This first section of the book examines the drama-driven First Korean Wave (2003–2011) together with drama-themed urban promotion practices mainly in Korea and partly in Japan. Based on the ethnography of the Korean drama industry, chapter 1 discusses how Korean television dramas are produced, covering funding channels, sponsorship practices, and the ways the dramas cater to their export markets. Focusing on Korean cities’ marketing strategies, chapter 2 analyzes how cities create the sites that are used as settings for dramas and then reuse them to attract tourists. The linkage between the two chapters lies in the cooperation between “marginal drama producers” and “marginal cities.” By marginal drama producers, I mean those independent drama producers who jumped into the industry only after witnessing the unexpected overseas popularity of pioneering dramas such as Winter Sonata and Jewel in the Palace in the early 2000s. They were motivated by romantic fantasies about the higher rates of return obtainable in foreign markets. Despite their great expectations, however, their actual industrial position is marginal because they suffer from insufficient
financial resources and weak production capabilities, and are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis broadcasters in the redistribution of profits. Their financially marginal condition, combined with the spatiality of drama production, has driven these independent producers to resort to Korean cities that could be both financial and spatial sponsors. By “marginal” cities, I am referring mainly to the Korean regional cities, discussed in the introduction, that have persistently aspired to develop themselves but have been deprived of the necessary material and cultural resources.

Collaboration between marginal drama producers and marginal cities results in the simultaneous production of drama and place. Cities deliver funding to cover part of a drama’s production costs; sometimes they also provide land on which a set will be built. In return, television shows dramatically depict landmark places in the sponsoring cities, integrating them into their story lines. While drama sponsorship rebrands city places, place placement in dramas also reconfigures dramas’ story lines, leading to a mutual construction of drama and place. What I wish to emphasize is the speculative nature of both the drama production and the drama-associated city promotion. Both players seek instant short-term success. Local leaders use drama sponsorship as a sensational tool for bringing flash publicity to their municipalities. Drama producers insert significant sponsoring city sites into drama story lines and backgrounds as a means to secure immediate funding. The two chapters in this section show how the very marginality of both drama producers and regional municipalities shapes their speculative ventures; the level of uncertainty is very high, but the rewards for success are correspondingly great.

I collected the data presented in this section during my fieldwork, from January to July of 2011 and from May to July of 2014. I would like to talk briefly about the data collection process because it reveals both the speculative and marginal characteristics of the drama producers and aspiring cities.

Having neither previous experience of it nor connections with it, the ethnography of the Korean drama industry itself presented me with difficulties. I had to spend a lot of time making contact with industry insiders and scheduling appointments with them because many of them simply refused to meet an “outsider.” These hard-won opportunities to meet with industrial players, however, did not necessarily lead to smooth interviews. Many of my interview questions received no clear answers due to the interviewees’ surprisingly conservative attitudes. Independent drama producers were reluc-
tant to disclose the costs of drama production, the amount of sponsorship they received, and the nature of the financial flows. As discussed in chapter 1, the Korean drama industry operates amid tensions and conflicts between two major players within it: broadcasters and independent producers. My interviews with both parties often ended in harsh and emotionally charged criticism by the one of the other, pushing me to examine the contradictions within the industry in my research. Most of the data used in this book come from each side’s offensive descriptions of the other, because I eventually found it easier to gather correct information about certain players from their counterparts rather than from themselves. In addition, I was helped to understand the practices within the industry not only by the data and explanations people provided but also by the manner in which they answered or evaded my questions.

The dominant impression I received in the field was of the stark contrast between the media celebration of the East Asian, or even global success, of Korean television dramas and the producers’ actual situation. Many of their offices were surprisingly humble. An interview with a male informant at a small-sized production firm in a small, dark room was a scary experience. The interviewee, who looked like a mobster rather than a cultural creator, even threatened to sue me “if this interview content is ever revealed in any printed material,” adding “we never have enough time to shoot dramas, but we do have enough time to file lawsuits.”1 This precarious situation was no exception for majors either. One weekday morning, I met a key staff member at one of the major drama production firms. Despite the meeting being prescheduled, we were unable to continue our conversation due to incessant incoming phone calls. The staff member told me that the firm was involved in more than twelve lawsuits at that moment and one of the trials was scheduled for that afternoon. Overhearing the phone conversations, I was able to gauge the financial and legal situation the firm faced, despite its industrial position as a major. For sensitive reasons such as these, the names of the drama production firms are not specifically identified in this book unless they are officially mentioned in other sources. Based on those fieldwork experiences, I examine how Korean drama producers can be characterized as marginal despite their ostensible position at the forefront of the Korean Wave.

The ethnography of the sponsoring cities was relatively easier to deal with because local officials did not send the curious researcher away. Instead, many of them considered meeting me to be an extension of their promotional
activities. The priority for most municipalities I visited was raising their recognition status. The ambiance I mostly witnessed in provincial cities and counties was calmness, entirely the opposite of the bustling and overcrowded urban experience of Seoul. The absence of busyness and activity in these serene landscapes and atmospheres highlighted their desperate need to boost their publicity. Chapter 2 will deal with the historically and socioeconomically conditioned marginality of local municipalities—a different kind of marginality from that of drama producers—which led to their tying themselves to the broader reach and sensational representations of television dramas.

Nevertheless, the sponsoring cities were also sensitive about how much sponsorship they provided and did not reveal the exact amounts. I have therefore left many blank spaces regarding who paid how much to whom, only presenting the figures for production cost and sponsorship amount. Most of the cases in which specific sponsors and amounts of sponsorship are revealed are cited from news articles. Personal collection/overview of media reports since 2000 has, therefore, significantly helped me to understand the development of the drama industry and the practices of drama sponsorship over the past fifteen years. News articles about the entertainment business, viewer ratings, behind-the-scenes stories about drama productions, and star gossip have assisted me in figuring out matters that I could not make complete sense of from interviews alone—in particular, the differences between superficial and actual causes and outcomes within the processes of drama production and consumption. Yet many Korean news articles, particularly those covering entertainment issues, are published by simply drawing other sources through news-buying practices; that is why authors are not particularly identified in many Korean entertainment news articles. For such reasons, in my citation of the news articles, I identify the news titles, the published individual newspapers, and the published date only without mentioning authors (reporters).

Once, in the late 2000s, members of the South Korean National Assembly competitively reported on budget-wasting cases in which local government had poured tax money into sponsoring television dramas. Official and unofficial reports released then enabled me to identify detailed statistics and stories that had previously been concealed from the public.

To observe and interview drama-inspired tourists, I accompanied three Japanese tour groups with a translator to visit sites featured in television
dramas. I also visited another five different drama locations and engaged in on-site observation and conducted interviews with the tourists I happened to meet there. In May 2011, I visited Shin-Ōkubo in Japan, where souvenir shops and cafés selling Hallyu-associated products are clustered, and conducted semistructured, in-depth interviews with more than twenty Japanese women about their consumption of Korean dramas. During the same visit, my on-the-spot interpreter led me to “Korean schools” in which mostly female fans of K-drama were learning Korean language to be able to enjoy K-culture more. Those extremely engaged and highly vocal interviewees recounted their personal experiences of drama tours in detail.

In this book, only prime-time drama series (i.e., those aired during the 10–11 p.m. slot) broadcast via terrestrial stations are discussed because they both reflect and are constructed by the speculative nature of drama production. Since at least until the early 2010s, overseas markets could be accessed almost exclusively through the domestic airing of programs on terrestrial stations, causing independent producers to bet everything on winning one of the three prime-time slots. Terrestrial prime-time series (jisangpa deurama), where vested interests regarding exports, and thus further profits, are concentrated, garner the most intense speculation.