

**Making Korean-Canadian Representation Convenient:  
Remediating *Kim's Convenience* from Stage to Screen**

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**Abstract:**

This analysis of *Kim's Convenience* as both a theatrical text and televised sitcom examines the growing trend in diverse representations of daily life in Western media, and the successes achieved by these multicultural media texts. By focusing on a Korean-Canadian immigrant family, Ins Choi seeks to normalize the experiences of the Asian diaspora in North America. In a time of growing Asian representation in the West, this paper advocates for increased presentation of these stories in the media.

*Keywords:* Media Adaptations (Remediation), Korean-Canadian Diaspora in North America, Asian-Canadian Representation in North American Media

The essential narrative of *Kim's Convenience* is Korean-Canadian playwright Ins Choi's semi-autobiographical contribution to the growing canon of media texts portraying the lives of diasporic Asians in Western society. Both mediations of *Kim's Convenience* are centered on a local Toronto convenience store owned by the Korean-Canadian Kim family since the wave of Korean-Canadian immigration in the 1980s; and the cultural divides that exist between immigrant parents and their second-generation children (Zarum). Both the 2011 play and the 2016 television sitcom of the same name have received critical acclaim for presenting complex, fleshed-out Asian characters in leading roles that counter antiquated stereotypes (Shea; Westerman; Zarum). While the play was written over seven years ago by Ins Choi alone, the sitcom is currently produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Channel (CBC) and has reached international distribution through the streaming platform, Netflix, as of 2018 (Conner; q on cbc, 00:03:18-00:03:30). In this essay, I argue that by embracing audience reception to the original mediation of *Kim's Convenience* as a play, Ins Choi and CBC intentionally utilize the televised sitcom medium in order to expand on the narrative of the source material resulting in international success for the narrative of *Kim's Convenience*.

*Kim's Convenience* as a play specifically revolves around the patriarchal Appa, his wife Umma, and their Canadian-born children Jung and Janet as they deal with growing concerns of gentrification and the everyday immigrant experience (Zarum). According to interviews with Choi, the inspiration for the narrative was his own life; the setting reflects his commonly-shared observation that many local convenience stores were run by entrepreneurial South Korean immigrants in the 1980s (CBC Arts; Hune-Brown). Softened immigration policies allowed for a generation of South Korean skilled professionals to immigrate to North America in the 1980s, and the characters of *Kim's Convenience* reflect both those in migration and the children born in the

West (Cobb 10). Consequently, the body of Western written and theatrical works centered on the Asian identity had still been quite young when Ins Choi first conceptualized the narrative. Thus, Choi had been rejected by every major Toronto theater once he finished writing (Hune-Brown). Paul Sun-Hyung Lee, who plays Mr. Kim, cites the ubiquity of the play's format and subject matter as the cause of the initial failure (q on cbc, 00:01:00-00:02:57). Despite this, the first performance of the play *Kim's Convenience* took the spotlight at the Toronto Fringe Festival in 2011, and the award for Best New Play (Hune-Brown).

The play's acclaim saw its spread across North American theatres, including the National Arts Centre (NAC) in Ottawa – the only theatre company in Canada directly subsidized by its government with the purpose of promoting Canada's "bicultural vision of the nation" through showcasing the work of immigrant artists (Meerzon 114). The NAC is the byproduct of the Canadian government's institutionalization of *multiculturalism* as a part of its national identity, and its use of state-owned media organizations like the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to promote this ideology (Broadcasting & Telecommunications 162; Meerzon 113). In the Canadian media's sharing of common directives and ability to coordinate across state-owned media groups, *Kim's Convenience* had a clear pathway to a publicly-funded remediation of the also publicly-sponsored theatrical form (Meerzon 121). Early 2010s media saw a large wave of unprecedented Asian representation in Western media with the successes of *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Masters of None* (Hune-Brown). Asian-led productions were becoming a viable investment within the Western media industry, especially as Asian audiences made up the fastest growing population group in Canada and the United States (Westerman). Adapting *Kim's Convenience* into the first Canadian TV series with an All-Asian cast had therefore been advantageous to Canada both commercially and culturally. The overwhelmingly positive response to *Kim's Convenience*

applauded its light-humor and relatability that reflect everyday life (Green, Nestruck, Zarum). Audiences that identify within the Korean diaspora specifically felt touched by Choi's ability to capture many of their seemingly individual, shared experiences in a space often dominated by white narratives (Conner). Its critiques lay with its "sitcomishness" and hasty resolution of its issues in the last few parts of the play (Green). However, these critiques would prove almost prophetic as *Kim's Convenience* was adapted onto television screens just five years after the play's debut.

The sitcom *Kim's Convenience* premiered on October 11, 2016 as an episodic situational comedy closely adapted by Ins and partner Kevin White (CBC Arts, Shea). The most notable distinction between the play and televised mediations is the inherent differences in timing that impact the audiences' ability to connect to the storyline and its characters. The original play lasts an hour and ten minutes long altogether with no intermission, while the series has been stretched into 52 individual episodes and counting. The play can only cover so much in its allotted time, leaving the setting restricted mainly to the convenience store and hasty resolutions that can be fit in at the end (Conner, Green). Additionally, the narrative as a play is restricted to reproductions of the source text, meaning that the plot never changes regardless of shifting casts. However, through extending the narrative by about 25 hours, the televised format was able to build upon the foundations set up by the theatrical mediation (Hune-Brown). Mediamakers are able to explore more settings such as each characters' homes, introduce side characters that add to each main characters' individual plotlines, and simply provide more screen time for diasporic Asian representation through the televised medium (CBC Arts). The media form also comes to life, as it is now produced within a seasonal format that allows for revisions over time and reaction to real-life conditions. Overall, viewers are able to better connect with the protagonists and develop a

close-knit relationship over the years of the series' run. The episodic format reflects the day-to-day life of the Kim family on television as each episode is self-contained while simultaneously adding to the larger seasonal storylines at hand. In fact, the series is noted for casting its audience as the gazing voyeur in order to be universally accessible regardless of background. By spending more time with this family, audiences are supposed to appreciate their lived experiences and further accept multinationalism as central to Canadian society.

Remediating *Kim's Convenience* from a play into a TV sitcom has also directly allowed for the expansion of the narrative's audience on a global scale because of its ability to currently stream on the global streaming service Netflix (Broadcasting & Telecommunications 138). As a play, consumption had been limited to those in the area for the production's stay at a local theatre; although its popularity and reproducibility allowed it to be seen widely in North America. Analysis had been limited to what was remembered by audiences from a few live viewings at max, and who would have the means to attend. As streamed televised media, anyone around the world with a Netflix subscription can watch the *Kim's Convenience* series at any time, for as many times as they would like. The presence of an emerging international media market to cater to has been crucial to the popularity of *Kim's Convenience* because it creates a demand for more of the story and more Asian representation in the media (Conner, Zamur). This has resulted in the ability to now codify the series in the larger body of situational comedies in which *Kim's Convenience* stands out as the only sitcom featuring an Asian family (Hune-Brown). Nevertheless, availability of streaming did not necessarily guarantee the remediation's success. Instead, success was earned in its relatability – but now, to international audiences. The play had been seven years of work from Choi, and so the production had been his dream to have his own story showcased on stage (q on cbc, 00:01:00-00:02:57)). In contrast, the TV series is produced

by a team of writers, including the Caucasian Kevin White, who was selected by Choi in order to make the adaptation consumable to non-Asian audiences (CBC Arts). The show's goal is to now maintain the authenticity of the Korean-Canadian family while speaking to universally-held truths like other sitcoms do.

Ins Choi had struggled at first to bring *Kim's Convenience* to life at a time when diasporic Asian stories in television were limited to bland, stereotypical background characters in the early twenty-first century. As the play became a proven success across Canada, its adaptation into a televised series would prove unquestionable amidst population changes caused by rapid Asian immigration to North America and their demand to be seen on screen. In conclusion, the remediation of Ins Choi's 2011 play *Kim's Convenience* into the hit TV sitcom *Kim's Convenience* (2016-2021) has succeeded because of the television medium's capacity to stretch the limited source material across a longer period, the increased access to international media markets, and the related increased demand for Asian representation in media.

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