

Uncomfortable Proximity: Perception of Christianity as a Cultural Villain in South Korea

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In global media audience reception studies, one of the most popular yet highly contested theories has been Joseph Straubhaar's theory of cultural proximity. Despite Straubhaar's inclusion of religious dimensions in his definition of the concept, however, few critics have sought to advance the cultural proximity thesis by incorporating religion into the discussion. In this article, I examine the perception of Christianity in South Korea in relation to particular media texts about spirit possession. In the uniquely pluralistic and competitive religious atmosphere of Korea, the strong presence of Christianity and its generally negative perception among the non-Christian public sometimes render both familiarity/relatability *and* a sense of discomfort, foreignness, and antagonism. Such an observation fits neither the notion of cultural proximity nor the opposite notion of cultural discount. I call this uncomfortable proximity.

Keywords: cultural proximity, Korea, Christianity, audience, media and religion

For some time, cultural proximity, a phrase coined by Joseph Straubhaar, has been one of the staple theories in global media audience research. It has also received much critique from scholars who increasingly recognized the limited scope of its applicability. Despite these scholarly efforts to critically reexamine and advance the notion of cultural proximity, two ideas that deserve to be discussed continue to be absent in the academic discussions. First, despite the small yet growing field of media and religion, little research has investigated how religion can modify the cultural proximity thesis. Second, Straubhaar's critics mostly challenged only the *generalizability* of his argument. In other words, cultural proximity seems to be working in certain cases and not in others, because an increasing number of findings indicate that cultural proximity is not what audiences are always looking for. This article addresses these two issues by (1) incorporating religion in a global context to advance the proximity thesis and (2) instead of challenging the *scope* of its applicability like most other critics, showing that the *quality* of proximity that the audiences experience can be more complicated than Straubhaar's earlier notion. This quality, as I demonstrate below, is a hybrid of cultural proximity and the opposite notion of cultural discount. For capturing such a paradoxical nature of audience reception, I propose the concept of uncomfortable proximity.

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Cultural Proximity and Its Critics

As the world has experienced the rapid process of globalization,¹ *cultural imperialism*—the idea that the powerful Western media will dominate and homogenize the world's culture (Lule, 2015, p. 159)—has obtained prominence among global media scholars. As scholars looked more closely at various national and cultural contexts, however, the cultural imperialism thesis was found to be too simplistic. Straubhaar joined the challenge to imperialism by observing that audiences outside Western contexts do not passively consume whatever Western media are delivered to them. Instead, he highlighted audiences' tendency to prefer contents that are culturally "more proximate and relevant to them" (Straubhaar, 1991, p. 43) and that are "closer to and more reinforcing of traditional identities, based on regional, ethnic, dialect/language, *religious*, and other elements" (p. 51, emphasis mine). Straubhaar calls this cultural proximity, which is the opposite of cultural discount.²

Although it has enjoyed its status as a staple theory in cultural studies' approach to global media, scholars eventually realized that cultural proximity is also in need of significant modification. Michael Curtin (2007), for instance, argued that "scholarly presumptions regarding the comparative popularity of culturally proximate programming from overseas sources need to be recalibrated to take into account the relative comfort that many audiences seem to feel with exotic products" (p. 277). For Curtin, "one might occasionally attend a movie with the intention of sampling the exotic, but one lives with television as a part of everyday life at home" (p. 279). In other words, cultural proximity is not sought by the audiences consistently in all media forms. In certain situations, such as watching movies in theaters, people may seek cultural elements that are highly foreign and not relatable to their everyday lives. While Curtin takes cinema as the case in which the cultural proximity thesis does not work, Tim Havens (2012) has employed the metaphor of "cultural journey" to show that, even in the global TV industry, cultural differences can sometimes be valued. Such critiques, however, still presuppose that there are culturally safe places where cultural proximity is secured. Rather than rendering the theory completely useless, then, they *limit the scope* of the cultural proximity thesis. Cultural proximity must be understood as only *one possible way* of audience response rather than a universal norm in global media reception studies.

Partly in response to critics, Straubhaar (2007) advanced his argument by introducing the notion of "multiple proximities," which takes into account the multiple layers in cultural products. Now, elements that appeal to audiences as proximate can include genre proximity, value proximity, and even thematic proximity. Thus, what may appear foreign or exotic in, for instance, aesthetics (e.g., cinematography) may still resonate with audiences' familiarity with certain genre structures. Likewise, a genre that may seem exotic in a local culture may still bear certain values that can resonate with viewers. This broadened

¹ Jack Lule (2015) provides a working definition of globalization "as a set of multiple, uneven, and sometimes overlapping historical processes, including economics, politics, and culture, that have combined with the evolution of media technology to create the conditions under which the globe itself can now be understood as 'an imagined community'" (p. 37).

² Cultural discount refers to the diminished appeal of a media text due to the difficulty, on the part of the audience, to identify with various cultural elements of the text (Hoskins, McFadyen, & Finn, 1997). Simply put, cultural discount takes place because of insufficient cultural proximity.

concept of multiple proximities is akin to Ien Ang's (1985) notion of "emotional realism," which can be appreciated by the audience when they can relate to the emotional experiences portrayed in a text even when the literal content is unrealistic.

Just as Ang's notion of emotional realism only depicts how *some* of the audience can interact with the media text, Straubhaar's revised version of his proximity thesis, despite its widened definition, can no longer be seen as a generalizable theory. Straubhaar (2007) himself admits that cultural proximity is not an accurate predictor of transnational success and is even limited by—and in tension with—other factors. In the complex world of transnational media reception, seeking some form of proximity is now only one of many ways audiences respond to foreign films and TV shows. But is the *scope of its applicability* the only aspect that needs modification? What about the *quality* of proximity? Could some controversial elements associated with religion, which has been absent in the critiques of Straubhaar's theory, shed new light on how proximity can be experienced?

Religion and Proximity

Both in Straubhaar's initial definition (1991) and his revised take on proximity (2007), Straubhaar mentions religious aspects. Yet scholars of global media and religion have rarely engaged the proximity thesis to determine whether it can be critically advanced by taking religion more seriously. Knut Lundby's work (2002) may be the closest to such an attempt. Lundby studied the audiences of American televangelism in Africa and concluded that African Christians' unfamiliarity with American politics limits their readings of the texts' political connotations and renders strictly religious-apolitical interpretations.

Indeed, works like Lundby's introduce religion into the study of transnational audience reception. One might even say that, in Lundby's case, proximity is working only partially at the religious level but not at the political level. But can there also be a more complicated and different kind of proximity? Religion is often associated with antagonism. Could some audiences find particular religions represented in media texts to be very familiar and relatable, *yet at the same time* see them as foreign entities that are "invading" the local culture? What kind of proximity would that be? I argue that it would be reminiscent of a mundane cultural villain from an outside world rather than an exotic entity. Such a religio-cultural phenomenon reflects what I call *uncomfortable proximity*.

Uncomfortable Proximity: In the Case of Religion

I define uncomfortable religious proximity as *the experience of audiences finding a religious element in a media text highly familiar and relatable to their everyday lives yet being antagonistic to it due to its perceived foreignness and imperialism*. The religion represented in the film or TV show is not seen as belonging to the local culture even though it is perceived to be already present in local culture. Such an uncomfortably proximate religion can also be seen as an entity that opposes local traditions, which can render negative, hostile, and even nationalistic responses. Thus, the uncomfortably proximate is neither proximate in a sense that it is welcome as part of the audience's own culture nor too alien for them to relate to. The uncomfortably proximate is an enemy from a foreign land that resides within and tries to overthrow the indigenous culture. It is *in* the local culture but not *of* the local culture.

The term *uncomfortable proximity* has been used previously by an artist, and I must clarify how I am using it differently. Graham Harwood (2003) gave the same name to his critical Web hack of the Tate Gallery's website. To describe his feelings about this London-based art gallery, Harwood stated, "I found myself awkwardly situated by my admiration for parts of the Tate collection and my equal disdain for the social values that framed the creation of much of its art and of the collection itself" (p. 375). This experience is referred to as *uncomfortably proximate*, because the viewer enjoys the aesthetic creativity of the text but is equally troubled by the political background of the artworks. Reflecting upon Harwood's work and his discomfort with the construction of "an exclusive, class-based canon of British art history" (Munster, 2006, p. 128), Anna Munster emphasized how this kind of uncomfortable proximity can be brought to the surface, particularly by digital art.

Indeed, Harwood's experience is well captured by the term *uncomfortable proximity*. Furthermore, unlike previous critiques of Straubhaar's notion, which mainly problematized the cultural proximity thesis for its limited scope of applicability, Harwood actually describes the *quality* of his experience with artistic texts. Harwood does not, however, interact with Straubhaar, and that is exactly where my usage of the same term differs from his. Harwood's reflection concerns two conflicting emotions caused by two different aspects of a given text. An artistic collection, at its purely outward aesthetic level, is pleasing, yet the historical/political forces that brought the collection to where it is today are troubling. Simply put, Harwood's notion of uncomfortable proximity is about the viewer experiencing a positive emotion for one reason and a negative emotion at the same time for another reason. It is about having mixed feelings for the same object.

What I describe as *uncomfortably proximate*, however, does not refer to the audience feeling simultaneously both positive and negative emotions about a media text. Instead, I attempt to capture the audience's perception of a cultural (in this case, religious) tradition and practice as familiar, mundane, and relatable yet disturbingly foreign and invasive. This paradoxical notion challenges Straubhaar's proximity thesis (both his earlier cultural proximity and his more recent multiple proximity) not by questioning the scope of its applicability but by complicating the quality of proximity. This kind of proximity does not draw the audience closer or provide positive experiences. But it also does not cause anything strange, unfamiliar, or exotic. There is nothing uncanny about it, yet the cause of the experience is taken by the audience to be unpleasantly from an outside world. For this reason, it is culturally and socially proximate, yet very uncomfortable. It is a hybrid of cultural proximity and cultural discount.³

Like any theoretical concept, my notion of uncomfortable proximity can be better described by specific examples in concrete contexts. The examples below, which come from the South Korean context, illustrate how some Korean audiences perceive Christianity to be *uncomfortably proximate*. I will further show that, in these particular instances, Korean shamanism is sometimes taken as the

³ One might misunderstand my notion of uncomfortable proximity as identical to Jonathan Gray's (2003) anti-fandom, albeit at a global scale. To be sure, there is likely to be some anti-ness among audiences who find something to be *uncomfortably proximate*. However, uncomfortable proximity is about more than just being anti to what is perceived to be foreign. It is about perceiving something to be disturbingly foreign yet annoyingly mundane and relatable to one's own cultural/social context.

national/local/indigenous religion that is being invaded by Christianity. In these instances, the relationship between Korean shamanism and Christianity is analogous to that between a protagonist and a villain: a villain that Korean audiences are very familiar with yet deem to be disturbingly foreign. I must first explain, however, why I focus on South Korea over other possible choices. The uniquely pluralistic religious atmosphere of the country and the status of Christianity in the Korean society are fitting for notable examples.

South Korean Religious Context

Although the pluralistic religious atmosphere is not unique to South Korea, the Korean religious marketplace is much more competitive compared to many other national contexts. While multiple religions coexist in many Western, Asian, and Middle Eastern regions, one or two traditions often boast dominance among the population. Those dominant traditions are typically Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. In South Korea, however, the picture is much more oligopolistic. Statistically, roughly half of the population claim to be religious; slightly over 20% are Buddhist, a little less than 20% are Protestant, and about 10% are Catholic (W. Lee, 2010). And, of course, as in other parts the world, there are minority new religious movements (Choi, 2004). In South Korea, then, the religious atmosphere involves (1) the coexistence of religious and nonreligious populations, both of which make up half of the nation's population, and (2) the interaction and competition among at least three major institutionalized religions without any one of them overwhelmingly outnumbering the others.

Besides the statistical information, however, another crucial aspect to consider in the Korean religious context involves two less institutionalized yet more influential religions in the country. Scholars continue to observe that Confucianism and Korean shamanism (*mu-sok-sin-ang*) remain deeply rooted in the entire Korean culture (Choi, 2011). Regardless of the religious institution that one chooses to be part of, Confucianism has always determined the ethical norms of social relations in Korea. Korean shamanism, on the other hand, always has been understood as the "real Korean religion" that defines the whole Korean religiosity, which is applicable beyond individuals who identify themselves as religious. Whenever major religious traditions from overseas traveled to Korea, they have interacted with and become indigenized by the preexisting shamanism. In fact, both Nam Hyuk Jang (2007) and Joon Sik Choi (2011) observe that even Christianity has been thoroughly shamanized in Korea,⁴ which is ironic, because Christianity is most hostile to Korean shamanism. The Korean church's condemnation of *mu-sok-sin-ang* as "idolatry" and the general public's perception of Christianity as "imperialistic" or "anti-traditional" speak of Christianity's status in the contemporary Korean context.

Korean Christianity

Among the major institutionalized religions in South Korea, Christianity is distinct in its history as well as its contemporary status. Unlike all the other major traditions, which have been in Korea for more

⁴ While many scholars often refer specifically to the Pentecostal/charismatic denominations in Korea as examples of shamanization, Sung Gun Kim (2011) points out that even the major denominations in Korea that are not officially associated with Pentecostalism have now become practically charismatized.

than a millennium, Roman Catholicism was introduced to Korea about two centuries ago, and Protestantism reached the country about a hundred years ago. Throughout their short histories in Korea, both the Catholic and Protestant Churches have played significant roles in education and modernization. They have also played major parts in liberating the country from Japanese occupation, though the Protestant Church has also had leaders who turned out to be collaborators with Japan. Protestantism has also experienced a rapid growth that has not been seen in other parts of the world. Today, South Korea is known by Christian leaders around the world to be the "East Asian powerhouse of Evangelicalism." In addition to the number of Protestant Christians who make up about 20% of the country's population, which is remarkable compared to other East Asian countries, South Korea also has some of the largest churches in the world and is the world's second largest overseas missionary sending country.

Despite its fast and successful growth, Christianity is perceived by the general public in contemporary South Korea as extremely negative. Surveys show that Protestant Christianity is the most hated religion among Koreans outside the church (W. Lee, 2010), and Christianity (both Protestant and Catholic) is still perceived as the most "foreign" or "Western" religion among the major traditions believed and practiced by South Koreans despite the size of Christian institutions in the country (Choi, 2004). The mass media occasionally report some pastors' moral corruption and conservative Christian groups' hostile protests against more liberal values. Popular discourses on Christianity involve derogatory depictions of the church's exclusive view of divinity and salvation as well as militant street evangelism in the midst of Korea's pluralistic/oligopolistic religious atmosphere. In those street evangelisms, with which most citizens of Seoul are familiar, one can often hear the motto *yesu-ch'öndang bulsin-chiok* (Jesus-heaven, unbelief-hell). This phrase is also often appropriated in derogatory statements against Christianity.

It is important to note that it is mostly the conservative Protestant branch of Christianity that is associated with exclusive and militant religious expressions and proselytization. However, while most Koreans are aware that Protestantism and Catholicism are not exactly the same tradition, when derogatory remarks are made, they are often directed against some of the core beliefs shared by both. Likewise, it can be argued that the Korean public's negative views of the Protestant Church can be projected into their perceptions of the entire Christian religion, including the Roman Catholic tradition.

With this brief background on Korea's religious atmosphere and the status of Christianity in the country, the next question is: What media texts would be appropriate to capture Christianity's uncomfortable proximity in South Korea?

Spirit Possession in Korean Media: Christianity and Korean Shamanism

There can be many ways to examine the notion of uncomfortable proximity in reference to religion. In the South Korean context, however, I propose that films or TV shows about spirit possession and exorcism can serve as fitting examples for case studies. The reason for this choice is twofold. First, the religious subject of spirit possession can speak specifically to both Christianity and shamanism in South Korea. The place of spirit (demon) possession and exorcism in Christianity is rather well known. In the Korean shamanistic worldview, the spirit of the dead carries on, and the souls of those who died unjustly do not depart this world but stay in it until their "grudges" are revealed and compensated. It is

believed that their activities can have a real effect on this world and that the shamans have special powers to communicate with and allay those spiritual entities, often through the means of possession and necromancy. Today in Korea, shamans (*mudang*) can be found all over the country, even in a high-tech city like Seoul. When customers enter her shrine (although there are male shamans, Korean shamans are predominantly women, and even the male shamans are mostly feminized in their appearance as well as speech; see Choi, 2011; J. Lee, 2009), the *mudang* offers counseling or fortune-telling. Depending on the graveness of the customer's situation, they also perform rituals (*gut*) to interact with the spiritual world, which sometimes involve necromancy through spirit possession. The fact that *mudangs* not only exist in large number but are sometimes financially successful (visiting their shrines can be expensive) suggests that the presence of *mu-sok-sin-ang* is still strong in South Korea today. Korean shamanism also appears in popular media such as prime-time TV dramas and films, particularly in horror cinema (N. Lee, 2013).

The second reason for the choice of media texts about spirit possession and exorcism relates to the first: They are more relevant to Christianity and Korean shamanism than other religions in South Korea. Christianity, as already noted, is perceived to be foreign and Western despite its strong presence in Korea. Korean shamanism, also as discussed earlier, is seen as the most Korean religion and the backbone of Korean religiosity. This contrast in the contemporary Korean context is peculiar, because Korean shamanism has also been regarded as superstitious and a hindrance to modernization, while Christianity was credited with accelerating it. The struggle between Christianity and Korean shamanism in TV shows and films about spirit possession, then, can reflect the perceived tension between what is Korean and what is foreign and Western. Thus, some of Korean audiences' responses that reflect such perceived tension can be appropriate sites for uncovering the uncomfortable proximity of Christianity.

In summary, TV shows and films on spirit possession and exorcism as well as audience responses that speak to perceptions of Christianity can provide relevant sample data for exemplifying my notion of uncomfortable proximity. Based on observations, I will argue that, for those who address Christianity negatively, it is not simply a foreign, exotic, and hardly relatable entity. Far from it. To the contrary, it is quite familiar and relatable, yet it is regarded as foreign and not belonging to Korea's tradition and culture. In the next section, I introduce some textual examples that betray the producers' awareness of the perception of Christianity in relation to Korean shamanism. Then I present two case studies to examine audience responses that address their views on the subject.

Textual Examples: The Industry's Take on Christianity's Uncomfortable Proximity

Before analyzing audience responses, it is worth mentioning how Christianity is sometimes juxtaposed with Korean shamanism within Korean media texts. Documentaries about real shamans, for example, often depict their family members—particularly their parents—as devout Christians who are opposed to their shamanistic path. In some cases, the obstinate Christian parent finally accepts the child as she or he is, and that marks the moment in which peace is restored in the family.⁵ Such documentaries present the tension between the shaman protagonist and the opposing Christian parent not as fiction but

⁵ See, for instance, the episodes of the shaman-turned-celebrity Mi Ryeong Park in the show *Inkan kŭkchang* (human drama), which were aired by Korea's public channel KBS in June 2007.

as a reality that resonates with Korean viewers. Such shows reflect the media industry's take on Christianity's uncomfortable proximity in South Korea.⁶

In addition to seemingly realistic documentaries and TV shows, another type of textual example that represents Christianity's uncomfortable proximity comes from a fictional and theatrical medium: horror cinema. One film that does so quite intensely, particularly in relation to spirit possession and shamanism in Korea, is *Possessed* (2009). The film also goes by the translated titles *Living Death* and *Distrust Hell*. In fact, *Distrust Hell* is the most literal rendition of the Korean title *Bulsin-chiok*, which means "unbelief-hell" and is clearly a reference to the aforementioned phrase *yesu-ch'öndang bulsin-chiok* (Jesus-heaven, unbelief-hell). The film is about a missing girl, who is the protagonist's younger sister, and the two sisters' mother, who is depicted as a fanatic Christian. Although the plotline revolves around the protagonist and a police officer searching for the missing sister, it is the portrayal of the mother by which the film takes advantage of Christianity being the uncomfortably proximate religion in South Korea. This fanatic Christian character habitually speaks loudly through a megaphone and engages in street evangelism, which is a picture that most South Korean audiences would be familiar with. She also constantly chastises her daughter, the protagonist, for her lack of faith and prayer. The mother perceives everything outside the church to be demonic, which is exemplified by scenes such as the one in which she pushes the police officer outside her apartment and says "everyone like him is Satan!" Toward the latter part of the film, both the missing girl and her sister show supernatural signs of spirit possession in ways understood by the shamanistic view. In contrast, the fanatic mother's interpretation of the whole situation turns out to be misguided, and her faith eventually leads her to commit suicide. The mother dies because of her faith, while the two sisters, both of whom turn out to have shamanistic potential, live.

There is a scene in which the pastor of the mother's church scorns her for taking the Christian faith in a wrong direction. Such scenes may serve as a safeguard against being accused of attacking the entire Christian faith, which is believed by a fifth of South Korea's population. The film also depicts the greediness of some other characters that employ shamanistic rituals. Nevertheless, by featuring a character and her religious rhetoric that audiences can resonate with, and depicting her as a villain or a tragically misguided character that causes a disaster to the family, *Possessed* serves as a notable example of the industry taking advantage of Christianity's uncomfortable proximity. It does so by referencing the commonly perceived negative ideas of Christianity in Korea, especially its hostile and narrow interpretation of the spiritual world. Such audience perceptions expected by the industry can be further elaborated by examining some responses to pertinent TV shows and films.

Examples of Audiences Expressing Uncomfortable Proximity

I use two case studies to illustrate how Christian elements in media texts can be received with uncomfortable proximity by some South Korean audiences. The first case comes from a study by Jin Kyu Park (2005) in which he analyzed Korean audiences' online responses to a Korean TV show to explore the

⁶ There are, of course, shows on Christian cable TV channels that feature stories of shamans converting to Christianity. The notion of religio-cultural proximity might work differently in Korea's Christian population, and this might be the flip side of this study that is worth pursuing in future research.

viewers' perceptions of Christianity, which turned out to be predominantly and significantly negative. For the second case, I follow Park's method of collecting and analyzing online responses, but I take Korean audience responses to a Hollywood film to provide a case that is complementary to Park's work. Both cases focus on Korean audience reception to texts about spirit possession, but one is a domestically produced TV show that is fictional, and the other is a foreign-produced feature film that is allegedly based on a real story. As described below, the TV show focuses on Korean shamanism while occasionally juxtaposing it against Christianity, but the Hollywood film mainly revolves around Christianity while briefly mentioning other religious views outside the Western world.

It is important to note that neither my notion of uncomfortable proximity nor the cases described here are meant to be generalizable claims about the entire Korean audience. Indeed, previous critiques of the cultural proximity thesis have rightly limited the scope of its applicability. I maintain, with other scholars, that proximity is only one aspect that can be observed by *some audiences* in certain occasions. What I hope to show here is that the *quality* of proximity can also be complicated in a way that challenges the dichotomy between cultural proximity and cultural discount. Thus, I will sample online responses that (1) express Christianity as a disturbingly foreign entity that does not belong to the Korean culture, yet, at the same time, (2) betray familiarity with the religion in ways that are relatable to people's mundane experiences. Both Park's and my collected data, which are online audience responses, have their limits as qualitative data. The most obvious one is the anonymous nature of online responses, because it is difficult to verify the identity of those who posted their comments and reviews even when these sites have "real name policies" for registration. This, however, does not significantly hamper the analysis in these particular cases. In fact, this characteristic of online posts may actually lessen the burden of sharing negative views on particular religions. Although face-to-face interviews with audiences certainly have their advantages, I maintain that analyzing online responses to these media texts does provide a helpful glimpse of what Christianity's uncomfortable proximity might look like.

Case 1: Korean TV Drama

The first case that reflects Christianity's uncomfortable proximity to South Korean audiences comes from Jin Kyu Park's study (2005), which analyzed online audience responses to the Korean TV drama *Wang-kkot seon-nyeo nim* and captured viewers' negative perception of Christianity as an exclusive religion that "others" all other non-Christian views and practices. *Wang-kkot seon-nyeo nim* was aired from June 2004 to February 2005 by one of South Korea's public channels, MBC. *Wang-kkot seon-nyeo nim*⁷ is about a woman who is destined to be—and later becomes—a shaman. In her journey, she goes through various difficulties because of her fate to serve as a shaman. At the center of all of the hardships is the experience of *mubyung*, a mysterious illness that cannot be cured by any medical treatment, which serves as a supernatural sign of being chosen as a shaman (Harvey, 1979). *Mubyung* is believed to stop only when the chosen accepts her destiny and determines to become a shaman. Another major difficulty in the protagonist's life involves struggles with her adoptive grandfather, a patriarchic figure who happens to be a Christian and does not want a shaman in his family. As mentioned, Christianity is often perceived

⁷ *Wang-kkot seon-nyeo nim* is the name that the protagonist later uses as a shaman, which can be roughly translated as "flower angel" or "flower fairy."

as an imperialistic tradition from the West that tries to subdue indigenous Korean culture and religion. Such characters in TV dramas that oppose the protagonist's association with shamanism can resonate with audiences' experiences with Christianity in the Korean context. In other words, *Wang-kkot seon-nyeo nim* is another textual example that reflects the media industry's take on Christianity's uncomfortable proximity.

While Park was more broadly concerned with audiences' overall responses, my argument in this section is that parts of his data, which express strong hostility toward Christianity, also corroborate my notion of uncomfortable proximity, even though Park himself did not mention anything on this aspect in his analysis. Remember that there are two paradoxical sides to the concept: familiarity/relatability and perceived unwelcome foreignness. Some of the hostile comments about Christianity in Park's study reflected more of the former while others expressed more of the latter. In comments such as the following post, it is hard not to notice the writer's familiarity with what is being criticized: "Christians must feel religious guilt if they don't do anything, watching a drama like *Wang-kkot seon-nyeo-nim*. They think that they should not be quiet when they encounter a story about idols or shamans" (quoted in Park, 2005, p. 114). It is implied that the writer can *easily predict* how Christians would respond to the ways in which spirit possession is represented in the show. Although this post does not explicitly use the language of "foreign attack on our tradition," it does recognize how Christians would be displeased about the show's affirmative depiction of Korean shamanism.

The following post (and others like it) mention what Christians in Korea "should learn": "The world is becoming pluralistic. We have to have a society where all races live together and all religions are in harmony. Vulgar Christians in our society should learn about difference and harmony before they argue for their righteousness" (quoted in Park, 2005, p. 114). The phrase "vulgar Christians" is directed at those who do not strive for harmony with other religious views but instead "argue for their righteousness." In the Korean context, it is hard not to recall the previously mentioned street evangelism, although other incidents can also contribute to such critiques. Comments such as these speak of perceptions of Christianity in Korea as disturbingly pervasive yet relatable to people's everyday experiences.

Other comments focused more on criticizing Christians as Westernizing agents in Korea, which clearly point at the perceived non-Koreanness of Christianity. The Christian religion is depicted as an imperialistic force that tries to destroy and conquer what is Korean. Park states that, in such comments, "Christianity was defined as a Western religion that did not only take the place of the traditional religions but has also demolished traditional cultures and religions" (2005, p. 115).

The next post refers to Korean Christians disparaging "Korea's own" supernatural practices while regarding theirs as superior. "Are not shamanism and *Jeom* [the Korean word for fortune-telling] all our customs, which we have inherited throughout our history? Isn't Christianity what we adopted from the West?" (quoted in Park, 2005, p. 115). This post also implies that the author of the comment is familiar with Korean Christians' attitude toward traditional Korean culture and religion. The focus of the complaint, however, is that "what we adopted from the West" is trying to attack "our customs" that "we have inherited throughout our history."

This rather hostile statement includes strong elements of both of the paradoxical sides of uncomfortable proximity:

You guys want to see a drama full of praise for Jesus, don't you? To you guys, things like Dangun or shamanism or indigenous faith are all superstition. You guys are like a child possessed by Western demons, who don't know anything about its own roots. (quoted in Park, 2005, p. 115)

On the one hand, the writer seems to think that she or he can predict the thought patterns—so to speak—of Christians. And it is their religion that is the enemy of Korea's own way of dealing with spiritual matters. Mentioning Dangun, who is taught in schools as the founding father of Korea, further demonstrates that Christianity is perceived to be opposing the very root of Koreanness. It may be recalled that Christianity was once seen as a modernizing force while Korean shamanism was viewed as superstitious and an impediment to modernization. In this post, however, that is precisely what is being criticized: Christians seeing Korean shamanism as nothing but superstition. For this writer, those Christians who frown upon Korean shamanism as superstition are not superior in any way but are "like a child possessed by Western demons."

To these audiences, Christianity, especially as it relates to Korea's indigenous religion, is nothing like an exotic culture that is difficult to relate to or too remote from their mundane experiences. At the same time, however, it is clearly perceived as a disturbingly foreign influence that threatens the spirit of Koreanness. Christianity is like a familiar villain that is from outer space yet firmly settled in the local soil. One may argue, however, that such antagonistic familiarity should not be attributed solely to Christianity, because the TV show to which these audiences are responding is a local Korean product. An important addition, therefore, would be an exploration of audience responses to another media text that is both foreign-produced and features Christianity in relation to spirit possession and exorcism.

Case 2: Hollywood Exorcism Movie

For another case study, I present my own analysis of South Korean audience responses to a Hollywood exorcism film. This type of media text is complementary to case 1, which was on a local text about shamanism. An exorcism movie from Hollywood, unlike a Korean TV drama, typically features Christianity as the representative religion that engages spirit possession and the supernatural realm. There have been a number of significant Hollywood exorcism films in terms of both their success and textuality. Although it would be desirable to obtain and analyze Korean audience responses to all of such films, neither space nor availability allows a study on such a grand scale. Therefore, I selected a film that is fairly recent and relatively popular compared to other Hollywood exorcism movies released in South Korea. Another helpful criterion for a more suitable film might be the primary objective of the movie not only being entertainment but presenting a serious argument about the religious topic of spirit possession.

A Hollywood exorcism movie that fits these criteria well is Scott Derrickson's *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005). The director of the film, a graduate from Biola University who identifies himself as a Christian, has stated explicitly in an interview that he was hoping to provoke the audience to think about

their beliefs in the demonic (Cowan, 2008). Although the film was not as successful in South Korea as it was in the United States (see IMDb, n.d.), it still did quite well when it was released in Korean theaters about seven months after its release in America.⁸ *Emily Rose* is based upon a true story, or rather a real court case, in which a Catholic priest is indicted for negligent homicide of an ill teenage girl. The priest, who is represented as Father Richard Moore in the film, insists that the girl—Emily Rose in the movie—has been possessed by the devil and that no medical treatment can help her. He eventually keeps her away from the medical treatment that the doctors consider crucial for curing what they believe to be the girl's medical illness. The plot revolves around the court trial with continuous flashbacks of the witnesses' testimonies. The flashbacks involve incidents that suggest the reality of demon possession, but the scenes are often followed by the prosecutor's reinterpretations to debunk the supernatural claims. Although the film was directed by Derrickson, the script was written by Derrickson and Paul Harris Boardman, which allowed Derrickson to present his view as a believer while having Boardman represent the skeptic's perspective. The trial involves rigorous arguments from both sides, and the movie ends with Father Moore being charged as guilty, yet with a sentence of time served. Rather than strictly advocating one perspective, *Emily Rose* encourages the audience to be open to the possibility of a supernatural realm.

The structure of the film as well as the authorial background and intention make it clear that *Emily Rose* was not made only to scare the audience and make a profit, even though the pleasure of encountering supernatural terror certainly is what many horror fans seek. Instead, along with entertainment, a clear argument is made in the film. *Emily Rose* deliberately challenges the audience to engage the religious topic of spirit possession. The represented religion in the film, of course, is Christianity. The film is also a foreign product to the eyes of Koreans. Thus, investigating South Korean audiences' responses to *Emily Rose* specifically in reference to the Christian aspect of spirit possession can provide an additional insight into the uncomfortably proximate nature of how Christianity can be perceived in the South Korean context.⁹

Unlike the Korean TV drama *Wang-kkot seon-nyeo nim*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* does not have an official Korean website. Therefore, I collected the data from the online posts about *Emily Rose* on Naver's movies section. Naver is the most popular search engine in South Korea and boasts its highest usage rate of about 80% in nearly all search categories (Internettrend, n.d.). These anonymous posts can be read online without membership, and they are all written in Korean.¹⁰ They consist of 995 short

⁸ According to the Korean Film Council's box office database, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* mostly remained in the top five in Korea during the week of its release as well as the following week. Considering the fact that the film was released in Korea roughly seven months after its release in the United States (which is more than enough time for circulating pirate files) and the fact that it was a horror film released in the spring (not the most popular genre among moviegoers in Korea and not the best season for horror cinema), it is safe to say that the film did quite well in Korea (see Korean Film Council, n.d.).

⁹ This does not mean, of course, that all or even the majority of the audiences will respond to the argument of the film. Indeed, most of the comments focused on the film's entertainment value as a horror movie (most of which were positive). It can be hardly refuted that entertainment is what audiences are looking for.

¹⁰ All the excerpts in this section are translated by the author.

comments, which are usually a few sentences, and 274 longer reviews that are at least a paragraph long. The posts on Naver significantly outnumbered those available via any other Korean search engines. Out of more than 1,000 total posts, 188 of them went beyond addressing entertainment values and engaged the religious elements of *Emily Rose*. Table 1 summarizes how I coded the comments and reviews.

Table 1. Comments and Reviews of The Exorcism of Emily Rose on Naver.

Coded themes	Number of posts	
	Comments	Reviews
(1) Relating to the film through Korean shamanism	2	15
(2) Resonating with the film without reference to specific religions	39	1
(3) Affirming/supporting the Christian aspect of the film	25	24
(4) Difficult to understand the film due to religious foreignness	0	2
(5) Negative responses to religion and superstition altogether	2	4
(6) Negative responses to the Christian specificity	32	42

Note. Total number of online posts was 1,269 (995 comments and 274 reviews). Total number of posts on religious aspects was 188 (100 comments and 88 reviews).

I should clarify again the limited yet useful nature of the selected data as well as the aim of analyzing them. While I read all the comments and reviews, the purpose is not to make a generalizable claim about the general audience. Just as Ang's concept of emotional realism captures only a portion of her viewers, my notion of uncomfortable proximity highlights how the South Korean context *can* complicate the simplistic notion of cultural proximity. Readers should recall that previous challenges to Straubhaar's theory focused on the *scope* of its applicability. By using 188 posts, I intend to complicate the *quality* of proximity.

The categories in Table 1 are self-explanatory. Theme (1) refers to responses that recognized similarities between the film's depiction of spirit possession and Korean shamanism. Posts in coding category (2) generally agreed with the film's overall argument about the supernatural without mentioning any specific religion. Theme (3) refers to responses that one might expect from Christian audiences affirming the film's message, although there was one review that also critiqued the demonology depicted in the movie from a Protestant perspective. These first three categories may attest to the cultural proximity of the film to a certain extent. The few posts in category (4) may indicate cultural discount. The reviews and comments under (5) simply expressed dissatisfaction with any religious or supernatural discourse.

Although the first five coding categories are interesting and worth analyzing for future research, the quality of audience responses in (6) are most pertinent to the discussion of uncomfortable proximity. The way in which spirit possession is represented in *Emily Rose* is mostly Christian-specific, and this

Christian specificity is precisely what these negative responses problematized. As shown in the following comments, it seemed to have triggered these audiences to ask: Why *only* Christianity?

"I liked it except for the fact that it was too Christian."

"It was fun, but it showed too much partiality toward a particular religion."

"The movie is only for Christians. It won't be pleasant if you're not one."

Despite the fact that the film was marketed as "based upon a true story" (i.e., a true story that was Christian-specific), which many of the posts did recognize, the writers of these comments saw the Christian specificity as a choice, which in their eyes was unfair and showed partiality. In other words, to these people, it was not at all that the Christian specificity was hard to understand or difficult to relate to. There was no cultural discount here. Instead, their expressed discomfort was about Christianity being the featured religion when there were other options.

Other responses, which were more aggressive in tone, saw the film as an evangelistic effort:

"I could smell religious odor. It's basically saying that you better believe in Jesus."

"This is a church advertising movie. Are you kidding me?"

"This is an evangelistic movie that only aims for proselytization in a very immature way . . . it childishly aims at the weak and vulnerable human mind."

"What I hate to hear the most is 'Jesus-heaven, unbelief-hell'¹¹ . . . (The movie) sounded more like a threat to me."

These posts went beyond recognizing the Christian specificity. Similar to some of the online responses to the Korean drama *Wang-kkot seon-nyeo-nim*, they expressed familiarity with Christian tactics, so to speak. The last post even recalled a familiar phrase from the streets in Korea, which was not even mentioned in the film. Far from expressing discomfort with any exotic/unfamiliar nature of Christianity, these responses seem to be saying something like "you can't fool me; I know what you're up to." It is important to note that the director's aim was not to argue for Christianity's superiority over other religions in the realm of the spiritual world. To the contrary, in one of the court scenes in the film, the character Dr. Sadira Adani—an anthropologist and a psychiatrist—testifies and argues for the *universality* of spirit possession in all cultures. She refers to possession as "a basic human experience reported by a great number of people all around the world" and an experience that is a "scientifically verified, culturally universal one." Yet Derrickson's effort for inclusiveness was not recognized by these audiences. Instead, they expressed how familiar they are with the enemy's predictable plans, so to speak.

¹¹ This is another reference to the phrase *yesu-ch'öntang, pulsing-chiok*.

Yet other responses carried all the elements of Christianity's uncomfortable proximity more strongly. These comments and reviews literally juxtaposed Christianity with Korean shamanism in ways that most fully embody the notion of Christianity as a cultural invader and a rival to Korea's own religion:

"What does this make of our country's shamans? And why are Christian movies so exclusive?"

"These Western movies depict spiritual entities in such a dichotomous way, only as a struggle between good and evil."

"If Emily was Korean, she might have received the invocatory rite and lived a so-so life as a *mudang*, but Christian countries like America don't embrace other supernatural entities besides their own God and deem all possession as caused by evil spirits that must be cast out."

These responses strongly expressed the perceived exclusiveness and foreignness (i.e., Westernness) of the Christian faith. Notice how they depict Korean shamanism as at least an equal—or superior—counterpart to Christianity for dealing with the spiritual realm. It is not just that Korean shamans are more effective in driving out spirits. To these viewers, Christianity, compared to Korean shamanism, has an unsophisticated and inferior understanding of the spiritual world, yet it is also exclusive, militant, and arrogant. The last statement refers to the shamanistic worldview in which the shaman is not necessarily possessed by an "evil" spirit. Rather, shamans are guided by the spirits to serve as a channel to communicate with the spiritual world. The argument in the last response is that, if the incident of *Emily Rose* took place in Korea, she might have embraced her calling to become a shaman and use her gift to serve as a mediator between this world and the spiritual realm. Unlike Korean shamanism, however, Christianity disrupts the peaceful harmony between the two worlds by demonizing spirit possessions according to its exclusive view.

One common thread in all of these responses is that Christianity is seen as a Western imperialist that imposes its own understanding of the spiritual world—an imperialist that these writers find to be too familiar and even predictable.¹² Earlier, I defined uncomfortable religious proximity as *the experience of audiences finding a religious element in a media text highly familiar and relatable to their everyday lives yet being antagonistic to it due to its perceived foreignness and imperialism*. This is precisely what can be seen in these audiences' analyses of Christianity.

¹² As mentioned earlier, it is important to note that Protestantism is the most hated religion in South Korea according to statistical data, and not Catholicism, which is the represented tradition in *Emily Rose*. These audiences' responses, then, could be projections of their views on Protestantism to the broader Christian faith without making the distinction. This could spark future discussions about another characteristic of uncomfortable proximity: Perhaps it is contagious to other cultural practices that are similar to the ones that are uncomfortably proximate.

Conclusion

In this article, I attempt to critically advance the cultural proximity thesis in a way that is different from previous critics. Whereas most critiques have been directed at the scope of the theory's applicability, I complicate the quality of proximity. In light of the dearth of research that connects religion to the proximity thesis, despite its importance in the definition of the concept, I focused on the perceptions of Christianity in South Korea. By exploring Korea's religious context and some examples of media texts as well as audience responses, I argue that sometimes what is perceived to be familiar and relatable to locals' mundane experiences (i.e., culturally proximate) can still be perceived to be disturbingly foreign. Such a paradoxical perception is neither proximate in a positive sense nor foreign in an exotic sense. It is neither cultural proximity nor cultural discount. Thus, I call it uncomfortable proximity.

Like other cultural forms and practices, religion travels around the globe and becomes represented in the media. In certain contexts, it can be neither "too foreign" to be relatable nor embraced as part of the local culture. Instead, it may be perceived as a cultural villain that is, paradoxically, familiar yet alien. There is, however, a difference between a familiar villain on a screen or in a story and what I call a cultural villain. Whereas the former is fictional and even popular, the latter is right there to be witnessed and experienced in real/everyday life. Thus, a cultural villain is not simply fun to watch and then forget about. It is uncomfortably proximate.

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