

Breaking new ground: Kim's Convenience to be Canada's 1st sitcom led by Asians

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Kim's Convenience, originally an acclaimed stage play, is breaking new ground as Canada's first TV sitcom led by Asian actors.

"I'm really excited to have the show being broadcast at this time in history," said Ins Choi, the Korean-Canadian actor-playwright who wrote the hit theatre production, about life behind the counter of a corner shop run by Korean immigrants and the family's intergenerational conflict.

The TV show debuts amid discussion about Hollywood's lack of diversity and dearth of significant roles for minorities.

"I love that we are part of that [discussion]. That this show — in a positive, proactive way, with a lot of humour, a lot of heart, kind of an essentially Canadian way — we can add to that conversation," Choi told CBC News.

For the show's stars, the change has been a long time coming after years toiling in theatre and small roles in TV and film.

'I'm Canadian through and through, but a lot of times I'm not allowed to play a Canadian.' - Actor Paul Sun-Hyung Lee

"I've grown up here my entire life," said Paul Sun-Hyung Lee, who plays the lead role of Mr. Kim (also known as Appa, or Daddy in Korean).

"I love hockey. I love the Blue Jays. I drink beer, maple syrup. I'm Canadian through and through, but a lot of times I'm not allowed to play a Canadian. I've got to be the guy in the background," Lee said, quipping he's played a doctor so often he feels he's fulfilled his parents' wish for him to study medicine instead of acting.

Jean Yoon, who plays Mrs. Kim (called Umma, Korean for Mommy), concurs.

"It's great as an artist of colour to be playing a fully rounded character," she said.

"In my experience, we're coming in to play roles that will further the plot, that would deliver information, that would set the hero up, but in this show we — the people of colour — get to be the heroes."

From the stage to the small screen

As a child, Choi lived above his uncle's store, called Kim's Grocery, in Etobicoke, Ont. He developed *Kim's Convenience* — his first play — over several years and debuted it at the 2011 Toronto Fringe Festival.

Actor-playwright Ins Choi, who lived above his uncle's convenience store as a child, channelled his memories into his first play. (Bruce Zinger/Soulpepper)

It was an immediate hit, prompting a bidding war from several theatre companies. Choi signed with Toronto troupe Soulpepper, which remounted it to [rave reviews](#) and, later, [sent it on a national tour](#). The play will be part of the company's first-ever off-Broadway residency next spring, with Soulpepper also hoping to take it to Korea.

Lee, who also worked in a convenience store growing up, has been involved with *Kim's Convenience* since the start.

"At the beginning, we knew there was something special," he said. "We just didn't know it would get to these levels."

After spending the summer shooting the 13-episode sitcom in Toronto's east end, he's looking forward to bringing the story to a wider public.

Paul Sun-Hyung Lee portrays Mr. Kim in the new sitcom *Kim's Convenience*, a role he originated in the hit stage production. (CBC)

"It's always a bit interesting when we say it's 2016 and the idea of a non-white or Asian actor playing the lead in a television show is considered groundbreaking," he said.

"On one level it's very heartening and it's great that we are finally making these strides. On the other hand, it's kind of frustrating that it took this long to get to this point."

South of the border, Margaret Cho's sitcom *All-American Girl* lasted just one season 12 years ago. It wasn't until 2015 when another show about Asian-American life debuted on mainstream TV.

Fresh Off the Boat, based on Eddie Huang's memoir about his Taiwanese family moving to Orlando, debuted on ABC in February 2015. Critically acclaimed, its third season starts on Oct. 11.

"When you are used to being invisible in pop culture, seeing yourself reflected back racially is not necessarily just a one-note happy celebratory thing," said Hannah Sung, co-host of the *Globe and Mail* podcast *Colour Code*, which explores race in Canada.

"It can be difficult. You can feel self-conscious. Because, again, it's all that pressure on those very few characters to try to reveal the fullness of the experience of being Asian-Canadian."



An audience for Asian-Canadian stories

At a preview screening of *Kim's Convenience* this week, the first two episodes were met with raucous laughter and applause both from an audience of Korean-Canadians and non-Asians.

Expectations run high for the series and the excitement of having a potential TV hit was palpable. Will *Kim's Convenience* be a success like *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, which depicted Muslims living in small-town Saskatchewan and ran for six seasons on CBC-TV?

"I think it's going to give broadcasters confidence that there's a market for Asian-Canadian stories," said Yoon, who also originated her role with the stage production.

"And also that there's an audience. I really firmly believe that."

Kim's Convenience debuts on CBC-TV on Oct. 11 at 9 p.m. ET (9:30 NT).



Kim's Convenience features Asian-Canadian actors, from left, Jean Yoon, Paul Sun-Hyung Lee and Andrea Bang. 'There's a market for Asian-Canadian stories,' says Yoon. 'There's an audience. I really firmly believe that.' (CBC)