American culture is immoral and materialistic, consumer goods were presented as "the essence of American freedom and the individual right to choose," offering "a reassuring vision of the good life" (May, 2008, pp. 19-20). Consumer goods were also presented as enablers of freedom for women, allowing American women "to have a decent life, to have a job, to bring up children and still take time out for cultural and economic life" (Belmonte, 2008, p. 139). American leisure and recreation activities were highlighted as U.S. policy makers learned that "the freedom to dine and relax could sell America as effectively as the freedom to vote and strike" (Belmonte, 2008, p. 141). In so doing, consumerism became the means for achieving individuality, not an end in itself (May, 2008), and freedom was defined as consumer capitalism (Prevots, 1998).

The Broadcasters Exchange Program enhanced the Americanization of radio writers and directly affected the birth of radio melodrama.<sup>21</sup> It was part of the Educational Exchange Program, implemented by the U.S. State Department and the USIS, which invited various opinion leaders and professionals for sojourns in America. Korean professionals were sent to the United States for observation and study, and American "experts" were brought to Korea to provide instruction and to engage in cultural interchanges with their Korean counterparts (Liem, 2010). If the promotion of cultural contacts through the media

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<sup>21</sup> Han Sang Kim (2016) and Sangjoon Lee (2015) also note South Korean cultural producers' participation in the exchange programs in the 1950s and '60s.

aimed to persuade foreign audiences of the virtues of democratic capitalism, the exchange programs were designed to have foreign opinion leaders see America's industry, technology, and high standard of living in person and to play the role of pro-American ambassador in their home countries. Cho Namsa, who was chosen as a participant for six months in 1956, attended a one-month series of lectures at Boston University's School of Public Relations and Communications. Later, he visited broadcasting stations and production sites in Washington, DC, and Chicago, did some traveling by himself, and spent a final month in Boston (Briscoe, 1958; Editorial Office, 1956).

After his return to Seoul he began writing *The Blue and Red Thread*, which portrayed a war widow's romantic relationship, as a way of exploring individual freedom. His trip to America must have been a strong influence. He enthusiastically admired what he saw as the American spirit—particularly the frontier spirit that enabled the country's "amazing" development of industry and television technology—in journal articles that he contributed at the same time he was working on *The Blue and Red Thread*. This admiration fits into the American goal behind the exchange programs:

to overcome some of the false impressions of this country spread abroad by American films and by Communist propaganda . . . the Department hopes to increase the number of persons in other countries who have a reasonable background in American life and can convey a full and fair picture of this country to their own countrymen at home. (Briscoe, 1958, pp. 241–242)

The Educational Exchange Program was intended to make participants accept American hegemony and its legitimacy within the free world as both natural and inevitable. Many South Korean alumni of the program became pro-American elites who were strongly influential in later decades (Heo, 2003).

The Educational Exchange Program also signaled a shifting emphasis in U.S. propaganda activities in South Korea in the second half of the 1950s. U.S. frustrations with the Rhee regime had been growing over its authoritarian excesses and its refusal to implement American advice on economic policy (Liem, 2010). USIS-Korea in this context turned more attention to training various professionals in democratic practices, a project that included the Educational Exchange Program. This meant that USIS-Korea put much less significance on direct anti-Communist themes during the late 1950s (Liem, 2010). In 1955, after the Geneva Summit, President Eisenhower proclaimed the need for a "free and friendly exchange of ideas and of people" (Belmonte, 2008, p. 68) between his country and the USSR. This diplomatic rhetoric provoked a strong backlash from the Rhee regime, which saw the changing position as "treason to the common cause" (Semi-Annual USIS Report, 1955, quoted in Liem, 2010, p. 201). In this context, the USIS believed that encouraging even stronger anti-Communist policies in South Korea "might only result in restricting or embarrassing the U.S. Government in its long range efforts to ease tensions and work out a new approach on a world-wide scale" (Rational [*sic*] Behind Country Plan, July 15, 1955, quoted in Liem, 2010, p. 201).



### Conclusion

In the case of serialized melodrama in the 1950s, national radio's stated goal of spreading anti-Communist propaganda manifested in an emphasis on Americanized lifestyles and consumerism. Armstrong (2003) points out that as East Asia was the site of actual military conflict between Cold War rivals, cultural conflicts there were often "cruder and less primary than in Europe, sometimes taking the form of simple wartime propaganda methods that bordered on the ludicrous" (p. 72). The 1953 USIA pamphlet *Korea My Home* exemplifies the cruder form: It shows Communist soldiers stealing the crops and possessions of a Korean farm family. The father, disgusted by these actions, declares, "These communists, like locusts, devour everything. They take our food, our sons, our daughters" (quoted in Belmonte, 2008, p. 145). I claim that radio serial drama unwittingly played a significant role in transforming the craft of propaganda, thereby extending connotations of anti-Communism. When the term referred mainly to proclaiming hostility to Communism and the will to defeat North Korea (J. H. Kang, 2004), radio serial drama connected dots between the anti-Communist ideology and cultural Americanism, replacing the former with the promotion of capitalist consumer modernity.

The shift was not necessarily designed by the Korean government. The Rhee regime was wary of the unprecedented penetration of American culture into Korea, and radio melodrama was to be blamed, as various parties considered it "vulgar." The sublimation of the original propagandist purpose in favor of vulgar content partly resulted from historical contingencies within radio-drama production (e.g., a writer shortage, technological limitations, film-industry relations, and commercial motivations). However, this sublimation was in accord with the emphasis of U.S. policy makers on the need to "avoid the flavor of propaganda" and to promote the American way of life, consumerism, and "the good life" (Belmonte, 2008; Gienow-Hecht, 2004; Wagnleitner & May, 2000). U.S. authorities in the cultural Cold War were concerned not only with legitimizing capitalist development, liberal democracy, and the global hegemony of the United States but also with control of individual bodies and the design of the state governance of postcolonial nations (Heo, 2008).

Radio serial drama in the 1950s illuminates the seamed ways the cultural Cold War unfolded. Caught up within abounding tensions—between propaganda versus entertainment as radio's purpose, America as a model to emulate versus America as a source of moral degradation, and the unwavering anti-Communist doctrine of the South Korean government versus the shifting emphasis of U.S. cultural diplomacy—radio writers had to cope with a rudimentary state of production. Two contradictory meanings of America coalesced in radio serial dramas: one as freedom, individuality, and modernity mediated by USIS and the Broadcasters Exchange Program and the other as decadence and vulgarity mediated by the U.S. Army base and American mass culture. Although derided as "vulgar," these dramas played a central role in the cultural Cold War by enshrining consumerism and the American way of life.

A Princeton economist and devoted fan of Korean TV drama listed its cliché scenes as follows: Everyone lives in fine homes, one drives to an ocean beach to cope with stress, and one of a pair of young lovers is sent to study in America (Reinhardt, 2014). The radio serial drama of the 1950s shows a strong affinity with contemporary Korean TV dramas. What is regarded as unique traits of Korean TV drama in *Hallyu* [the Korean Wave] studies, therefore, can be further examined in relation not only to intra-Asian

cultures and the regional dynamics of the industry but also to the history of the global Cold War. Also, radio drama in the 1950s should be further studied in relation to gender. As I have hinted, radio melodrama made itself a technology for the production of a new Cold War subject by relying primarily on female characters pursuing individual freedom. Investigating gendered subjectivities by bringing together text, genre, critique, cultural producers, and broader contexts will further our understanding of the Cold War, cultural production, and the history of Korean popular culture.

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