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Questioning Madness in *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) and *Feng Ai* (2013)

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of contemporary East Asian films and television series show alternative portrayals of characters with mental disabilities that differ from mad men, fools, or other stereotypes of people with disabilities. These stereotypes of disabilities are related to ableism, an able-bodied center point of view. While critically examining ableism and visual culture theory from a film studies perspective, this paper focuses on the popular Korean TV series *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (*Saikojiman Gwaenchana*, dir. Park Shin-woo, 2020) and the Chinese documentary *Feng Ai* (*'Til Madness Do Us Part*, dir. Wang Bing, 2013), both of which resist the simplified depiction of characters with mental disabilities as mad people or fools. Both films challenge an ableist depiction, but they approach the “invisible” mental disabilities in different ways. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) contests the marginalization of characters with mental disabilities by using various film styles and taking advantage of the media platform Netflix, whereas *Feng Ai* (2013) blurs the boundary between people with and without mental disabilities by exploring human existence and feelings. To be specific, *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) highlights the diversity of characters with mental disabilities by illustrating their different experiences and social backgrounds, while *Feng Ai* (2013) pays attention to the living conditions and personal feelings of people with mental disabilities.

Keywords: Contemporary East Asian Films; Television Series; Characters with Mental Disabilities

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1. Introduction

In July 2016, a socially sensationalized killing at a care facility for people with disabilities in Sagamihara occurred in Japan, killing 19 people, and injuring 26 others^[1, 2]. The suspect Uematsu Satoshi was a former nursing employee at the Sagamihara facility. Uematsu confessed that he was motivated by his extreme belief of eugenics, saying that it would be better if there were no people with disabilities. Professor Akira Takeuchi of Gifu University's Department of Regional Science, who studies people with disabilities and bioethics from a social-philosophical perspective, responded to Uematsu's eugenics ideas as follows: "The starting point of eugenics is to promote health and well-being, but at the same time, it excludes the weak and those with disabilities in the name of promoting social progress, and inadvertently rationalizes discrimination against people with disabilities". The "good deed" of promoting social progress and development hides the ostracism and malice against people with disabilities, and such eugenics views can easily exist in an invisible way in people's daily life.

In fact, some films visualize the seemingly invisible eugenics ideas and "ableism", an able-bodied-centered viewpoint. These include the documentary *Do You Need a Reason to Live* (dir. Sawa Norio, 2019), which traces the trail of Uematsu Satoshi's crime by showing his letters and drawings, and a fiction film *Plan 75* (dir. Hayakawa Chie, 2022), which visualizes the vulnerability of people with disabilities, especially the elderly, by using the Sagamihara stabbings as a reference.

As such, film can function as a tool to criticize ableism, but it can also be influenced by ableism, failing to critically expose the limitations of eugenics and instead reinforcing stereotypes of people with mental disabilities. Some scholars have pointed out that characters with mental disabilities are often portrayed as crazy or stupid, and that mental disabilities are used as narrative tools. Some scholars, such as Erin Heath (2019, p. 3) in *Mental Disorders in Popular Film: How Hollywood Uses, Shames, and Obscures Mental Diversity* point out that Hollywood films like *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, 1999) and *Black Swan* (dir. Darren Aronofsky, 2010) intentionally use mental disabilities as a narrative device to make spectators feel the emotional struggles of the characters while being entertaining^[3-6]. For instance, in the climax of *Black Swan*, the ballerina Nina Sayers (played by

Natalie Portman), who has psychosis, who acts the role of the black swan, has an immersive experience of "getting mad" and visual hallucinations in the ballet performance. Gilman (1982, p. 42) highlights the "madness" caused by mental disabilities as a concept or icon with a "highly symbolic and representative" image^[7]. In a word, largely influenced by ableism, some films link mental disabilities to "madness" and construct stereotypes of people with mental disabilities.

Against the above stereotypical portrayal of people with mental disabilities, some American and European films of the 1980s and 1990s explored alternative representations of people with mental disabilities. For example, Erin Heath (2019, p. 41) notes that *Rain Man* (dir. Barry Levinson, 1988) is a film that does not directly focus on the autism of its protagonist, Raymond, but rather provides a more comprehensive characterization of him by portraying the brotherhood between him and his brother Charlie on their journey^[3]. *Forrest Gump* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1994), a commercially successful film that won six Academy Awards, depicts how Gump, who has a mental disorder, has a rich life experience by joining the army and meeting different people. In addition, *Toto le héros* (dir. Jaco Van Dormael, 1991) and *The Eighth Day (Le huitième jour)*, (dir. Jaco Van Dormael, 1996), which won awards at the Cannes Film Festival, both emphasize how people with and without disabilities interact with each other in their daily lives, rather than focusing exclusively on mental disabilities. In these films, characters with mental disabilities are not reduced to mad men or fools, but have their own likes and dislikes, as well as their own strengths and weaknesses.

An increasing number of contemporary East Asian films and television series are also showing examples of portrayals of characters with mental disabilities that differ from those of mad men or fools, especially after the improvement of disability-related laws and regulations in the 1980s and 1990s, although the causal relationship between these laws and films is not necessarily clear. For example, Taiwanese director Liao Mingyi's feature film *I WeirDO* (dir. Liao Mingyi, 2020), shot on an iPhone, is a film that shows the joy and sorrow of the hero and heroine of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) after they enter an intimate relationship, as well as confusion and struggles through their love affair. In addition, *The Falls* (dir. Chung Meng-hong, 2021) focuses on a single mother who suffers from a mental disorder after facing

various pressures, such as divorce and unemployment, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the estranged relationship between mother and daughter, which reveals the vulnerability of human beings under the fast-developing human society. The mother with a mental disorder could be a representative of any person with or without disabilities facing various pressures and isolation in the current society.

Furthermore, unlike the supporting cast of characters with disabilities, a growing number of contemporary films and television series feature protagonists with disabilities, starring well-known actors and popular actresses. These protagonists with disabilities are different from the “crazy” or “dumb” characters that previously played supporting roles, and instead have strong personal appeals. In addition to the physical appearances and attractiveness of popular actors and actresses, their charm lies in their mental disabilities that give them the courage to step out of social conventions, and become their unique selves^[8]. For example, in the Korean drama *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (dir. Park Shin-woo, 2020), popular Korean actress Seo Yea-ji plays the role of an anti-social fairy tale writer Ko Moon-young, whose fairy tales, though dark and thrilling, unexpectedly resonate with readers and heal their hearts^[9]. Ko Moon-young has her own opinions about things and her thinking is not limited by social traditions. *Flower of Evil* (dir. Kim Cheol-kyu, 2020) is another film that depicts Baek Hee-sung (played by Lee Joon-gi), a metalworker with a personality disorder. He is outwardly a good husband and father who is good at living and raising children, but secretly a suspect in a murder case. The complexity of Baek Hee-sung and his feelings towards his wife and family are shown through the suspenseful plot.

Among these films, I choose the popular Korean TV series *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (*Saikojiman Gwaenchana*, dir. Park Shin-woo, 2020) and the Chinese documentary *Feng Ai* (*Til Madness Do Us Part*, dir. Wang Bing, 2013) as my case studies because both films resist the simplified depiction of characters with mental disabilities as madmen or fool. Both films challenge an ableist depiction, but they approach the “invisible” mental disabilities in different ways. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) contests the marginalization of characters with mental disabilities by using various film styles and taking advantage of the media platform Netflix, whereas *Feng Ai* (2013) blurs the boundary between people with and without mental disabilities by exploring human existence and

feelings. In contrast to the depiction of madness, *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) highlights the diversity of characters with mental disabilities by illustrating their different experiences and social backgrounds, while *Feng Ai* (2013) pays attention to the living conditions and personal feelings of people with mental disabilities. I will elaborate more about how mental disabilities are depicted in *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) and *Feng Ai* (2013) in the second and third sections.

2. Film History about People with Mental Disabilities in East Asia

The introduction part illuminates a general social background and some depictions of people with mental disabilities in some well-known films. I will further elaborate how East Asian films depict people with mental disabilities by highlighting three key points: 1) mental disability is frequently used as a storytelling method or an entertaining tool; 2) while at the same time, some films explore social issues related to mental disability, including laws and regulations, social isolation, and caregiving problems; and 3) some contemporary films portray people with mental disabilities by using different media forms, such as fashion, art, exhibition, and online platforms. As a result, it turns out that how characters with mental disabilities are portrayed is largely concerned with the filmmaking processes, distribution, and reception, especially nowadays platforms, playing an important role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, I will focus on how contemporary East Asian films depict characters with mental disabilities by using different filmic techniques or taking advantage of platforms. I chose *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) and *Feng Ai* (2013) as two case studies, both of which challenge a stereotypical image of people with mental disabilities as fools or mad people. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* exemplifies the third key point that emphasizes how media platform is used to contest the marginalization of people with mental disabilities, whereas *Feng Ai* highlights the second key point that visualizes human existence in a psychiatric hospital.

As it is mentioned in the introduction, mental disability is frequently used as an entertaining element for mainstream spectators. People with mental disabilities are usually depicted as mad or fool people in East Asian films. For example, Kameda in *The Idiot* (*Hakuchi*, dir. Kurosawa Akira, 1951),

a man confined to a mental asylum for years, whose idiocy is equated to goodness and pureness. In *Byakuya no yōjo* (*The Temptress and the Monk*, dir. Taizawa Eisuke, 1958), the male character with mental disabilities is portrayed as a fool with a low social status, which could easily be distinguished by the viewers. Mental disabilities here become a main reason for his low social status. *Gakko II* (dir. Yamada Yoji, 1996) provides another example that connects mental disabilities to incapability. One of the students in *Gakko II* is bullied due to his mental disabilities. The Hong Kong film *Heart of Dragon* (dir. Sammo Hung, 1985) suggests a similar pattern that the protagonist with mental disabilities needs to be cared for by his brother due to his lack of abilities.

In addition to the above films directed by well-known directors, characters with mental disabilities still appear to be insane or lunatic in some recent East Asian films. For instance, *Incantation* (dir. Kevin Ko, 2022), a recent Taiwanese supernatural horror film, illustrates how the female protagonist with mental disabilities attempts to save her daughter by imploring the viewer to chant an incantation. Taking *Gonjiam: Haunted Asylum* (dir. Jung Bum-shik, 2018) as another example, a group of people explores Gonjiam Psychiatric Hospital, and they meet ghosts who are patients with mental disabilities killed by the director of the hospital. The exploration team is frightened by the ghosts that attack and pull them into the darkness. These films tend to draw a connection between mental disabilities and madness to create dramatic conflicts.

In that case, disability is usually used as a character setting or a storytelling method rather than referring to the everyday experiences of people with disabilities. In *Pure White* (dir. Sakamoto Yoshihiro, 2016), Mashiro, the female protagonist with mental disabilities, is overprotected by her family. It seems that mental disabilities become a major conflict for her to live independently and follow Yui to Tokyo, which pushes the story into the climax – Mashiro leaves home alone to find Yui on a snowy night. *Oasis* (dir. Lee Chang-dong, 2002) is a well-known Korean film that pictures how a man with a mild mental disability (Jongdu) and a woman with cerebral palsy (Gongju) fall in love with each other. Although *Oasis* is commercially successful for assimilating people with disabilities into the mainstream, Woo (2014, p. 172) argues that the specificities and complexities of disability issues have been hidden by exploring a

melodramatic trajectory in the film^[10]. Jongdu is a melodramatic victim/hero figure with vulnerability and a childlike personality, whose masculinity is rebuilt by his sexual attack by Gongju^[10]. Disability thus becomes an important storytelling element that symbolizes “loss”, which needs to be overcome by the hegemonic masculine values. I do not suggest the direct connection between melodrama and ableist depiction of characters with mental disabilities here. Rather, characters with mental disabilities are dedicated to narratives and plots in these films. As a result, mental disability itself tends to be ignored by filmmakers and spectators due to the overuse of implication as “madness” in numerous films.

Meanwhile, some films pay attention to mental disability itself and the living conditions of people with mental disabilities. To be specific, some Japanese films question laws related to mental disabilities and the isolation problems of people with mental disabilities. Focusing on *Article 39 of Penal Code* in Japan, *Keiho (39 keihō dai sanjūkyū jō)*, dir. Morita Yoshimitsu, 1999) explores whether insanity should be punishable or not. On the one hand, people with or without mental disabilities should have equal citizenship. In that case, people with mental disabilities should be punished as those without disabilities if they violate the law. On the other hand, people with mental disabilities are faced with barriers due to their disabilities, so that they may need extra care from others^[11]. If they make a mistake, should people forgive them due to their disabilities? The film *Keiho* raises such a complicated and controversial question about legal capacity and the self-determination of people with mental disabilities.

Before Dawn—100 Years from Shuzo Kure and His Nameless Mental Patients (dir. Imai Tomoki, 2018) is another example to examine the social isolation problems of people with mental disabilities in Japan. Financially supported by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan, and Japan Arts Council, *Before Dawn* explores how the human rights issues related to the home confinement of patients with mental disabilities are addressed by following the steps of Kure Shūzō. Kure is a professor of psychiatry who strived to improve the living conditions of people with disabilities and wrote a report titled “The reality of the home confinement of mentally impaired patients and statistical observations” in 1918. Different from those screened in commercial film theaters, *Before Dawn* was screened without charge in civic centers in 2022, which was organized by

Kyosaren, an institution that provides support to people with disabilities in Japan. The film suggests that social isolation of people with mental disabilities is not only related to laws on disability, but also concerned with people around them, such as their family members and caretakers.

Some contemporary Japanese documentaries focus on their caretakers, especially family members and doctors. *Michikusa* (dir. Shishido Daisuke, 2018) traces how people with mental disabilities live with their caretakers after leaving asylums and hospitals. It illustrates the everyday lives of four protagonists with mental disabilities: Okabe, Kuwada, Nakada, and Oya. The camera follows them when they wander through the streets. Supported by the Japan Council on Independent Living Centers and the KIRIN Welfare Foundation, *Michikusa* has been screened in the Machida City Hall, the Osaka Suminoe Special Support School, and other institutions related to disabilities. *Zero* (dir. Soda Kazuhiro, 2020) is another example that captures on the verge of the retirement of Dr. Yamamoto, who used to be a psychiatrist for decades. As Soda Kazuhiro's ninth observational film, *Zero* won the Ecumenical Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival due to its unique film style, such as "no narration, super-imposed titles, or music", "no scripts", and "use long takes". The film has also been screened at Documentary Fortnight: MoMA's International Festival of Nonfiction Film and Media in 2020. The significance of films about mental disabilities is not only limited to its representation of people with mental disabilities in everyday life, but also how they are exhibited and screened in different places for different spectators.

Some contemporary East Asian films about mental disabilities creatively collaborate with fashion, art, exhibition, and other different media forms by taking advantage of platforms and social media. *A Short Film about DISTORTION* (dir. Kasatani Yoshiaki, 2016) and *Jizo Libido* (dir. Kasatani Yoshiaki, 2018) are two documentaries related to a collaborative project of Atelier Yamanami and PR-y. Atelier Yamanami, an Art center and welfare facility in Shiga Prefecture, provides a space for people with mental disabilities to create artworks and connect with others. Led by Kasatani Yoshiaki, PR-y is a project that include fashion brands creation, documentary films production, photography books publication and exhibitions curation. The film *Jizo Libido* was an officially invited film at the Philadelphia Asian Amer-

ican Film Festival 2018. Interested in how the director combines disability, art, and fashion, I organized a screening, and talk event about the two films in Nagoya University in July 2022. The films raised a controversial discussion about how disability should be positioned and whether artists with mental disabilities have their own voices when their artworks have commercial value. Whether people with mental disabilities have agency in these films and filmmaking processes is another important aspect while examining these new forms of contemporary East Asian films.

Some Chinese documentaries give a local voice to people with mental disabilities in China, especially females. Released on social media, *Rollercoaster Riders* (dir. Liu Xinzi, 2021) and *Brain Fog* (dir. Guo Jidi, 2022) are two independent documentaries exploring how people live with mental disabilities^[12, 13]. *Rollercoaster Riders*, made up of interviews from 42 participants, raises awareness about bipolar disorder, with which people may face difficulties in dealing with relationships with family members and friends. *Brain Fog* shares the intimate experience of people who live with mental disabilities in China. Guo, a Shanghai-based independent filmmaker, highlights her focus on individuals and how people perceive the world with mental disabilities. *Brain Fog* can be freely watched online at the official website of *Shanghai Daily* with useful contacts for mental health resources^[14]. These films provide opportunities for people with mental disabilities to improve their self-awareness and connect with their community members in an effective and valid way.

Characters with mental disabilities are often depicted as madmen and fool, which implies the function of mental disabilities as an entertaining tool for narratives^[15]. At the same time, as mentioned above, some East Asian films also tackle social problems of people with mental disabilities, including social isolation, caretaker issues, and laws. Moreover, some recent films attach importance to how they are screened and exhibited at film festivals, art exhibitions, and online platforms. Thus, in addition to filmic representation, filmmaking processes, distribution, and reception also need to be focused on to examine the agency of people with mental disabilities. Based on the above background of East Asian films about characters with mental disabilities, I will examine how some contemporary films depict people with mental disabilities with new filmic techniques and media platforms. Do mental disabilities still function as an entertainment tool?

I will explore different layers and structures in some contemporary East Asian films about people with mental disabilities by focusing on two case studies: *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (*Saikojiman Gwaenchana*, dir. Park Shin-woo, 2020) and *Feng Ai* (*'Til Madness Do Us Part*, dir. Wang Bing, 2013).

It's Okay to Not Be Okay (2020) and *Feng Ai* (2013) are two different case studies in terms of media form, aesthetics, and modes of circulation. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, a Netflix series, demonstrates how contemporary media forms can provide alternative depictions of mental disability through both aesthetics and modes of circulation. The series' distinctive use of animation—particularly in its fairy-tale sequences—creates an affective visual language that invites spectators to engage with mental difference beyond realism or pathology. Distributed via Netflix and widely consumed through binge-watching during the COVID-19 pandemic, the series encourages an immersive mode of spectatorship that allows sustained emotional and ethical engagement with its characters. Notably, the protagonist with a mental disability is portrayed as a complex moral subject rather than as a fool or a “mad” figure, offering an alternative to historically stigmatizing depictions. *Feng Ai*, an independent documentary directed by Wang Bing, exemplifies how alternative media forms shape the representation of mental disability through distinct aesthetic, circulatory, and ethical practices. Unlike mainstream television, the film circulated primarily through international film festivals and later via independent screenings and DVD distribution, situating it within a niche economy of art cinema. Wang Bing's personal film style—characterized by long takes, handheld camerawork, and minimal narrative intervention—foregrounds duration, proximity, and observational attention. This aesthetic approach constructs a mode of spectatorship oriented toward cinephiles and spectators invested in independent documentary practices, who are invited to engage patiently and reflectively with the film's subjects.

3. Contesting the Marginalization of Characters with Mental Disabilities and Their Caretakers

It's Okay to Not Be Okay (*Saikojiman Gwaenchana*, dir. Park Shin-woo, 2020), a mainstream Korean TV series on Netflix, diversifies how people with mental disabilities and

their caretakers live in an asylum by taking advantage of the media platform Netflix and involving various film styles, including melodrama, suspense, musical, and animation. I will illustrate how the Netflix TV series *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* contests the marginalization of people with mental disabilities from two aspects: 1) it vividly illuminates the interiority and emotions of characters with mental disabilities by different filmic techniques; and 2) Netflix, as an international broadcasting media platform, provides an immersive experience for spectators to expand the imagination of people with mental disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the most popular romance TV series of 2020 on Netflix in South Korea, *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* depicts a group of people with mental disabilities and their caretakers in OK Psychiatric Hospital, an asylum near the sea. In addition to the romantic story between two protagonists, a psych ward caretaker Moon Gang-tae (acted by Kim Soo-hyun) and a children's book writer with antisocial personality disorder Ko Moon-young (acted by Seo Yea-ji), *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* portrays how patients with different personalities live together and form a community in OK Psychiatric Hospital. Patients living in the hospital and other main characters have different extents of stigma due to their different life experiences. For instance, Moon Sang-tae (acted by Oh Jung-se), Moon Gang-tae's older brother, has autistic and cannot control himself after witnessing the murder scene of his mother. Kan Pil-ong (acted by Kim Ki-cheon), traumatized by the Vietnam War, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Lee Ah-reum (acted by Ji Hye-won) escapes from her abusive ex-husband with anxiety disorder. Kwon Ki-do (acted by Kwak Dong-yeon), a son of an assemblyman, is bipolar disorder because of the lack of parental love. These people spend time doing rehabilitation activities with their caretakers in the OK Psychiatric Hospital.

It's Okay to Not Be Okay challenges a conventional depiction of psychiatric hospitals or asylums as haunted houses. OK Psychiatric Hospital is more like a resort hotel with beautiful sea view and a relaxing garden where patients can walk around and enjoy sunshine. In contrast to white laboratory coats, nurses wear pink uniforms and caretakers are in baby blue. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* also introduces how a medical institution functions while facing different situations and different people with mental disabilities. For example, “galmaegi 777” is a code used by nurses in episode 3 when

patients try to escape from the hospital. Psychiatric hospitals prohibit the use of irritating words to protect patients and help them to calm down. Oh Ji-wang (acted by Kim Chang-wan), the director of OK Psychiatric Hospital, cares about his patients and helps them to get better by providing different courses, including a literature class of the female protagonist Ko Moon-young. When Kwon Ki-do becomes excited due to his bipolar disorder, as if he were in a nightclub, all the staff and patients in the hospital cooperate with him to de-escalate his emotions. A butterfly hug as a therapeutic exercise is also introduced to deal with anxiety and stress.

It's Okay to Not Be Okay criticizes ableism by exploring the relationship between people with disabilities and their caretakers in a melodramatic way. As Brooks (1976, p. 20) and Williams (1988, pp. 51–52) note about “moral occult,” melodrama often reveals hidden problems and truth for reality^[16, 17]. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* pays attention to social problems brought by ableism, such as dilemmas faced by caretakers. Gang-tae, who takes care of his brother Sang-tae in his childhood, often feels the conflicts between looking after his brother and living his own life. At first, Gang-tae regards Sang-tae as a burden and sacrifices himself to be a caretaker. When Gang-tae was a boy, he always feels jealousy of his brother, who got more attention from his mother. Although Ko Moon-young saved his life in his childhood, Gang-tae always feels that death might be a better choice at that time. However, after he falls in love with Ko Moon-young and then lives together with her and his brother, he comes to realize that it is Ko Moon-young and Sang-tae that protect him from some potential danger. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* emphasizes how Gang-tae, Sang-tae, and Moon-young care about each other and solve the problems together through a montage in which they hold each other and walk forward. Such a scene draws attention to the ethics of care, which illuminates how people with and without mental disabilities take care of each other because people are all vulnerable.

How characters with mental disabilities perceive the world and feel about their surroundings is vividly pictured by an animation and musical style in *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*. For instance, Sang-tae feels so excited when he walks on the street to see his favorite picture book author, Ko Moon-young, in episode 2. The aspect ratio is changed from a TV series mode to a filmic style, which creates a narrower

sense of space. Then Sang-tae happily runs through cherry blossoms in full bloom with a light and uplifting music. An animation-and-musical style is used to emphasize Sang-tae's excitement and happiness. The balloon that Sang-tae holds flies into the sky, and the bird that he sees at the roadside poster turns into a lively one. Sang-tae's rich imagination is also fully illustrated by animation. When he sees an illustration about umbrellas on the wall, Sang-tae uses his bag to keep out the rain as if it were raining. His behavior might be different from what others do on the street. However, the animation style makes it reasonable because he is so excited to see his favorite picture book author in person.

In addition to the animation and musical style that depict Sang-tae's mood, fairy tales in the picture books written by Ko Moon-young portray the interiority of people with and without disabilities. Each episode talks about a fairy tale in *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, such as *The Boy who Fed on Nightmares*, *The Lady in Red Shoes*, *The Cheerful Dog*, and *Zombie Kid*. These fairy tales are told in different styles, including 2D animation, clay animation, and illustration. Taking *The Cheerful Dog* as an example, Gang-tae reads the story to Sang-tae on the bus. The story begins with Gang-tae's narration and then it turns into a 2D animation, the style of which is the same as the picture book. It tells about a dog that looks happy all day but cries at night because it is tied to a tree. One day, it asks itself, “Why not break away your collar?” Then Sang-tae answers, “I cannot do it because I have been tied for too long.” Such a story-telling reveals how Sang-tae feels about his life as a caretaker of his brother. Although Sang-tae looks happy and satisfied, he is sad when he is alone at night. His brother is like a collar that he cannot break away to chase freedom. Thus, the dilemma faced by the caretaker is well illustrated by a fairy tale.

It's Okay to Not Be Okay not only vividly depicts characters with mental disabilities by various filmic techniques, but also takes advantage of the media platform Netflix to diversify the depiction of people with mental disabilities, which involves production, distribution, and reception. Netflix, as a brand, often closely connects to popular genres by following recent cultural trends^[18]. Disability is one of the hot topics in Netflix TV series^[19, 20]. For instance, *Flower of Evil* (dir. Kim Cheol-kyu, 2020) invites a popular South Korean actor Lee Joon-gi to act as Baek Hee-sung, a protagonist with personality disorders. *Extraordinary Attorney*

Woo (dir. Yoo In-shik, 2022) highlights the career of Woo Young-woo (acted by Park Eun-bin), a lawyer with autism spectrum disorder. Jason Bechervaise, a film critic in Korean cinema, notes that *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* helps people to know more about people who suffer from autism, and Woo Young-woo is an attractive character with agency. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, *Flower of Evil*, and *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* are all popular South Korean TV dramas with high ratings on Netflix and television networks.

Although *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* is a South Korean TV drama, it gets International Emmy Nomination for its popularity all over the world. Netflix, as a transnational broadcaster, contributes to bringing East Asian films and TV dramas to international markets. Netflix releases the content on the same date for international spectators. Even if some time zones can watch the content sooner than others, fans from different countries can form communities to discuss it. Netflix, as an international media platform, thus helps to consider the significance of exploring East Asian films about disability. Taking *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* as an example, we cannot only examine its popularity in East Asia but also need to consider its transnational influence and international connections.

The worldwide popularity of *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* provides an alternative depiction of characters with mental disabilities and the asylum they live in. Moreover, binge-watching makes viewers become immersive into an imagined world where characters with mental disabilities spend time with their caretakers in OK Psychiatric Hospital^[21, 22]. The broadcasting was on tvN and Netflix from June 20, 2020, to August 9, 2020, which was during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, it provided more time for viewers to watch the episodes. According to Jenner (2018, p. 161), binge-watching is usually associated with fans who watch the content repetitively^[18]. Jenner (2018, p. 127) also highlights that viewers have agency to make choices and share comments about the content via Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram^[18]. Fans also create videos related to disability based on the original content. These fan-made videos spread on the internet raise discussions about disability as well.

4. Beyond the Boundary of “Madness”

It's Okay to Not Be Okay contests the marginalization of characters with mental disabilities by taking advantage of

the media platform Netflix and involving various film styles, whereas *Feng Ai* (*'Til Madness Do Us Part*, dir. Wang Bing, 2013), a documentary of more than three hours, illustrates how men with mental disabilities live in an asylum in Yunnan and blurs the boundary between people with and without mental disabilities by exploring human existence and feelings. I will explore the ambiguous boundary between disability and non-disability from the following two aspects: 1) the use of a handheld camera, and 2) Wang Bing's filmmaking process, distribution, and reception.

Feng Ai focuses a group of men living in an isolated asylum in Yunnan^[23]. They come to the asylum for different reasons. Some have mental disabilities, while others have committed crimes. They are locked on the same floor with shared rooms. The film lasts for 3 h and 48 min, during which viewers are likely to have an immersive experience with people living in the asylum. They usually walk along the corridor looking for food and comfort. However, the iron wire fence courtyard prevents them from going out or having any contact with the outside world. As a result, most of them share the sense of emptiness with each other.

Wang Bing's handheld camera emphasizes the sense of emptiness by creating a repetitive routine and a unique perception of time. The camera witnesses people walking around aimlessly in the asylum. Ma Jian, a patient who has been hospitalized for 5 months, talks to himself, “Going home is the best choice...I want to go home. I miss my family. As Hui people, we usually sing during the Spring Festival.” Then the camera follows him when he looks for nurses and asks for a transportation fee to go home. After being rejected, Ma Jian wanders in the corridor and picks up speed to run. The camera shakes and tries to keep up the pace. “They are trying to kill me! It's too hot, I'm sweating.” Ma Jian says while taking off his clothes. The camera stays behind as if staring him in the dim light. Then a doctor comes and gives him an injection. Meanwhile, another naked patient comes out of the room and pees at the iron fence. After the night passes, people continue wandering around the corridor in the daytime.

The repetitive routine is imbued with a sense of emptiness by Wang's immersive handheld camera and sound. *Feng Ai* records spitting and coughing sounds in the asylum. When Ma Jian runs around the corridor, there is no sound but the wind. The camera also follows a patient who is allowed to

come back home for ten days. The man walks aimlessly along the road with the noise from construction sites and dimming street lighting, which lasts for about three minutes. The duration of noise or silence further highlights the emptiness of human existence in or outside the asylum. Even if people leave the asylum, they are faced with their empty lives and try to look for comfort.

The immersive handheld camera suggests not only the emptiness through silence or noise, but also human feelings and affect through conversations and songs in the asylum. Zhu Xiaoyan, a man hospitalized for 11 years, falls in love with Li Chengqiao, a woman hospitalized for 3 years. They are locked on different floors, so it is difficult for them to meet. Nevertheless, Zhu often talks to Li through the iron fence. When the New Year is approaching, they are on different floors but watch the fireworks together. Zhu says, "I'll fly down to you." Li asks with a smile, "Do you really wanna come down?" Zhu replies, "Yes, I want to. I want to come down because you're there." Maybe because the firework is too loud, they repeat the conversation about four times to confirm with each other. Li gives a candy to Zhu through the iron fence the next morning when someone sings, "Thanks, don't forget me for another guy. When we met, being together was so sweet. This love will always be in my heart..." They hug and kiss through the iron fence, which echoes the film's English title, "*Til Madness Do Us Part*".

Wang Bing's use of a handheld camera turns his filmmaking process into a way of creating and sharing knowledge about the world. As Pollacchi (2021, p. 15) notes, "He testifies to witnesses of the recent past as well as reports, archives, and provides tools to reflect upon certain phenomena such as labor issues, the position of intellectuals, the absurdity and violence of certain political campaigns^[24]." *Feng Ai* focuses on men with mental disabilities living in an isolated asylum. Wang's handheld camera witnesses their living conditions, including both physical and mental health. Pollacchi (2021, p. 16) further argues that Wang's filmmaking process is an experience that is shared between him as a director and "the social actors in their living and working settings^[24]." Wang Bing mentions his principle while shooting *Feng Ai*, "I will not shoot people when they are ill. I do not want to turn my camera to people's pain." Wang's handheld camera functions as a tool for him to create knowledge about the blurred boundary between disability and non-disability in *Feng Ai*.

Then, how to understand the blurred boundary?

Feng Ai suggests the blurred boundary between people with and without mental disabilities by examining human existence, feelings, and basic aspects of human life in an isolated asylum. *Feng Ai* unfolds the inner richness of men with mental disabilities. Shi Guangdiao, a man hospitalized for 2 years, sleeps with Zeng Weichen, another man hospitalized for 15 years. They chat with each other before falling asleep. "How much money do you have?" "500,000 or 600,000 yuan." "So much? With those, you can buy 5 wives." "They're not that cheap! Aren't they?" "Even if they were 200,000 yuan each, I could buy a couple, one for me and one for you." Then they complain about the high taxes and make jokes about each other. In another room, a man wants to sleep with his male partner, so he tries to make another man leave by swatting away a mosquito with his shoes. Wang Bing (2013, p. 132) explains that these scenes offer the viewers a chance to pay attention to the complexity of human existence and some basic aspects of human life^[25].

These basic human needs, such as love and comfort from family and friends, are shared by people with and without mental disabilities. As Wang Bing (2013, p. 127) highlights in his interview, it is important to establish a relationship between spectators and the subject of film^[25]. *Feng Ai* provides an immersive experience for spectators to imagine the isolated living conditions of men with mental disabilities by taking advantage of the immersive handheld camera. At the end of the film, many people have the feeling that "there is no difference between us and them" and "we can become them at any time". Thus, the boundary between people with and without disabilities becomes ambiguous, and the world on the screen seems to extend to the reality.

As an independent documentary coproduced in Hong Kong, France, and Japan, *Feng Ai* has been screened at various film festivals, including the 2013 Venice Film Festival, the 2013 Busan Film Festival, the 2013 Golden Horse Festival, and the 2014 Rotterdam Film Festival. *Feng Ai* is also the winner of the Festival des 3 Continents of Nantes in 2013. In addition to film festivals, some mini theatres and film-related institutions have also arranged screening events for *Feng Ai*, such as Cine Wind (Niigata), Cinema Onomichi, and Sakurazaka Theatre (Okinawa). For instance, when Visual Arts College Osaka screened *Feng Ai* in 2014, its screening flyer shows not only the film introduction, but

also some background information about people with mental disabilities in China, including the Mental Health Law of the People's Republic of China, that has been passed in October 2012. According to Article 30, "The hospitalization of patients suspected of mental disorders shall observe the principle of free will." However, if people have committed any act of harming themselves or others, or have the potential to do so, they are supposed to be hospitalized due to the law. Thus, the screening of *Feng Ai* provides a contested terrain for people to discuss mental disabilities.

5. Conclusions

This article explores people with mental disabilities in contemporary East Asian films. On the one hand, mental disabilities are often used as an entertaining element. Characters with mental disabilities are usually depicted as fools in melodramas and mad people in horror films. Mental disabilities are frequently used as a metaphor, a symbol, or a tool to support narrative. For instance, Mashiro in *Pure White* is stopped to climb mountain with Yui by her family due to her disability. As a result, she runs out of her home at midnight to meet Yui. Thus, Mashiro's mental disability triggers the conflict between her and her family, which brings the plot to a climax. On the other hand, some films discuss laws and social issues about people with mental disabilities who are isolated from the outside world, such as *Keiho* and *Before Dawn—100 Years from Shuzo Kure and His Nameless Mental Patients*. Moreover, the relationship between people with mental disabilities and their caretakers has been an important topic in contemporary East Asian films since healthcare murders took place in recent decades, including the Sagami-hara stabbings.

In contrast to an ableist way of depicting characters with mental disabilities as fools or mad people, some contemporary East Asian films give voice to people with disabilities and raise the discussion to the public by using different approaches. Some films take advantage of different media forms, such as art exhibitions, fashion shows, media platforms, and so on. For instance, Atelier Yamanami and PR-y have a collaborative project about artworks done by people with mental disabilities. *A Short Film about DISTORTION* and *Jizo Libido* are two documentaries that focus on how artists with mental disabilities create artworks in Atelier Yamanami. People who are involved in fashion and art circles

are likely to be interested in people with mental disabilities and their artworks. Thus, the collaborative project helps to provide alternative depictions of people with mental disabilities. *Brain Fog* is another example that releases online at the official website of *Shanghai Daily*. It illuminates how women deal with their mental health issues in China. Different from films screened at film theaters, their spectators might be those who face the same issues and use the internet to search for solutions. Such a film provides a practical way for people with mental disabilities to be aware of their communities and people who are in similar situations.

Among these contemporary East Asian films, I focus on *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (2020) and *Feng Ai* (2013), although it is necessary to acknowledge some limitations, particularly issues of performance and authenticity in televised representations of disability, as well as the gendered structuring of representation in *Feng Ai*, both of which challenge an ableist depiction of people with mental disabilities. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* explores the interiority and emotions of characters with mental disabilities by using different filmic styles, including animations and musicals. Moreover, as an internationally popular TV series on Netflix during the COVID-19 pandemic, it provides an immersive experience for spectators to imagine how people with mental disabilities live in a psychiatric hospital or an asylum, and how caretakers deal with different emergencies. Its successful worldwide reception suggests the demarginalization of characters with mental disabilities. Although there are some remaining questions about the performance of disability by good-looking actors and actresses such as Kim Soo-hyun and Seo Yea-ji, the popularity of actors and actresses does motivate their fans to pay attention to disability issues.

Compared to *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, which contests the marginalization of characters with mental disabilities by various film styles and the media platform Netflix, *Feng Ai* emphasizes the blurred boundary between disability and non-disability by exploring human existence and feelings of men with mental disabilities in an isolated asylum in Yunnan. Wang Bing's use of a handheld camera creates a repetitive routine in the asylum, suggesting the emptiness of men with mental disabilities. However, their songs and conversations imply their inner richness and basic human feelings. Wang Bing's filmmaking process is also a way of sharing knowledge about how men with mental disabilities live in

an asylum in China. Different from *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* on Netflix, *Feng Ai* has been screened at international film festivals. Thus, people who are interested in films and those with professional knowledge about films may watch *Feng Ai* on screen. In a word, both *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* and *Feng Ai* expand the imagination of spectators about people with mental disabilities in different ways.

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