

JEANIE Y. CHANG, LMFT

HOW

K

DRAMAS

CAN

TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

POWERFUL LESSONS
ON BELONGINGNESS,
HEALING, AND
MENTAL HEALTH

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WILEY

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This book is dedicated to all the K-Drama fans out there, validating why you love K-Dramas so much and giving you leverage to convince others to join our community.

I also dedicate this book to my younger sister, Kathy, who brought K-Dramas back into my life when I was on an unknowing hiatus.

And to my parents, Bae Sung Ho and Nam Kwang Hee, who instilled in me traditional Korean values that have rooted me in my identity today.

I'm also dedicating this book to my four kids, Melodie, Ian, Skyler, and Asher, because I'm so proud and thankful to be a mother, which is my main job!

Finally, this book is wholly dedicated to my super-supportive, patient husband of 26 years (as of this writing), who faithfully watches K-Dramas with me and enjoys hearing my deep dives while also giving me feedback. He has always been more excited about my success than I am.

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Foreword

It has been remarkable witnessing the rise of K-Dramas as an international genre of storytelling. Since the pandemic, the popularity of shows and movies from Korea has been undeniable. What underlies that popularity is the way Koreans tell their stories. In the mix of love triangles and high school revenge, it is the way we as an audience are allowed to sit in the emotions of the characters that make us return to them. Korean dramas remind us about our stories, or rather, how we felt in our stories.

In talking about a particular K-Drama or specific moments in a K-Drama, we are able to slow-cook on those emotions and relate to them. That is how Jeanie Chang and I met. At a leadership conference of Korean Americans, we ended up sitting next to each other. Thus began a long and still ongoing conversation about our favorite K-Dramas and how they have helped the two of us on our storytelling journey.

Our most memorable discussion was caught live on the first presentation of Jeanie's Noona's Noonchi podcast. Of course, with Jeanie's superpower of listening, I opened myself to her about how K-Dramas helped me reconnect to my Korean heritage. We zeroed in on how K-Dramas help us find ourselves. Through my emotional connection with different storylines in Korean dramas, I learned to

embrace my roots. As soon as I began to understand the wealth of stories from my homeland, I was able to fully understand how to tell my story. Leaning into K-Dramas and the complexities of my heritage helped me work with the Nickelodeon team to develop *Bossy Bear*. It also helped me understand how to tell my mother's story in my blog, *MommaKongSays*.

My conversations with Jeanie are always insightful, in part because we have the mutual language of K-Dramas, but mostly because Jeanie allows anyone to tap into their own inner drama. Much like the way Song Hye Kyo's character in *Descendants of the Sun* realizes that she is very much in love with her special forces lieutenant, or in *Thank You* when the grandmother character Kang Boo Ja quietly waves the little girl Bom (who has AIDS) to sit with her in her bathtub. Jeanie listens with the heart of a Korean drama producer. If you know those two specific show examples as I do, you'll recognize that K-Drama storytellers allow those looks of love and caution to replay over and over so that the viewer can see the impact of that moment from every angle and every character's perspective.

Jeanie allows you to express your *Jeong* and feel your *Han* by connecting you to similar moments in these dramas. She allows you to talk about them and see all the different ways to feel. In doing so, she is able to help you release subtle traumas by connecting you to something you have watched, by connecting you to something that allows you to feel despite the cultural and language barrier.

As you can see, I am a fan of Jeanie Chang! I know you will continue to find insights into yourselves through this book in the same way I do each moment I get to spend time with her. I look forward to more conversations with my friend and I cannot wait for you to read her book.

Chil Kong, Consulting Producer of Nickelodeon's
Bossy Bear and Adjunct Professor of Theater at
Bowie State University

Introduction

The Story of Noona's Noonchi

“K-Dramas saved me when I went through life traumas.”

“K-Dramas helped heal my wounds.”

“Through K-Dramas, I have found so many new friends from all over the world.”

“K-Dramas make me feel less alone in this world.”

This is a snapshot of what I hear from my clients and followers on a regular basis.

What if I told you Korean Dramas (K-Dramas) could also change the world? Maybe you're thinking, “Cool, tell me more because I love K-Dramas and want more validation to binge watch them.” Or maybe you're saying to yourself, “You're kidding, right? How can a show like *Squid Game* change the world?” It's a bold statement, I know. That's what I'll be showing you throughout this book.

I'll start from the very beginning: with my own experience of K-Dramas both personally and as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. K-Dramas have helped my mental health over the years, specifically with my cultural identity. What started out as self-care has blossomed into an integral part of my clinical work. I figured if they're helping me, they must be able to help others.

So I started talking about them in therapy sessions and in my virtual and in-person workshops. I'm not advocating for K-Dramas just because I enjoy them or because I'm Korean. My work as a licensed mental health professional trumps my cultural identity, and I'll always prioritize mental health and wellness. Having good mental health creates a ripple effect that leads to strong self-identity. And I believe K-Dramas can help.

The Noona's Noonchi channel started at the height of the pandemic, encouraged by college students who told me I should put all my content on YouTube. I found the thought funny. Me, start a YouTube channel? But it made sense because I had more content than I knew what to do with. I was also comfortable on camera. I started bringing K-Dramas consistently into my support groups, sessions, and talks early on in the pandemic because folks were so depressed and lonely that I needed something fun that would cheer them up in a unique way.

Of course, I had to think of a witty name. I knew right away I would use *noonchi* or *nunchi*, one of my favorite words in the Korean language. When I was a child, I received the highest compliment that a Korean adult can give: telling your parents (and you) that you have good noonchi. It's known as the Korean superpower, and I hold it near and dear to me because I am, after all, Korean.

The term refers to Korea's art of social and emotional intelligence. It's reading the room, gauging the context of people's reaction and the situations you're in, and assessing how you're feeling in reference to everything.

Koreans will tell you how complicated it is to explain noonchi. It's about being quick to act, think, and follow through in the most mature way possible. I use it daily and it's also an invaluable tool in my work, which is always client-facing. I became quite astute in using my noonchi virtually during the pandemic. In my line of work, I take my clients' or people's words with a grain of salt, even if they insist that they're feeling a certain way or doing fine or not

doing fine. I have to dig deeper and use my noonchi to ask the questions that will get me answers so I can then help my clients, followers, and other people I deal with.

I wanted my YouTube channel and social media to be approachable, which is how I like to be in real life. “Noona” came to mind because it sounded witty next to noonchi. It means “big sister” in Korean, which is what boys call their older sisters or older girl friends. (In real life, I am actually an *unnie*, which means “older sister” or what women call their close older girlfriends, because I have a younger sister.) And so, Noona’s Noonchi was born.

A Global K-Drama Community

“K-Dramas are for everyone.”

I hear this often and it’s important for me to point out that this point of view comes from non-Asians and non-Koreans. Gone are the days only Koreans and Asians watched K-Dramas. The Noona’s Noonchi social media community is global. Today, most of my followers are from the United States, with the second biggest number from India. Based on my direct messages and interactions online, many of my U.S.-based followers are non-Asians—including white, Black, and Latinx—and only a fraction are Asian. I’m amazed at this wonderfully diverse community that has brought belongingness all over the world. It has positively impacted my mental health and gives profound meaning to my work.

In 2023, I launched Noona’s Noonchi Tours, offering K-Cultural tours around South Korea, including popular K-Drama sites. My inaugural tours included only three Asian participants. I take this as a point of pride. It means I am being a good ambassador of my home country and influencing how my followers enjoy Korean culture through the eyes of their K-Drama experience. My tours are the first of their kind and I love bringing over people who are visiting Korea

for the first time, eager to see the country depicted in their beloved K-Dramas, and, of course, who want to be closer to their beloved K-Pop artists.

Being in the social media influencer space, I have gotten to know other K-Culture influencers. The landscape is quite fascinating and worth exploring with you because it still blows me away. It's as global as you can get, which is something to write home about. There are quite a few prominent Korean and Korean American content creators and influencers, such as Priscilla Kwon (@priscillakwon) and Stephanie Kim (@tressuni), who cover K-Culture and cultural trends; Joanne Molinaro (@thekoreanvegan), as well as @maangchi and @koreanbapsang, who are popular for promoting Korean food; and Jane Park Kang (@janeparkang), who covers Korean culture in parenting and family. There are also well-known Korean content creators, like @mykoreandic, who address Korean culture, food, and trends, and @jfromkorea, who covers South Korea travel.

I've had the privilege of getting to know Jae Choi (@jfromkorea), who hosts tours around South Korea, along with his tour partner, @chrisbg, a Bulgarian content creator who lives in Korea. Chris helps run the ever-popular Instagram account @seoul.southkorea. The account has over a million followers and does a fantastic job of promoting Seoul and South Korea tourism. Chris says he believes South Korea travel is more popular than ever and that people are very eager to visit because they have the perception that it's the "Korean Dream."

This reminded me of growing up in an immigrant family and hearing so much about the "American Dream." To hear Chris talk about the "Korean Dream" just hit me emotionally. For people around the world to look at Korea like this is beautiful but surreal; it feels too good to be true. At the same time, I see what Chris is talking about because folks tell me, "Korea is on my bucket list." When I asked Jae why he thinks South Korea has become such a hot spot to visit, he took a moment to think about it and replied, "the Korean people." Jae acknowledges that

K-Content has played an important role, but in the end he believes the Korean people are what make Korea popular. On his travels, he's heard from many tourists about how they love seeing the Korean hospitality and the culture's emphasis on the collective and community. It's something I agree with, although I discuss in my mental health workshops that collectivism comes with its own stressors, like any cultural practice that has many nuances. Still, I believe the Korean people's collective mentality, a key aspect of Asian culture, is what has made Korea into a powerfully resilient global presence.

A testament of how global the K-Drama community has become is the number of social media accounts as well as influencers that are neither Korean nor Korean American. As far as I know, I'm the only Korean American influencer who covers the K-Drama niche and I stay as focused as I can on my mental health expertise. There are other Korean American and Asian American influencers out there who address Korean and Asian culture.

Amazingly, the social media influencer with the largest K-Drama community in the world is a young lady from Dubai. She's known as @deemalovesdrama on her socials, and she was the first-ever Noonchi Tours fellowship recipient who was provided the opportunity to attend my inaugural tour. With over 560,000 followers across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube (at the time of this writing), Deema Abu Naser fell in love with K-Dramas when she was around 13 years old and started her account in 2019 because she loved the shows so much and wanted to find an outlet to talk about them. Deema shared on my inaugural tour how she feels such belonging with her K-Drama community and how that fuels her passion for being a content creator full time. I find it absolutely inspiring how a non-Korean and non-Asian built the largest K-Drama community in the world.

So much goes through my mind when I see non-Asians reviewing K-Dramas with such enthusiasm, as if I am unable to digest what's happening. These are folks who are publicly talking about K-Dramas

and proud to be creating content about them. It wasn't too long ago that I could only mention K-Dramas with my husband and family because no one else would know what they were or didn't care to know. These influencers show just how appealing K-Dramas are on a global scale and that one can connect to them regardless of cultural descent.

Of course, many people still aren't aware that K-Dramas exist or don't seem to be interested in watching, and that is fine. The world is huge, and K-Dramas aren't for everyone. When I said this at a workshop in 2022, one woman in the audience responded, "Those folks don't know what they're missing!" Another one said, "They must be living under a rock if they don't know about K-Dramas."

There's an assumption that social media platforms, particularly TikTok, are exclusively for Gen Z. Being a Gen Xer, I used to think the same. However, I really liked what Priscilla Kwon shared about social media, which is largely influential in how K-Dramas have gone global and viral:

You don't have to be young to enjoy social media. There's an audience for every single age group. For example, when *Squid Game* blew up, everyone was talking about it and there was such a fascination with it (across all ages). This made others who hadn't seen or heard of it want to jump on the bandwagon. That's what makes social media so powerful. You see and hear so many people talking about *Squid Game* that there's a fear of missing out (FOMO).

I know many folks my age and older who decided to become active on social media aside from Facebook and created Instagram and TikTok accounts because they wanted to follow K-Drama accounts, including myself, Deema, and others. They searched for K-Drama communities because they wanted to talk about their beloved shows. Social media is a huge reason why K-Dramas have boomed because they connect the community, and that FOMO promotes

more K-Drama fans because the enthusiasm produces a ripple effect. Streaming services have also made K-Dramas go global because they're more accessible now than ever before. I used to downplay the impact of social media, but I can't deny that I've written this book and gained more speaking gigs thanks to my social media accounts.

It's one thing for me as a Korean American to find the K-Drama global effect surreal, but Korean nationals find it baffling. As a clinician and researcher at heart, I tend to ask Korean nationals I meet what they think about K-Dramas having such global appeal. Many question why foreigners enjoy K-Dramas so much and others find it downright amusing. I sometimes found myself trying to explain the global appeal of K-Dramas. I realized that most folks had never really thought about why they enjoy watching K-Dramas, but soon enough after thinking about it, they're able to answer. And it was like that with foreigners. Many Korean nationals indicated it was for entertainment purposes and a way to unwind after a long day. They saw it as a great form of escapism. Some say they like how K-Dramas portray certain issues that are occurring within Korean society, especially the recent dramas in the last few years, while others have said they enjoy watching with their families and their kids. Nevertheless, K-Dramas are a normal part of Korean society, as we would expect them to be, and their reasons for watching aren't too far off from ours.

JTBC (a South Korean TV network) producer director (PD) Christine Ko admits she was very surprised to hear such enthusiasm from K-Drama fans all over the world the several times she's been on the Clubhouse app. Christine says now that K-Content is so in demand, there's a much higher level of expectation in her work. It's a double-edged sword since it's an exciting time for K-Content. However, Christine is cautious about what kind of K-Dramas are being produced, since the industry has been asking these days, "What stories can we keep creating that are appealing to global audiences?" While I agreed with Christine that this is a thrilling time to be in the K-Content industry and there are stories to think about that can

reach all audiences, I pleaded with her to stay grounded in Korean values, the good and bad of it all. My explanation to her on why K-Dramas have gained such traction is that the Korean culture and family values resonate with audiences in a time of adversity. Because people felt comforted watching K-Dramas, they grow more curious about the culture they're seeing. To stray from that would be a travesty. Christine agreed.

Why K-Dramas?

"I feel like my quality of life is pretty good when I'm watching two to three K-Dramas at a time, because it gets me excited."

– Korean American content creator, Priscilla Kwon.

K-Dramas are aspirational and inspirational. They allow us to strive, thrive, and hope for a better tomorrow. K-Dramas show us where we came from, who we are today, and what we could be. They're like a roadmap of life, guiding us in navigating life's speed bumps, roadblocks, twists, turns, dead ends, fork in the roads—you get my drift.

Joan MacDonald, a K-Content writer for *Forbes*, is someone I've long admired since I read all her articles. She says she feels K-Dramas are "so much more entertaining" than what she was watching on American TV. "In a very entertaining way, they deal with emotions and human relationships, and they feel very cathartic."

However, at its core, K-Dramas can change the world because they promote a beautiful experience of belongingness—a belongingness that the world needs now more than ever. In a post-pandemic world, belongingness inspires you to find yourself and build cross-racial and cross-cultural bridges. Belongingness with others across the globe makes the world feel smaller. Even though we may be across continents and oceans, K-Drama fans feel an undeniable closeness with one another because they share their love and enjoyment with others.

Belongingness is an innate human emotional need for survival. It's about being part of someone or something outside of yourself, just as critical as food, shelter, and water. It's guaranteed that when a K-Drama fan encounters another, the chemistry of belongingness happens.

Belongingness isn't just about kinship. It's also about connecting to yourself—your self-identity, values, and perspectives.

What K-Dramas do so well is developing their characters with such richness and depth. Shared experiences from trauma to achievements and successes all affect your emotional, social, and psychological well-being. Even if you tell me, "I'm a loner, I prefer being by myself," I'd tell you that your mental health will eventually take a hit since that leads to loneliness. "Loneliness kills," according to the longest-running study on happiness. Dr. Robert Waldinger, the Harvard psychiatrist leading the program, says, "Loneliness is as powerful as smoking or alcoholism."

K-Dramas reveal a spiderweb of complexities within us. The most obvious example is the K-Drama antagonist. While a character may start off being "bad," they may not necessarily end up that way by the end. It all becomes fuzzy once viewers begin to understand the backstory of the character as it's revealed. K-Dramas encourage viewers to develop empathy for characters outside of themselves and help them relate to experiences and emotions that aren't their own, a process called externalization, which I'll get into more detail later on. Compassion and empathy go hand in hand. Both are an essential element of belongingness.

People will tell you they love K-Dramas because of the storylines or the cute characters. But gaining insight into empathy and compassion—the core elements of the human existence, which weave into our mental health—is what really keeps us coming back to K-Dramas for more. Human beings are connective creatures, and what draws us to a K-Drama is its ability to help us evoke emotions in a less intimidating way, which in turn provides us an outlet or safe

space to process our thoughts and behaviors. Don't you think that the world is a better place when we display more empathy and compassion for those around us, especially in a post-pandemic world? Priscilla Kwon called K-Dramas "a breath of fresh air" when the world needed it the most. "I don't have this in my life and that's why it was fun seeing it through K-Dramas."

My social media community really sparked me to dive into this topic more deeply. One of my followers, Wayne Boatright, is a white man in his sixties from the West Coast who spent seven years in prison for a DUI that ended up killing someone. Wayne says he has accepted the consequences, knowing a life was lost because of his actions, and served his prison time with resolve and peace. Wayne says that in his last few years in prison he bonded with his fellow inmates who introduced him to K-Dramas, and they would schedule time to watch them together in the newsroom of the San Quentin jail where they worked. In his own words:

My saving grace in prison was finding K-Dramas on the back channels they have on prison television. Here we were as a larger group instead of in our own jail cells to experience K-Dramas together. I'm talking to these guys, all of whom were Black aside from me—we loved these K-Dramas and we felt connected.

Wayne says these were men who committed crimes like murder, but their past crimes were irrelevant when it came time for K-Drama watching. Each night, they eagerly sat together at 7 p.m. and experienced a belongingness that's indescribable in that San Quentin prison. "We were transported to another world out of prison to another place, another time, and it was enthralling."

His story moved me and still resonates today, perhaps because I can imagine how difficult an environment like prison can be. Prison inmates who have been sentenced for the most heinous crimes found a belongingness in K-Dramas. Wayne pointed out that he was the

only white male in that institution, which we can imagine must make him feel vulnerable, but Wayne didn't indicate that to be the case at all except to say he felt part of a community of K-Drama fans, and that got him through the last few years of prison. To this day, Wayne is an avid K-Drama watcher who talks to me off and on about his favorites. I wouldn't have known about his poignant story had it not been for K-Dramas.

The K-Content Phenomenon

Do you know that 2021's *Squid Game* is Netflix's most-watched show in its history? This is an amazing statistic, along with the fact that 60% of Netflix subscribers have watched at least one Korean show. Netflix's co-CEO Ted Sarandos said himself that Korean content is proving to be the type of storytelling people want. Netflix has indicated it will invest \$2.5 billion in South Korea over the next four years. (That gives me time to write a second book on K-Dramas for mental health!) Sarandos also says that one in five Netflix titles in Korea will come from a first-time writer or director because they believe success in Korea will lead to success globally.

The day that announcement came out, Korean Americans and K-Drama fans were texting one another in excitement. Disney+ also invested millions of dollars in producing Korean content. In fact, at the time of this writing, their 2023 K-Drama, *Moving* (a current favorite of mine), was its most popular show to date, which also happened to be the most expensive K-Drama production in history. Disney+ Korea wasn't doing well, but thanks to *Moving*, which also starred some of Korea's biggest stars, this all changed.

I believe these shows owe a lot to BTS and *Squid Game*, which catapulted Korean content onto a global scale. All BTS needs to do is mention what K-Drama they're watching or what their favorite Korean food is, and it'll be the next K-trend. *Squid Game* made history with its Emmy wins as Best Drama and Best Lead Actor

(Lee Jung Jae)—a first for a South Korean. When that happened, a wave of belongingness, or *Jeong*, rippled across the country. We felt that *Jeong*—the Korean concept for connection, kinship, affection—because we saw on a global scale, perhaps for the first time, that our culture was being hailed and centered. It’s something many of us never expected to see.

Astonishing, considering where we were pre-pandemic, when I got scoffs for talking about K-Dramas in my work or was met with skepticism when I indicated K-Dramas can benefit your mental health. K-Dramas were fairly unknown to the general public until the pandemic. Joan MacDonald, prominent K-Content writer for *Forbes*, recalls that when she pitched stories on K-Content, she would be met with the response, “What does this have to do with our demographic?” Both Joan and I chuckled at how we’re both living the global dream because she makes a living off writing about K-Content, which so many folks would love to do today.

Joan says her work stems from a passion she had for over 14 years when she first started watching K-Dramas. Back in 2012, Joan had only been watching K-Dramas for a couple of years, but knew she had to visit South Korea, which she did shortly after. The latest stat Joan says she knows of is how K-Drama viewership jumped by 200% in the United States amid the pandemic. Joan says, “These days K-Drama, K-Pop, K-Beauty is part of the younger folks’ ordinary vocabulary.” Joan says with a smile that the other day she was pleasantly surprised to hear her local Target playing BTS on the loud-speaker system. She couldn’t have imagined that in 2014 when she first saw them perform. Neither could I.

When I first started listening to BTS back in 2015, no one had even heard of them. I really enjoyed their music early on. Now it seems I’m the one feeling skeptical when someone mentions the name of a K-Pop song or group that I’ve never heard of. I’m being schooled not only by other Asians, but white, Black, and Latinx people who look disappointed when I mention I haven’t heard of who