

The Labor of Cultural Conception and Uncertainty in Cultural Work: The Work of Korean Drama Writers

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This article explores writers' labor and precarity in the drama production sector of the South Korean television industry. In particular, to examine what is often referred to as creative labor, I suggest the concept of *the labor of cultural conception*, which I define as the labor of imagining, conceiving, and developing ideas and expressing them through language in the production process of cultural and symbolic products. For this research, in 2018 and 2019, I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 research participants who produced dramas airing on broadcasters and cable channels in South Korea. The findings show that the industry structurally accumulates value from writers' unpaid labor of cultural conception in planning a television drama show by offloading risks to writers and using a piecework pay system. Writers also suffer from pressures, anxiety, and stress because they are required to generate ideas and write scripts according to shooting and editing cycles and rhythms. I argue that applying the concept of labor of cultural conception clarifies the distinctive forms of precarity and exploitation that workers face in cultural industries.

Keywords: cultural work, creative labor, cultural conception, creativity, political economy, television writers, Korean drama

The notion of *creativity* has been used to indicate a distinctive, core characteristic of cultural work (Conor, 2014; Garnham, 1990; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; McRobbie, 2016; Miège, 1989; Ryan, 1992; Schiller, 1989). Cultural work in this article refers to the work that makes cultural commodities, such as television shows and films. Moreover, many studies in recent decades have arisen about cultural work in cultural industries in which the umbrella term "creative labor" is used. These studies often reference popular and celebratory terms and discourses, like the "creative economy," "knowledge economy," and "information society" (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Kim, 2014; McRobbie, 2016). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) define creative labor as "those jobs, centered on the activity of symbol-making, which are to be found in large numbers in the cultural industries" (p. 9). Yet many studies do not specify what the term "creative labor" seeks to describe, in particular, what is meant by "creative" in the term "creative labor." In fact, since the usage of the term "creative labor" is so broad and abstract, it raises several significant questions,

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including “What is creativity?” and “Does [the term] necessarily create a corresponding ‘uncreative’ category, and how on earth are such designations philosophically or practically made?” (Conor, 2014, p. 5). Since the meaning of creativity in creative discourse has become more ambiguous, “creativity” has been expanded to include multiple meanings such as information, knowledge, and innovation, as critical scholars point out (Garnham, 2005; Lee, 2017; Ross, 2009).

Moreover, “the creative economy continues to rely on the Romanticist notion of the genius-artist to reify creativity,” as Pang (2009) explains (p. 58). Indeed, creativity in creative labor discourse connotes “a special attribute, something unusual and rare” that emanates from inherent aspirations and talents that only a few geniuses can have (McGuigan, 2010, p. 323). In this regard, creativity is often used to connote a type of “(pseudo) capital” put into the production process “within a for-profit economic system” (Lee, 2017, p. 1079). In this discourse, cultural products are often regarded as the outcome of creativity, the capital that exists in genius artists rather than the outcome of labor that workers put into the production process. In other words, when creative labor discourse stresses “creativity” in the production process, the use of the “creative” label tends to erase or obscure the physical and mental effort, along with the laboring time, that cultural workers put into the production process (Jones & Pringle, 2015; McRobbie, 2016).

As noted above, to specify and analyze this aspect of cultural work often referred to as creativity or creative labor, this article develops the notion of *the labor of cultural conception*, which I define as the labor of imagining, conceiving, and developing ideas and then expressing them through language in the production process of cultural and symbolic products.² To clarify, I do not consider the labor of cultural conception as occurring only in the conception stage. Rather, most workers participate in the labor of cultural conception during the entire production process, but the conception stage requires more intense labor of cultural conception. Thus, specific groups of workers, including writers who engage more intensively in the conception stage, play more significant roles in performing this labor.

I have developed the concept of the labor of cultural conception through researching this article on the labor and precarity that writers have experienced in the drama production sector in the South Korean

² I acknowledge that the term “conception” in the labor of cultural conception is influenced by the term conception in Braverman’s (1975) distinction between conception and execution in the labor process in advanced capitalism. However, cultural conception is different from Braverman’s idea of conception. Braverman (1975) explained that “conception must still precede and govern execution, but the idea as conceived by one may be executed by another” (p. 35). He also outlined how conception and execution “may be broken in the individual and reasserted in the group, the workshop, the community, the society as a whole” (p. 35). Braverman argued that the broadening division of labor in the workplace meant capital actively seeks to separate conception and execution, with a few privileged people (normally, managers) allotted the task of conceiving ideas. Most workers are tasked with executing them by engaging in repetitive and specialized labor in manufacturing a product. Braverman (1975) saw this process happening in nonmanufacturing industries, including knowledge-producing industries. Here, I do not assume that the division between conception and execution, along with the de-skilling of labor that Braverman (1975) pointed to, appears in the labor process of Korean drama writers. Rather, I use the term “conception” to highlight one of the distinctive features of the labor of writers.

television industry. While known as “K-dramas” or “Korean dramas” outside the country (e.g., Singh, 2020), “dramas” inside South Korea (hereafter Korea) refer broadly to various fictional narrative television shows. For this research, I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 research participants in Korea in 2018 and 2019, focusing on writers’ work experience in producing dramas for major Korean terrestrial broadcasters (e.g., Korean Broadcasting System [KBS], Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation [MBC], and Seoul Broadcasting System [SBS]), as well as Korean cable channels (e.g., JoongAng Tongyang Broadcasting Company [JTBC] and tvN). Korean dramas rarely have more than a single writer (Yu & Jeong, 2019). Typically, a single person develops a drama show and writes the scripts for all episodes, supported by assistant writers. Assistant writers generally do not take part in the writing process but rather tend to support writers by performing non-writing work, including researching (finding data or interviewing people for information), providing ideas for writers, or coordinating between writers and production staff. In other words, most Korean drama writers perform the work of both the series creator (who has developed the show) and the script staff writer (who mainly writes scripts for specific episodes).³ In acknowledgment of the high level of creative autonomy and contribution of writers, dramas are often referred to as “writers’ art” (Lee & Kim, 2017; Roh, 2015).

My research suggests that as Korean drama writers play roles of series creators and scriptwriters, their labor process usually consists of two stages and that they suffer from distinctive forms of precarity in performing the labor of cultural conception in each stage. Specifically, in the first stage, a Korean drama writer develops a new drama as a series creator and writes scripts for at least four episodes to pitch the drama. Generally, their labor for creating the series is unpaid due to the piecework pay system in the industry. A piecework system pays workers “a set fee per item produced” (McKercher, 2014, p. 220). Specifically, most writers are freelancers (legally self-employed workers in Korea); they receive their pay per episode and only for completed episode scripts rather than on a salaried basis. In the second stage, a writer must generate scripts within a designated time frame according to the production and airing schedules that broadcasters set. As a writer is required to generate ideas and write scripts according to shooting and editing cycles and rhythms, they suffer from pressures, anxiety, and stress. In particular, in 2018 and 2019, when I conducted interviews, in the Korean television industry only part of the production processes of most drama series tended to be completed before the series began to air, and writers’ mental and physical exhaustion in the second stage was extremely high.

To describe my findings, in the following sections, I first introduce the concept of the labor of cultural conception while linking this concept to scholarly discussions around the distinctive features of cultural commodities (e.g., television shows, films), the production process, and the pay system in the cultural industries. Next, I introduce my research method for this article and then explain how intense commercialization has shaped the Korean television industry. Finally, I describe how Korean drama writers develop shows and write scripts for episodes in a structurally precarious form because of how the industry organizes, manages, and controls the labor of cultural conception.

³ Drama writers in the Korean television industry can be compared with screenwriters in the U.S. television industry in that both write scripts for fiction shows. However, the labor processes of these two groups differ. In the United States, television writers work in a team of two groups: Series creators and staff writers. People on one team typically write scripts on a rotating basis or cooperatively (Banks, 2015).

Cultural Commodities and the Labor of Cultural Conception

From a Marxist perspective, what laborers sell is their capacity to perform work (labor power) for a certain duration of time, but the effort that laborers put into work is indeterminate (Braverman, 1975; Marx, 1867/1990). To increase the input of labor power in the mass production of commodities, the labor process is systematically controlled by the management and enforced through varying kinds of supervision and formalization in sets of production procedures, a situation that causes laborers to lose their autonomy (Braverman, 1975). The specificities of organizing production and the labor process vary depending on the industry and the social, economic, and/or cultural contexts (Braverman, 1975; Caves, 2000; Christopherson, 2008). In this section, I introduce academic discussions about the distinctive features of cultural industries, cultural commodities, and cultural work. After that, I describe how existing analyses can be expanded and elaborated by using the concept of the labor of cultural conception. In particular, I focus on a specific form of cultural work that produces cultural commodities in cultural industries from a perspective of political economy. Cultural industries are sectors composed of organizations that commodify culture and produce cultural products in an industrial and collective form to produce surplus value—in other words, to make a profit (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002).

Scholars from a political economy of communication tradition (Garnham, 1990; Miège, 1989; Mosco, 2014; Ryan, 1992) have explored which features distinguish cultural commodities from other commodities, and if/how such features lead to unique production processes. Here I point out three characteristics directly relevant to the labor of cultural conception, which I will discuss later in this section.

First, in contrast to other mass-production commodities, cultural commodities uniquely contain or generate inherently uncertain and unstable value (Caves, 2000; Miège, 1989). Although it is generally difficult to estimate the exact demand for commodities, and thus difficult to predict how many commodities will be sold, the demand for cultural commodities is marked by heightened uncertainty since it is challenging to estimate what value audiences obtain from a given cultural commodity (Caves, 2000; Miège, 1989; Smith & McKinlay, 2009a). As Caves (2000) describes, “nobody knows” how audiences experience cultural products (p. 3). Indeed, the uncertain and unstable value of cultural commodities in cultural industries makes them highly risky in terms of making profits (De Vany, 2003; Smith & McKinlay, 2009a). Consequently, companies in the film industry try to decrease this uncertainty by using strategies like the “blockbuster strategy,” which involves investing in a big budget, casting stars, and releasing films widely to make large profits. Nevertheless, uncertainty still remains (De Vany, 2003).

Second, cultural industries must continually produce new forms of cultural commodities (Caves, 2000; Miège, 1989). Miège (1989) explains that,

In the cultural industries, there is a permanent crisis in “creativity” and producers [companies] must constantly be on the lookout for new “forms” or new talent; production must be constantly renewed, and occasionally long periods may elapse before a solution is found. (p. 44)

For example, film companies must produce new films, and broadcasting companies must keep developing new series and new episodes. Specifically, all episodes are new forms of cultural commodities in cultural industries to a greater or lesser degree, while automobile manufacturers produce the same form of automobiles for a certain period.

Third, cultural commodities take new and varied forms requiring distinctive production processes. For instance, each film is produced through a specific process (Smith & McKinlay, 2009b) in that a new film needs a particular story, particular cast members, and distinctive shooting settings. Therefore, in such production contexts, it is difficult to develop strictly standardized labor processes, a point in line with Garnham (1990), who argues that “the cultural commodity resists that homogenization process which is one of the material results of the abstract equivalence of exchange to which the commodity form aspires” (p. 160).

I argue that *the labor of cultural conception* has distinctive features of uncertainty associated with specific characteristics of cultural commodities and production, as described above. First, the value of labor of cultural conception is uncertain in that the value of a cultural commodity is highly uncertain, and therefore cultural industries cannot measure the value of the labor that cultural workers perform through the conception process (Caves, 2000). Second, the amount of labor of cultural conception required in a particular cultural industry is uncertain and onerous because these industries must continuously develop new forms of cultural commodities (in particular, according to uncertain marketability). For instance, television industries tend to develop new series according to audience ratings, but even when a particular series gains popularity, new episodes for the series must be developed continuously. Therefore, television industries must pay a considerable amount for the labor of ongoing cultural conception. Last, the labor of cultural conception is uncertain in that cultural industries cannot strictly control how much labor cultural workers put into that part of the process. These industries have difficulty estimating how many hours are necessary for the conception stages. For example, in the music industry, it is extremely difficult to estimate how many hours a musician puts into composing.

While cultural industries have consistently devised new forms of products, many companies have recognized that individuals who engage mainly in the cultural conception process are difficult to control; therefore, they have tried to make adjustments (Miège, 1989; Schiller, 1989; Smith & McKinlay, 2009b). Regarding a distinctive labor management style, several scholars have argued that cultural industries tend to give their workers relative autonomy rather than try to control them (Garnham, 1990; Miège, 1989; Ryan, 1992; Schiller, 1989). For example, Ryan (1992) analyzed the labor process of cultural workers in privately owned corporations and found that managers minimally supervise cultural workers (“artists” as he refers to them). Schiller (1989) has described that large companies tend to allow “small-scale and relatively independent activity” to exist in cultural industries because the bureaucratized system in large companies is likely to oppress “human creativity” (p. 442). The tactic to grant relative autonomy to cultural workers seems to arise from necessity, given that employers have found it difficult to control cultural workers, who typically seek to hold on to autonomy and independence and refuse to be supervised and controlled by managerial intervention in the conception process (Garnham, 1990; Miège, 1989; Ryan, 1992). This form of labor management serves as one of the ways to increase the value of cultural commodities and the productivity of cultural workers.

On the other hand, scholars have found that while it is difficult to control the labor of cultural conception directly, it is also seemingly easy to exploit this work in cultural industries. Miège (1989) has argued that cultural industries have decreased costs by taking advantage of unpaid or underpaid labor in the conception phase of cultural production. He has pointed out that young, aspiring workers often develop their own projects and give them to a company at a low price while conducting a small amount of paid work. This may have partly to do, as Miège (1989) observed, with the way cultural industries tend to provide different forms of remuneration beyond (or instead of) wages, including royalties and residuals, to workers such as writers or composers, who engage mainly in the conception stage of the production process. The distinct management of and payment for the labor of cultural conception is reflected in the category of "above-the-line" workers in the North American film and television industries, which is compared with that of "below-the-line" workers (Banks, 2009; Hill, 2016). The above-the-line workers are usually professionals, including writers and directors, whose pay is negotiable and sometimes includes residuals or copyrights. In contrast, below-the-line workers are craft and technical workers, such as editors, camera operators, and costume designers, who tend to be paid more conventionally and be unionized.

Specifically, the work of Korean drama writers takes the form of piecework. Regarding piecework, Marx (1867/1990) argued that "the wider scope that piece-wages give to individuality tends to develop both that individuality, and with it the workers' sense of liberty, independence, and self-control, and also the competition of workers with each other" (p. 697). Drawing on Marx's (1867/1990) notion of "piece-wages," McKercher (2014) argues that piecework allows workers to decide when and how long they work, which "gives the worker a sense of autonomy and a degree of control over the labor process" (p. 220). However, she adds that piecework also fosters competition among workers, which tends to lower the average pay for everyone except for a lucky few (McKercher, 2014). On the surface, piecework seems to allow workers a certain amount of independence in their working schedules, yet people must work according to the dictates that the capitalist schedule demands (Caffentzis, 2013; Marx, 1867/1990). Related to piecework, Caffentzis (2013) argues, "Consequently, the capitalists save superintendence costs via the action at a distance that the piecework wage system provides . . . a bitter autonomy indeed" (p. 115).

Research Method

To examine how drama writers work and face precarity in the Korean television industry, this article draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 drama writers and two producer-directors (PDs) in Korea in 2018 and 2019.⁴ PDs are coworkers with whom writers work closely in the Korean drama production sector. Specifically, the interviewees include 16 writers ranging from those with more than 30 years of experience to new writers who had just recently created their first show. I recruited writers with various ranges of experiences because their working conditions, such as labor processes and pay systems, could vary depending on their seniority and reputation. Additionally, I interviewed two assistant writers. Most writers have moved among major Korean terrestrial broadcasters (e.g., KBS, MBC, SBS) and Korean cable channels (e.g., JTBC, tvN). All interviewees are cited by pseudonyms such as "Drama Writer 1."

⁴ This research is part of an original project for which I conducted interviews with 91 research participants.

This article focuses on drama series for traditional television networks, not series produced for other global media platforms (e.g., YouTube) and over-the-top (OTT) media services (e.g., Netflix) since those platforms had only just begun to appear in Korea. For example, Netflix's first original Korean drama series, *Kingdom* (S. Lee, 2019), premiered in January 2019, and two additional original Korean series were streamed in 2019.

My interviews suggest that Korean drama writers' labor process and working conditions vary according to seniority, reputation, contract status, broadcasters (that produce and air their shows), as well as their relationships with broadcasters, independent production companies, and colleagues in other positions, including PDs. The description I provide of how drama writers typically work on average offers insights into the important issue of the precarity of their work. In other words, I focus on common characteristics that drama writers I interviewed experienced and are structurally determined by the capitalist production processes of dramas, writers' labor processes, and pay systems. The key research findings I describe in this article—the unpaid labor for developing a new show and the intensive mental and physical exhaustion of writing scripts—are located in the experiences of most writers—from the so-called top-tier writers (with lengthy experience and established reputations) to new writers. The scope of this article, however, does not include diversity and differences among writers' experiences relating to their demographics and social status.

The Intensive Commercialization of Korean Dramas

Since the 1990s, the Korean broadcasting industry has faced the liberalization of media markets, flexibilization of production, and increased competition (Jin, 2011). In particular, the Korean drama production sector has become intensively commercialized in the last couple of decades. Before the late 1990s, major terrestrial broadcasters such as KBS, MBC, and SBS produced the majority of the country's dramas and circulated them mainly through their domestic networks (Lee & Lee, 2005). In the late 1990s, commercialization accelerated for two reasons. First, the risk of experiencing a financial loss in drama production began to increase due to changes in the advertisement market. By the last decade of the 20th century, regardless of the audience ratings, most of the advertising slots sold were for dramas (Lee, Park, Bae, Yue, & Yoon, 2021). However, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 caused Korean broadcasters to lose a large portion of their advertising market. Around this time, broadcasters began to explicitly pursue financial profits through dramas because these tended to achieve higher audience ratings than other genres and, therefore, were the most appealing to advertisers. Second, Korean dramas began to emerge as global cultural products that were marketable beyond the domestic media market as part of the so-called *Korean wave*. In particular, the success of Korean dramas (e.g., *Winter Sonata*, Kim & Kim, 2002; *Dae Jang Geum*, Jo, 2003–2004) in East Asian countries like Japan and China showed the potential for Korean dramas as global commodities (Jin, 2016). This success has only grown in the years since, and in 2019, the drama genre accounted for 90.4% of the total exports (US\$273,272,000 of US\$302,285,000) of Korean broadcasting programs by genre (Korea Creative Content Agency, 2021). In addition, during the 2010s, competition in the Korean drama market increased as domestic cable channels (e.g., JTBC, tvN) became major suppliers of dramas in addition to terrestrial broadcasters. In the late 2010s, global media platforms and OTT media services added to this competition (M. Lee, 2019).

On the whole, as Korean dramas became an increasingly marketable commodity abroad and competition among companies increased domestically, commercial logics have become a far more dominant factor in the production of dramas over the last two decades. One writer discussed the intensification of these commercial logics:

With the Korean wave, the drama production sector became very commercialized. Dramas started to be recognized as commodities, beyond entertainment content for audiences. . . . In the 2000s, drama production became a business in which people could hit the jackpot. The business is not interested in how dramas impact audiences. In this business, we have to make good dramas. (Drama Writer 5)

As Korean broadcasters produce dramas by focusing mainly on their commercial value, Korean dramas feature increasing uncertainty in consumption and marketability. Scholars such as Caves (2000) and Miège (1989), as discussed above, have pointed out uncertainty as an inherent characteristic of cultural commodities.

As a result of the increasing commercialization, during the 2000s and 2010s, the overall diversity of drama formats decreased compared with the 1990s, when the formats of these shows varied from television movies (*tanmakkŭk*) to serials and series that aired weekly for several years (Chung, 2009). Rather, two formats, the "Korean miniseries" (*mini shirijŭ*) and open-ended serials, became dominant (Park, Kim, & Lee, 2015). The Korean miniseries (e.g., *When the Camellia Blooms*, Kim, 2019) is a localized fiction format: Between 16 to 24 episodes of 60 or 70 minutes each. Open-ended serials have many episodes, sometimes as many as 100 episodes or more. Both formats run for one season *only*, which means there are no more episodes of that particular series after the series comes to an end. Today, the Korean miniseries is the most dominant and popular format among audiences and production companies (Lee et al., 2021).

Since the 2000s, the dominant production system in Korea has changed from in-house production to an outsourcing model in which broadcasters and independent production companies produce a drama together and share their costs and profits while broadcasters distribute the shows (Lee & Kim, 2017). When broadcasters select and schedule a show on their network, other production processes, including shooting, tend to be initiated. Generally, a broadcaster pays a large portion of the production costs, takes most of the intellectual property rights, and shares the profits with an independent production company (Kwon, 2015). By the late 2010s, independent production companies were producing around 70% of the dramas for the country's major terrestrial broadcasters (e.g., KBS, MBC, SBS; Lee, 2020). Under this outsourcing arrangement, most drama writers have contracts with independent production companies. In contrast, my interviews suggest that most PDs with whom writers cooperate have been in-house PDs. Even when broadcasters coproduce dramas with independent production companies, they often designate and dispatch in-house PDs to independent companies.

Since shorter-running miniseries formats currently predominate, broadcasters must develop new dramas more frequently, which incurs more costs for the conception of shows. My research suggests that since the early 2000s, the frequent creation of new dramas has increasingly been the duty of writers. In

other words, as described in the following section, the Korean drama production sector has offloaded the cost onto the writing group.

Unpaid Labor of Cultural Conception and Piecework

In this section, I present how and why writers' work in developing shows often results in a great deal of unpaid labor. In particular, I argue that the drama industry structurally accumulates value from writers' unpaid labor of cultural conception in planning a television drama show by offloading its financial risk onto writers through a piecework pay system. The work of the Korean drama writer is solitary and demanding. Working alone when developing a new drama, the writer thinks of a topic, beginning with original shows or adapting a plot from other cultural products, such as a book. The writer designs the characters, plots a storyline, and writes a synopsis and a specific collection of story outlines for each episode of a show. The writer must complete at least four episodes' worth of scripts to pitch a show to the broadcasters. If a writer is under contract with an independent production company, they must first take the show through an internal screening process at that company. Regarding the almost constant work of developing a drama, one writer stated, "Even my family questions why I am always busy even when I do not write scripts for a particular drama. People cannot imagine to what degree the process of conceiving a drama involves trial and error" (Drama Writer 14). Depending on the drama project, it could take several months or even years to develop a new show. Many writers I interviewed described how they had developed a drama show for two or three years (in one extreme case, for 10 years) but failed to launch the show. If the drama show is deemed acceptable, the independent production company will pitch the show to the broadcasters. If a broadcaster decides to produce a drama, the writer completes the scripts for the rest of the episodes.

My research reveals that Korean broadcasters have created whole catalogs of new dramas by creating and managing a writing workforce. Experienced writers who launch their shows with their own writer credits tend to make writing service contracts (*chipp'il kyeyak*) with independent production companies. Through this contract, these companies have the right to produce the dramas that the writers develop. Beyond the direct contract relationship, the drama production sector organizes a pool of new and less-experienced writers in various ways. At the company level, major broadcasters and independent production companies hold open calls for new original dramas.⁵ Companies review the shows that writers have produced without pay and choose to give a cash prize, an internship opportunity, or a job to a few winners among those who submit shows. Producer-directors and/or managers in the industry meet new and less-experienced writers through their personal networks and ask them to show drama projects they have organized or do speculative writing.

The writing service contract that writers make with companies (broadcasters or independent production companies) sometimes specifies exactly what project the writers will work on. However, more-experienced writers usually make a contract that includes how many episodes they must write without

⁵ When broadcasters contract directly with writers, they own the right to produce and distribute the contracted writers' shows. By doing so, the broadcasters can choose independent production companies to outsource the shows or produce the dramas in-house.

specifying a concrete show. Thus, with the writing service contracts, writers are paid based on piecework. According to what I described above as the piecework payment system for writers, writers receive a fee for the show when their shows are launched—an amount paid per episode multiplied by the specific number of episodes writers have produced (Kim & Hong, 2016). The interviewees reported receiving a wide range of writing fees, varying from US\$2,281 to US\$30,418 per episode. In most cases, the writing service contract indicates the number of episodes and the writing fee per episode. In addition, if their shows are rerun or syndicated, writers can generally be paid additional copyright fees by broadcasters.

Along with the writing service contract, companies often provide writers with a contract deposit—that is, part of the total writing fee paid in advance. My interviews suggest that most contracted writers usually receive a deposit worth about 30% of the total writing fee. For example, if a writer's contract indicates that they have to write 20 episodes within five years, and the writing fee per episode will be US\$7,604, they will receive US\$45,627 as a deposit. If the contract period ends without the launch of a writer's drama, then the writer must return the deposit. One writer referred to the deposit as "a type of debt that writers should pay back by writing scripts" (Drama Writer 15). Production companies offer writers who have more established reputations more resources, such as an office or the support of one or more assistant writers, to develop and write scripts. However, less-experienced contracted writers usually develop their shows without such support. Generally, such writers must wait until their shows have been picked up to air to receive such assistance.

The piecework pay system for drama writers is exploitative in several ways. There is no separate payment for the preliminary writing and thus the labor involved in devising a new drama. At best, some writers get paid in part for episode scripts they have written to pitch to broadcasters. More fundamentally, writers get paid only for work contributing to a show that ends up being aired, regardless of how many other shows or drafts they have developed. Thus, the pay writers receive does not reflect the actual labor they put in during the entire process of developing a television show. One writer describes how this works in practice: "Writers receive the same amount of money if it takes one year or 10 years to plan a drama and write scripts, and it doesn't matter how many times writers revise scripts" (Drama Writer 15). Only a minority of writers who receive very high writing fees and succeed in launching their shows can offset the unpaid labor for developing shows from the pay given for writing scripts. Another writer interviewee worked for five years to develop a drama on a writing service contract with a production company, and she pitched several dramas to broadcasters. However, her dramas failed to be selected. In the end, she received only US\$7,604 for her five-year effort (Drama Writer 1).

While companies (broadcasters or independent production companies) may appear not to control the labor process of writers directly, they certainly do so indirectly. Granted, when they are unsatisfied with the dramas writers have developed, the companies do not directly force the writers to revise scripts. However, if the writers decide not to revise the scripts, the companies will not choose to launch them, and the writers will have to develop a whole new show that can meet the company's standards. As one writer with more than 10 years of experience said, "The company always asks me to choose if I will do it or not, and seemingly, I can choose everything. However, I can choose nothing practically" (Drama Writer 8).

As I confirmed in interviews with in-house PDs who have participated in programming for dramas, broadcasters in recent years increasingly chose dramas based on their expected commercial value. My interviews suggest that Korean broadcasters decrease the uncertainty of the market they face by choosing several shows according to market demands and without paying for development. In other words, in addition to the inherent uncertainty about audience response, writers face offloaded uncertainty and precarity due to the power held by broadcasters in the decision-making process to air a show. One writer's experience clearly illustrates this precarity:

Broadcasters very easily reverse their decisions on picking up a drama show. For example, one broadcaster canceled my romance drama one month before the scheduled air date because the audience ratings for another romance drama airing on their channel were very low. . . . I had already written scripts for several episodes, and the independent production company had spent a lot of money in preparation for shooting. Nevertheless, the broadcaster did not compensate us for anything. (Drama Writer 14)

This writer's experience may be extreme, but it clearly illustrates how broadcasters shift the conception costs associated with the initial airing of the show to writers and independent production companies due to the unpredictability of a given drama's marketability. The cost for a writer who may have prepared for one or two years only to see the show canceled includes suffering from anxiety and financial insecurity.

The Subordinated Labor of Cultural Conception

This section explores how writers perform the labor of cultural conception in writing and revising scripts after their shows are picked up. I disclose how writers are required to generate the outcomes through the labor of cultural conception *within a designated timeline*, which makes their work inherently precarious. In addition, I describe how writers' labor of cultural conception is subordinated to the production processes of filming and editing, where production staff, including PDs, are usually paid according to their laboring time. The Korean television industry controls the form of labor by forcing writers to produce scripts according to the production processes of filming and editing, which the industry is more likely to essentially control. I also show that, due to this subordination, writers suffer from extreme mental and physical labor that involves anxiety and stress.

Broadcasting companies generally finalize their show selections three to six months before their planned air dates (Yu, 2015) and designate in-house PDs for each show. Therefore, generally, writers must write scripts *within a short time frame*, which makes their work demanding and harsh. For example (as mentioned previously), most Korean miniseries have 16 to 24 episodes that are 60 to 70 minutes each and air twice per week. After broadcasters select their shows and schedule when to air them, most writers struggle to generate scripts at this rapid rate. For example, writers generally write at a pace of 12 to 20 episodes over the course of five to six months. Regarding this workload, one interviewee stated that "writers write scripts that are almost similar in amount to writing two books over several months" and that "it is not enjoyable to write scripts. This is real suffering" (Drama Writer 12).

Moreover, a writer often works on scripts while the production staff shoots and edits the show—a process that sometimes continues even when the show is being aired. This production process is often referred to as the “live-shoot system” (*saengbangsongshik*) of production by the media (Song, 2017), used to shorten the production period and lower overall production costs. For example, Korean broadcasters allocate roughly US\$456,300 to US\$532,300 per episode, meaning that the total cost of a 16-episode series tends to range between US\$7,604,600 and US\$9,125,500 (Kim, 2021). These production costs are almost one-tenth that of a comparable show in the United States (Yu, 2020). However, given that the market size of and production process in the Korean industry are significantly different from those in the American industry, the two industries are not directly comparable. Nevertheless, the lower production cost in Korea has been achieved through the exploitation of workers via underpaid labor and overtime/overwork.

In the live-shoot system of production, writers often get tired physically and mentally while writing scripts for a show being aired. One writer describes how she struggled:

When I wrote scripts for drama show X, the show was produced through the live-shoot system. Although the shooting schedule was due to begin, we had not written all of the scripts. I had to squeeze something out of my head to offer for shooting locations. I just wrote scripts. I was not able to rest. When I got too tired to write, I fell asleep. As soon as I woke up, I wrote scripts again. As soon as I wrote scripts, the production team shot them and aired them. I struggled to write scripts in a timely manner. (Drama Writer 15)

More than a few of the interviewees told me that writing scripts for a show that was concurrently being aired impacted their health negatively. Many participants expressed that in addition to the heavy workload, they experienced difficulty conceiving ideas within the short turnaround time. Specifically, one interviewee described her difficulty by employing strikingly emotional terms: “Writing scripts is taxing. As writers, we exhaust our bone and blood.” She also stated that “writers must complete scripts by a specific deadline” and “it is very difficult to creatively conceive new ideas in a given time. This is one of the most taxing forms of work” (Drama Writer 14). Another writer shared her experience of writer’s block with me: “One day, I could not think up any ideas for a drama show that was being aired. Whatever happened, I had to send my scripts in a few days. Although I stayed up all night, my mind was blank” (Drama Writer 3). At that time, she did not get any support from others, such as colleagues, regarding her writer’s block and was worried that the other production staff would need to stop working due to her incomplete script. She described her experience by saying, “I was so lonely. When this memory comes to my mind, I feel scared that this could happen again” (Drama Writer 3).

In the Korean television industry, drama writing is not just providing completed products but performing the labor of cultural conception continuously during production. In other words, in practice, writers’ duties include anything from revising to updating scripts, bearing in mind audiences’ reception of the shows being aired. For example, one writer stated that “when audiences like dramas, the dramas are valuable. Dramas are not literary work” and “when I worked on drama show Y, if audiences liked a character, I tried to increase the scenes with the character. I tried to capture what audiences liked” (Drama Writer

15). Several writers also indicated that they try to consider the actors' performance styles when writing their scripts.

My research suggests that writers play a critical role in resolving a gap or break between conception (scripts) and execution (shows) by revising scripts (i.e., doing more labor) in the production process of dramas. Specifically, the interviewees told me that it is not unusual for the final filmed product to be quite different from what the writer had intended when they began writing the script. For example, PDs may interpret the meaning of the scripts in their own way, or writers might not properly express their intentions (Drama Writer 11). Adequate communication between writers and PDs decreases the gap in understanding between the writers' scripts and PDs' filming and editing. Yet, due to the busy schedules that both parties face, they are typically unable to communicate effectively. Thus, even when writers notice that particular filmed parts of an episode are different from their original intention, they are not likely to ask the PDs to reshoot the scenes. Generally, reshooting is not allowed due to the limited production budgets mentioned above as well as tight airing schedules. In fact, most interviewees told me they revise their scripts for shows that have not yet been filmed after viewing the already-aired episodes. Because every episode impacts the flow and content of subsequent episodes, the writers must revise the scripts to make the flow of narratives logical and natural. This production process increases the amount of labor writers must put into their work.

In 2018 and 2019 when I conducted interviews, the live-shoot system was dominant; for some drama series, the production process was completed before the dramas aired. However, writers often had to generate scripts according to the production schedules. Writers sometimes had sufficient time to write scripts before the shooting began, but even if they completed all scripts for a show before filming and airing, they often had to work continuously on revising these scripts. For example, one drama writer communicated that she had completed all the scripts for a show before filming began; however, as the show was filmed and aired concurrently, for almost five months she had to constantly revise her scripts according to production schedules (Drama Writer 15). Another writer argued that if writers had time to complete scripts, they would still have to revise scripts until all shooting and editing processes were complete (Drama Writer 12).

Conclusion

This article suggests how the concept of the labor of cultural conception clarifies the distinctive forms of labor and precarity that workers face in cultural industries. Applying this concept, my research has disclosed how the Korean television industry structurally accumulates value from writers' unpaid labor of cultural conception in planning a television drama show and from their continuous work in writing scripts. Specifically, since the late 1990s, drama production in the industry has become more commercialized, which increasingly involves a considerable amount of labor to develop shows—that is, during cultural conception. Due to the piecework pay system in the industry, writers perform a large amount of unpaid labor. Moreover, this article has shown how the labor of cultural conception that writers perform is subordinated to the production processes of filming and editing. In particular, writers suffer from mental and physical exhaustion because they must generate outcomes through the labor of cultural conception in a designated, short time frame according to production schedules, cycles, and rhythms after their shows have been selected for production by broadcasters. Furthermore, they often perform continual labor in revising their scripts by

repeatedly having to consider how their audiences react to their shows and how other production staff (e.g., PDs) work.

I posit that Korean drama writers' labor is precarious because the industry significantly offloads onto writers the inherent uncertainty and risks in the production processes and marketability of cultural commodities. Due to the piecework pay system and labor process, whereby writers must imagine, conceive, and develop ideas in a designated, short time in industrial forms of cultural production, they inevitably suffer from financial insecurity and instability as well as anxiety and pressure.

I argue that the concept of the labor of cultural conception contributes to challenging the creative labor discourse surrounding creativity and creative labor. Specifically, the concept plays a significant role in clarifying how cultural workers continually put laboring time and physical and mental effort into their work. In addition, I suggest that the labor of cultural conception and a piecework pay system are useful concepts to disclose how cultural industries manage cultural work in contemporary capitalism. I suggest that these concepts can be applied and extended to understand other forms of work in cultural industries beyond writers' work in the Korean television industry.

Notably, after I conducted the research for this article, global OTT media companies such as Netflix extended their market in Korea and increased their investment in the production of their *original* Korean drama series. Significantly, all the productions for global OTT services are usually complete before streaming. Therefore, for further research, it would be valuable to examine how the introduction of global OTT media companies in the Korean drama production sector impacts the production process of Korean dramas and writers' work and precarity.

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