

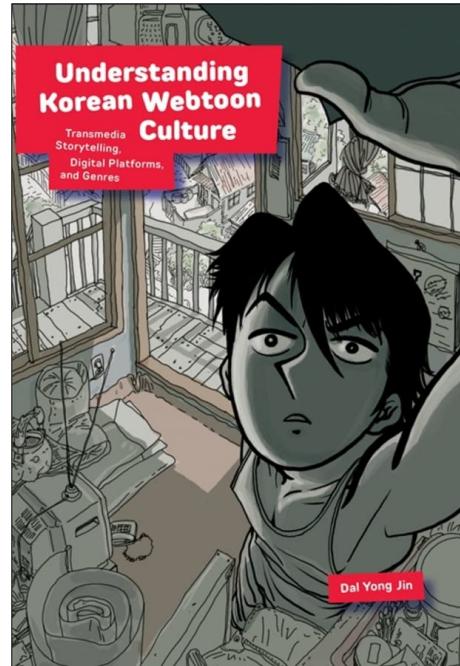
Dal Yong Jin, **Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture: Transmedia Storytelling, Digital Platforms, and Genres**, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023, 230 pp., \$ 22.41 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Haixia Man

University of Science and Technology Beijing

Webtoon, a neologism of “Web” and “cartoon” coined in the early 2000s, refers to a type of digital comics published in chapters online. It distinguishes itself from existing comic forms—for example, manga (Japanese comics)—in its creation motivation for the Web in the first place. This is clearly materialized in its digital-reader-friendly format, with each episode being one single, long vertical strip in color, rather than multiple pages of black-and-white prints. The Web-based comics are well-received by millennials (born between 1981–1996) and digital netizens of generation Z (born between 1997 and early 2010s) in South Korea where the comic in focus originated, not only because of their handy digital availability and comic style but also the meticulous stories that typically touch on Korea’s sociocultural issues that young readers can identify with. Webtoons have become the “treasure trove” for transmedia storytelling in Korean cultural industries, and lately, a transnational transmedia source of big screen culture in the global market. Dal Yong Jin’s new book, **Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture: Transmedia Storytelling, Digital Platforms, and Genres**, portrays webtoons as another major cultural product in the Hallyu (the Korean word for “Korean Wave”) tradition after K-drama and K-pop.



Dal Yong Jin, a distinguished SFU professor and a global professor in the School of Media & Communication at Korea University, focuses his research mainly on three related areas—the Korean Wave, digital platforms, and globalization. Since his first book, *Korean’s Online Gaming Empire*, Jin (2010) has committed to constructing a grand picture of Korean narratives in the global pop cultural market in the digital age. *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture*, his 11th monograph, and one of the 27 books that Jin has written, coauthored, or edited, is a natural continuation of his work and his stance that South Korea has emerged as “the most significant non-Western centers for the production of transnational popular culture and digital technologies” (p. 1) since the early 21st century. The book offers “a critical understanding of webtoons as a transnational media phenomenon” (p. 8) via the perspectives of digital youth culture, platformization, and transnational storytelling. Besides, the unrolled panorama of webtoons may serve as a case study to help readers to comprehend the even broader issue of cultural globalization in the digital age.

At which time did webtoons actually begin as a distinct form of comics? There is no academic consensus about it according to Jin (p. 29). What is certain is that the term “webtoon” was first utilized by manhua (comics) magazines or newspapers in 2000, or a little bit earlier in 1999, when some cartoon artists

started to create and update their work online with the availability of personal webpages or newspaper's websites rather than waiting for their works' debut in magazines and editorials, or enduring long and unpredictable apprenticeship from their mentors, as was the case in the manhwa industry. The webtoon platforms, led by Naver Webtoon, Kakao Page, and Daum Webtoon, were then developed as preferred junctions for webtoonists and viewers to gather and have spontaneous and direct interaction. However, instead of being a mediator, mega platforms grow into an intermediary who strategically controls, manipulates, and monetizes the entire process, even the entire industry.

Platformization is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, "digital platforms and smartphones gave cartoons a second life" (p. 59). They are fully motivated to reach out for ways of maximizing the monetary value of webtoons, including adding banner ads, developing IP-based transmedia content, offering freemium models (pay-or-wait) to audiences, and exploiting global collaboration, etc. (chapter 2). On the other hand, webtoon platforms' manipulation over the entire process results in uneven relationships between distributors and creators/consumers (pp. 52–59, 150–154). To be specific, their control of the overall ecology has created a lopsided relationship between themselves and webtoonists, squeezing the profit obtained by the creative souls into a teeny 10–20% of the total revenues (p. 56); their pay-or-wait model has propelled the addictive culture of binge reading for young consumers (chapter 3); and their excessive commodification of everything, such as fan translation, turns webtoons into sites of "ruthless capitalization" (Tai & Hu, 2018, p. 2372). Jin shows great sympathy for webtoon artists and fan translators, as the majority of them have not been treated fairly by the digital platforms.

In contrast to conventional comics that highlight the quality of drawings, webtoons place a stronger emphasis on the narratives. This makes webtoons a major source of transmedia storytelling for Korean cultural creators who had for a period of time suffered from a lack of new ideas before webtoons emerge from the view. The subtler stories that typically reflect more delicate and serious social themes of the era prove to be liked not only by young cartoon fans but also wider audiences. A good exemplary case is Yoon Tae-ho's *Misaeng: Incomplete Life* (pp. 103–105). It is the first webtoon to be adapted into other cultural forms (television drama, film, and musical), elevating Yoon as one of the most notable webtoonists. The comic depicts the unpleasant office life of a struggling intern whose difficult internship successfully connects to the prevailing "loser syndrome" among Korean youths and allows readers as well as audiences to sympathize and resonate with the protagonist.

Webtoon stories are typically about contemporary Korean society. There is no doubt that cultural authenticity endows webtoons with sociocultural significance and is a decisive factor to their success in being important sources of transmedia storytelling domestically. Nevertheless, it remains an open question whether, and to what extent, national mentalities and identities should be maintained in transnational transmediality. Jin argues for webtoons' hybridity (Jin, 2016, pp. 14–15; Jin, 2023, pp. 154–158)—a stance echoed by Shim, Yecies, Ren, and Wang (2020)—maintaining that "the webtoon platforms and webtoonists have to create webtoons based on local identities, instead of developing nationless cultural content" (p. 191), as Japanese manga usually does. However, inverse but not nonobjective voices can also be heard in the book. In Jin's interview with leading webtoonist Yoon Tae-ho, Yoon believes that "it is significant to develop webtoons reflecting universal ideas in order to penetrate global markets" where "Korean

webtoonists must depict themes and issues that everyone feels" (p. 178). This reveals the tension that arises when a new cultural form is platformized or globalized.

In general, *Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture*, by threading the evolution of webtoons in tandem with the advancement of digital technologies, discussing the vital influences of digital platforms, and webtoons' great value for transmedia storytelling in and outside the country, is exactly where to read about and understand media convergence in the digital age and digital cultures in relation to their three focal characters—platformization and transnationality in conjunction with transmedia storytelling. However, readers should always beware of within which scope Jin is making the analysis—locally (within Korea) or globally (outside Korea). The confusion arises because the introduction sets up webtoons as a transnational cultural phenomenon whereas the four ensuing chapters (chapters 1–4) are mostly about webtoons in the context of Korean society, switching to the international stage once in a while, without explicitly stipulating under which demarcation the conclusion is made. Thus, it is helpful if the reader can bear in mind that only chapter 5 on transnational transmediality is where webtoons' global reach is fairly reasoned so as to understand the author's logic and argument and not to overstate the facts presented.

As the first book-length study of webtoons, Jin's monograph has a lot to offer to scholars and students interested in cultural globalization and media convergence in relation to digital technologies. The book is well-written and a joy to read. Any reader, with or without relative academic background, can benefit from it. There are also other concerns rising for webtoons, including the age-restriction system (Yu & Park, 2023), but that is not of our concern in this current review.

References

- Jin, D. Y. (2010). *Korea's online gaming empire*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jin, D. Y. (2016). *New Korean Wave: Transnational cultural power in the age of social media*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Shim, A. G., Yecies, B., Ren, X., & Wang, D. (2020). Cultural intermediation and the basis of trust among webtoon and webnovel communities. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(6), 833–848.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1751865>
- Tai, Z., & Hu, F. (2018). Play between love and labor: The practice of gold farming in China. *New Media & Society*, 20(7), 2370–2390. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817717326>
- Yu, H., & Park, E. (2023). A harmless webtoon for all: An automatic age-restriction prediction system for webtoon contents. *Telematics and Informatics*, 76, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2022.101906>