

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 284: REGINA KIM

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve of Learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. This week's show is going to be a bit different because in it I talk about something I'm very passionate about, Korean TV dramas or K-dramas. Maybe your family has a similar story. You were stuck at home during the pandemic and running out of things to do, watch, and talk about. And someone in your life, in my case, my daughter said, Why don't you try this? And from then on, you became obsessed. I had a great conversation with entertainment journalist Regina Kim. She wrote a fantastic piece for *Elle* magazine called, *The K-drama Renaissance How South Korean Entertainment Took Over Your TV*. That headline describes exactly what happened in my house. The South Korean entertainment industry has been enormously disruptive to the media landscape, with pop groups, hit TV shows, and blockbuster movies that dwarf the global popularity of their US counterparts. So, what's their secret, and why now? Regina explains that this has been happening for years, even decades. Our perspective has just been too narrow. Mine was certainly broadened after our conversation. I hope yours will be too.

Whitney Johnson: Regina, let's start with your background and how you became interested in Korean pop culture.

Regina Kim: I was born and raised in Georgia, the state of Georgia. And I remember when I was growing up, the cities that my parents and I lived in, we were like one of maybe two or three Asian families in the entire city, or at least it felt that way. And so, I rarely saw other Asian faces. And of course, back in those days, it was very rare to see an Asian or Asian-American face on TV. It wasn't until I would say high school when I really started becoming exposed to Korean pop culture. And it happened one day when. So, my parents decided to rent some Korean dramas from our local Korean grocery store. They sold Korean dramas on VHS tapes. And one day, my parents started renting those because they had heard from some people that Koreans make some pretty good shows. And one of the first K-dramas that I saw with my parents was titled *All About Eve*. It came out, I believe, in 2000. So, it's

a fairly old drama. But that single K-drama, I would say like, literally changed my life because it has such a great story. I thought the acting was great. This actress named Chae Rim is in it. She was a really popular Korean actress back then, and Jang Dong-gun, who people say is like the Johnny Depp of South Korea. He's probably like one of the first Korean movie stars that became famous outside of Korea. He is also in it. And I remember when I was watching that drama, like, I just really fell in love with the characters and the story. It was just really well made for a drama at that time. And at the end of every episode, they played the theme song, which was *True Love*, and it was sung by Fin.K.L. or in English it's spelled as f, i, n k l, but in Korean it's Finkl. And they're actually one of the first K-Pop idol groups to come out of South Korea. But that song was really catchy, and that's actually what got me interested in both K-dramas and K-Pop. You can say that it all started with this one particular drama called, *All About Eve*.

Whitney Johnson: So, you said you were in high school when this happened?

Regina Kim: Yes, I was in high school.

Whitney Johnson: Now, what's interesting, too. Was it also one of the first times that you were able to see a Korean face like you weren't just seeing white faces, you were seeing a Korean face, and so you were able to see yourself up on the screen. Was that part of it as well?

Regina Kim: Yeah, I think that was definitely part of it. I mean, I don't think I realized it at the time. I think for me what it was, was, oh my goodness, like this is a show that was made in Korea, which is my parents' homeland. And I was just really surprised and proud of the fact that. You know, Koreans, you know, since I'm ethnically Korean, Koreans were able to make such great stories. So, it's just very eye-opening for me.

Whitney Johnson: Did you grow up speaking Korean?

Regina Kim: Yes, I spoke Korean at home with mostly my mom. With my dad, it was like Kon-glish, like a mix of Korean and English. But with my mom, I spoke solely in Korean.

Whitney Johnson: The real awareness and what got me excited about having a conversation with you is that, like many people, apparently. During the pandemic, we started watching K-dramas. I think it was probably May or June of 2020. My daughter, who at the time was probably 19 and had always been a big fan of Pokémon and, and manga, etc. Said, Hey Mom, why don't we watch, *Romance Is a Bonus Book*? That was my gateway show. And so, we started to watch that. And I'm just wondering, did you see, as an observer of Korean pop culture moving into the United States, have you seen a tremendous uptick over the last couple of years?

Regina Kim: Oh, yeah, definitely. I mean. Well. Well, first, I want to point out that even before this COVID pandemic hit the US, like even back in 2014, there was a survey that was done back then that found that roughly like, 18 million Americans watched K-dramas even back then and even before that, in like 2011, 2012, which is when I was working for this video streaming startup called Drama Fever. They're basically like Viki, like Viki was actually their biggest rival at the time, but Drama Fever focused on streaming Asian TV shows and movies. And most of the content was from South Korea. And I remember back then we were looking we were analyzing our audience, and we were surprised to find that most of our subscribers in the US were actually not Asian American like they were. They were mostly women, but they were like women who were like white, black, or Latina, which was very surprising. And I remember even back then, like again, 2011, 2012, Drama Fever had tons and tons of subscribers in the US. So, when I read about this 2014 study that had come out saying that 18 million Americans had watched K-dramas back then, I was not surprised. I think I think the thing was, back then, even though there were many people in America who were watching Korean dramas, we just didn't really talk about it. Like no one really openly talked about it. Yeah. Because, like, it just wasn't yeah, it wasn't part of the mainstream conversation. And so, I think like, I mean, myself included, I only watched K-dramas with my parents or like my friends who I knew were into K-dramas. I know like during the pandemic, like so between like I would say like end of 2019 and 2021. Netflix found that in the US alone, viewership of K-dramas on Netflix increased by over 200% during the pandemic. And then if you're talking like globally, viewership of K-dramas on Netflix increased by over 600%, which is insane.

Whitney Johnson: What's the attraction? I mean, you started to allude to this of the experience that you had as a teenager, but what are you seeing overall? The attraction to K-dramas is over US American television.

Regina Kim: Yeah, I mean, it's a great question, and I always felt that because I'm of Korean descent and just the way that my mom raised me. I've always even though I didn't grow up in Korea, like I was always familiar with Korean culture. And so, I always felt like maybe whenever I watch a K-drama, the experience might be a bit different from someone who is not of Korean descent watching a K-drama. And so, I decided to interview a bunch of US-based K-drama fans last year when I was writing one of my articles. And it was really interesting because there were certain things that almost all of them just said kept coming up over and over again during our conversation. Like, one of those things was obviously the very engaging storytelling. A lot of these K-dramas have very intense and sometimes melodramatic storylines, and they're also somewhat fast-paced, like not too fast-paced, but they're fast-paced enough so that viewers are able to stay engaged throughout the show. Many of them also mentioned the strong character development. I remember they were saying that if you watch an American show, a lot of the focus is on the plot and kind of like the sequence of events that take place. Whereas if you watch a K-drama, a lot of the focus is put on character development. Sometimes it's more so than the actual plot. And so, viewers are able to feel more of a deep emotional connection with the characters. And so, that's why you hear a lot of people saying that when they watch a K-drama, they will laugh and cry throughout the show. A common theme that also came up was how a lot of these, I guess American K-drama fans really like the fact that K-dramas usually are single season, right? Everything ends in just one season. So, you have like a finite number of episodes, and traditionally that was like around like 16 or 20 or 24. You also had some that were like longer, but everything usually ends in just one season, although that is also starting to change.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, I'm going to add my two cents. Are you ready?

Regina Kim: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So, absolutely better stories, and the character development is so strong. And they're also not only the main characters but also that there's some fantastic subplots. In fact, some of the subplots are even occasionally better than the main plots. Another thing that we really love is there's not a lot of sex or violence. And so, there's really focusing. Well, I know there are some that are popular right now that are violent, but the ones that we're about to talk about are not. And so, for me, where that can be something that is off-putting, I don't have to be vigilant. I can just watch the show, and we can watch it with our entire family. And so, that is tremendously you can cry and like really just be in that moment and not have to be vigilant in any regard at all. I've heard you say this, and I agree that the cinematography is very high as well. It's almost in some ways I almost feel like it's sort of Jane Austen-ish, where you've got these really small communities, like, like a show like *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha*. It's like a very small place, and it's just focused on a few people, and it's not big, and it's not grand. And yet you really care deeply about these characters.

Regina Kim: Yeah, absolutely. I totally agree. And it's interesting because I read some articles that were like comparing like how much it cost to create a K-drama versus an American TV show. And usually, it's so much cheaper to produce a K-drama, partly because of that reason. Like you don't have to film them in so many locations. You can just focus on just one or two locations. And if you just really focus on the characters, like the story just kind of develops through the characters.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And the other thing too, that I thought was interesting, and you might find this interesting as well. So, I was just interviewing Susan Cain, who wrote the book *Quiet* ten years ago and now has come out with a book called *Bittersweet*. And she talks about the importance of us being more open to our emotions of not just focusing on being happy, but also being open to being sad and being willing to cry. And one of the things that I discovered as I was watching these is that, and I'll talk about one in a minute, *Mr. Sunshine*. Actually, I'll reveal it now. I found myself devastated by it, and we still listen to the music. And my daughter and I have a contest to see how many seconds it's going to take for us to start crying, listening to the music from that show, because we just because we felt it so deeply. And I think that there is and there were some times when we were watching them, I'm like, I don't want to cry. I don't want to feel those feelings. And yet I think our culture needs for us to feel the feelings of being sad, of being, having a sense of tragedy. Because when we can feel those range of emotions, then we feel more alive, and we feel more human.

Regina Kim: Yeah, I totally agree. And I feel like there is this I've definitely heard this stereotype before where, you know, people will kind of like compare like the different Asian countries. And I've oftentimes heard that Koreans tend to be the most emotional out of all the Asians. And I kind of have to agree with that. And I don't think it's a bad thing. And that's what that's part of the reason why I think Korea produces like such great TV shows and films.

Whitney Johnson: A couple of random questions to which you may not have the answer or not. Why do the men wear lipstick?

Regina Kim: That's a very good question. I honestly don't know. But I mean, my guess I mean, even in American TV shows, I mean, like even the men, like, they all they all wear makeup, right? I mean, everyone wears at least some makeup when they're on camera. Right. And I guess for Korean actors, it just kind of highlights their features more perhaps. I really don't know.

Whitney Johnson: Why are the Americans that they show or Europeans that they show not good at speaking English? Have you noticed that?

Regina Kim: Oh, yes, definitely. I mean, it's for me, honestly, it's just a given now, and especially if.

Whitney Johnson: That they're just not going to speak well.

Regina Kim: Right. Right. And especially like if you, if you watch some of the older K-dramas, like it was even worse in those K-dramas. And I think there are probably two key reasons why the first being there just simply are not enough, like American actors. Or like actors in Korea who are native English speakers, there are just not enough of them. And so, if you've noticed, like a lot of these K-dramas will actually use like, for example, Eastern European actors. Believe it or not, yeah, it's really hard for them to find, like, talented actors in Korea who are native English speakers. And who knows? Like, maybe that will change in the future now that K-dramas are taking off in the US as well.

Whitney Johnson: Before, you know, you have people saying, I'm going to go over to Korea and work.

Regina Kim: Yeah, it's like hint, hint. Like any struggling actors out there, you might want to look into South Korea.

Whitney Johnson: Exactly. It's like the basketball players that go play in Europe. Okay. So, for those who study disruption, what are some major lessons learned from Korean pop culture?

Regina Kim: Yeah, I mean, I would say one thing that we can all kind of take away from this, like our observation of the rise of Korean pop culture is whatever you're doing, like always be prepared. You can't always control the timing of an opportunity, but, you know, you just never know when you'll get your big break and when your big break comes like you want to be prepared.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, because from what you were saying is that K-dramas have been around for I mean, you first saw them in high school 20 years ago, but were they around even before that?

Regina Kim: Oh, yes, definitely. I mean, they've been around for many decades. But I would say it was starting in the nineties when you saw kind of like the burgeoning of the, the so-called Korean wave or hallyu, which is the term that we use to refer to the growing popularity of Korean pop culture. But that's also when Korean dramas started gaining traction outside of Korea. But that's also because, I mean, Koreans were just constantly just trying to improve their, their TV shows.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Regina Kim: So, you know, and you just saw, like so many Korean creatives who just were constantly honing their craft. And obviously, if you do that over time, the quality of the TV shows that you produce will only become greater. But I mean, if you're talking about like Korean movies, for instance. I mean, Koreans have been at it for

decades there as well. I mean, the first Korean film to win an international award was *The Coachman*, which won second place at the Berlin Film Festival back in 1961. So, even back then, like, you know, Koreans were producing great films and some great TV shows as well. It's just that because now we live in the digital age where everyone has access to YouTube and social media, it's just. I mean, media has become so accessible to anyone, anywhere in the world. And so, people are more and more people are starting to discover Korean content. But yeah, I would say that Koreans have been creating great content for many years. So, that's why you just, you want to just keep doing what you're doing and then when yeah, when that opportunity comes, like you need to be ready for it. And Koreans were very much ready for it. So, if you look at *Squid Game*, for instance, right. I think many people are familiar with how that whole show came about. I mean, the director actually had written the script like a decade ago. Like he had written the script like, yeah, ten years before it came out. But back then people weren't interested in it, and so, he had to shelve it for a while. But like in the meantime, he didn't stop creating. Like he made a whole bunch of other films that became commercially successful. And then finally, like when Netflix picked up his script for a *Squid Game*, like many years later, it became a hit. So, you know, like, again, you can't control the timing, but that doesn't mean that you should stop trying.

Whitney Johnson: Lesson number one be prepared at whatever you're doing. What's the next lesson you would suggest?

Regina Kim: Be open to learning from others like you want to stay curious. You know, I find that in general, especially when it comes to like Korean pop culture, I feel like a lot of Koreans have been very open to learning from other cultures, and that has truly served them well. I mean, like even like back in the nineties, like the nineties was when South Korea became a democracy and really started globalizing. And that's also when you saw like tons of smart and creative and ambitious Koreans like venturing outside of Korea, traveling overseas to like the US and Europe and other places studying there. And, and then later they returned to Korea and brought back what they had learned overseas. And so, throughout the nineties and into the 2000s, like you really saw this flowering of Korean popular music that's also like in the nineties was when you had the birth of K-Pop, which very much has elements of American popular music in it, of course. And that's also when you saw like the flowering of K-dramas. So, the sense that I get is that Koreans are always looking to broaden their horizons. And I think partly that's because South Korea is such a small country.

Whitney Johnson: So, one of the lessons is, is that if you want to be creative, you get out of your network. One of the things for, for our listeners, is that you'll see in our latest book, *Smart Growth*, we cite a study that was done. That said the highest impact research papers were those that had 85% to 95% of the usual sources outside of the usual sources, but 5% to 15% were from novel sources. So, they got from they cited sources, people from outside their network. And what I hear you saying is part of what's allowed Korea, Korean culture to thrive is, yes, you build on what you have, but you also have people going out exploring other ideas, other cultures, other influences, and coming back and being able to innovate in a really powerful way. Okay. What's your next lesson?

Regina Kim: I would say be adaptable. And that's kind of similar to what I just said about like stay curious. But Koreans, I feel like, are always willing to adapt. And I mean, for a long time, like Koreans were, I guess you could say, like fast followers. I mean, they had to be they were forced to be fast followers because Korea was literally like wiped out during the Korean War in the 1950s. And like throughout the fifties and sixties, South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world. And so, there was a lot of catching up they needed to do. So, for, for decades, they were always looking outward and seeing what other countries were doing and trying to learn from them. But then, you know, if you just keep learning and trying to improve yourself over and over again at some point, over, over years or even decades, you will start becoming an innovator yourself. And I think that's what's happened with South Korea, is now you look at South Korea and how it's become a trendsetter in a number of areas like film, TV, music, even fashion. Koreans are just willing to just kind of keep in step with the times. Like, you just have to, like, see what's happening outside of, outside of your little bubble. And you have to do your best to just keep up with what's happening around you or better yet, stay ahead of the curve.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I think that's interesting. What you just said is that if you, you're a fast follower and you're continually iterating, at some point, you're going to start to innovate. Which is because, because that cycle that, that rapid prototyping. Very interesting.

Regina Kim: The fourth takeaway would be just make the most of what you have. You have to accept what you cannot change and change what you can. South Korea was wiped out, like during the Korean War in the 1950s and before that, it was colonized by Japan, I mean Korea. Korea was under Japanese colonization between 1910 and 1945. And during that time, like, Koreans were very much treated as second-class citizens, they didn't really have many freedoms.

Whitney Johnson: In their, in their own country.

Regina Kim: Exactly. Yeah, I mean, they were a Japanese colony back then. And like the Japanese very much tried to wipe out Korean culture. And Korean culture actually very much was on the verge of being wiped out, like literally. And then, fortunately, Korea was liberated from Japan after World War II. But then a few years later, like in 1950, that's when the Korean War broke out and just literally decimated the entire country. Right. And so, like Korea had to rebuild itself from scratch.

Whitney Johnson: I think it's amazing what's happened over the course of 70 years of just completely rebuilding. And it's a huge turnaround story. When you're able to turn around like that with such deep constraints. And so, you started to make this comment of working with what we had. What did Korea have to work with that allowed Korea to turn around the way it has?

Regina Kim: They pretty much just had their human capital because South Korea is just like South Korea doesn't have many natural resources. Like all the natural resources are over in North Korea. So, because South Korea was very poor in natural resources like they just really have a lot to work with. And so, really, they had to rely on their own human capital. And I would say like in the sixties and seventies, that's when South Korea was ruled by President Park Chung-Hee. And many people kind of refer to him as like a benevolent dictator. And I mean, he's a very controversial figure because, like, he really, like, kind of prevented a lot of Koreans from speaking out. Like, that's when you saw like you saw his government, like really clamping down on like freedom of press and freedom of speech. But at the same time, like he literally did wonders for the Korean economy. Like that's when you started seeing the Korean economy like really start to rise. And that's because actually kind of going back to one of my earlier points, you know, one of the reasons is because, like, he surrounded himself with the best people and he also recruited some of the world's best scientists and best experts from different countries. To like he was like, just come help Korea, you know, like help us rebuild our country. And that is really what he did. And you start to see that happen like throughout the sixties and seventies. One thing that all Koreans can agree on is that like he was key to rebuilding the South Korean economy.

Whitney Johnson: I've been asking you lots of questions. As we were talking and you were processing, did you make any connections? Did you have any insights or like, oh, I never thought of that before as you were as we were conversing.

Regina Kim: Well, first of all, you know, it makes me happy to see that like there are like Americans out there who, like you. Who are very much into like Korean pop culture and like who are knowledgeable about it and who are like open to hearing people like me, like, talk about it. Like someone like me who has observed Korean pop culture for a while now. And I'm just so glad that like now I have a platform where I can express my insights and my opinions on the topic. So, I think that's great. And, you know, like what we were discussing earlier about like making these connections between what Korea did to promote its pop culture with what we can do. What each and every one of us can do in our everyday lives to improve ourselves. And I thought that was pretty cool.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts?

Regina Kim: I mean, this is such a great experience. Like, thank you so much for inviting me to your show. Like, I really had, I had a lot of fun, like talking about Korean pop culture and K-dramas in particular.

Whitney Johnson: All right, Regina, thank you so much.

Regina Kim: Thank you.

Even if you don't geek out about K-dramas as much as I do, there's still a big takeaway from my conversation with Regina, and it's deeply connected to the mission of the show.

You don't have to be first. Fast-following also leads to innovation, so long as you don't give up. We talked a lot about the global media landscape, but there's a lesson here for personal growth as well. South Korea did not have a head start in the entertainment industry. Historically, they have suffered setbacks. But as Regina explained, they have always been open to learning and collaborating with other cultures. Sending their students abroad to learn from established industries is a big part of this, and the investment has paid huge dividends.

You can't build Hollywood overnight or even in one generation. Regina said, *Squid Game*, a single show took ten years of development before it became something that made sense for global audiences. And even then, it benefited from perfect timing to become a monster hit.

You can rarely control for perfect timing, but that doesn't mean you should stop trying. Don't just copy the ideas that came before but build on them and make them your own. With persistence, you can catch up to the leaders in your industry and perhaps even surpass them.

For more on well, there isn't more on K-dramas, but if you want to go back to the foundations of this podcast, then listen to [Episode 120](#), Play to Your Distinctive Strengths. And, or listen to Marcus Buckingham, [Episode 279](#). This is Your Brain on Love. Thank you again to Regina Kim for being our guest. Thank you, to you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman, audio engineer and editor Whitney Jobe, production assistant Stephanie Brummel, and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is, don't forget to watch K-dramas, Disrupt Yourself.